

BRIGHT SPOTS

Ready for School, Prepared to Learn



YMCA of the USA, Chicago, IL

Imagine an unemployed young man who, at 20, becomes full-time caregiver for his 3-year-old brother. How does he fill their days? How does he help his little brother grow and learn? How does he fight his deep sense of isolation?

For this young man in Seattle, the answers come through a unique program, formally known as the Early Learning Readiness – Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregiver Program. Every week, the brothers make their way to the YMCA in Seattle, where a trained facilitator welcomes a diverse group of grandparents, other relatives, friends and neighbors caring for children under 5.

As the children move among play areas, the caregivers bond. They read a short story together and talk about the importance of reading to their young charges at home. They learn how to use everyday household objects to play games that encourage conversations. While the big brother learns about child development and what he can do to support his brother's growth and early learning, he's also learning that he's not alone. These weekly groups, offered by the YMCA in a variety of languages, meet all over King County, Wash., in libraries, family centers, schools, community centers and other neighborhood locations.

Expanding a commitment to early childhood

Through this program, the YMCA of the USA is figuring out how to reach and support the informal caregivers who take care of 33–53 percent of children under 5 whose parents work. Studies show even higher rates of informal arrangements among low-income black, Hispanic and newcomer families.

Some parents choose an informal caregiver because they prefer their child be with someone they trust, who shares their language, culture and values. Other families cannot afford formal child care programs, or low-cost and free programs are full. Head Start, for instance, serves only about 40 percent of eligible children; Early Head Start serves slightly less than 40 percent. States

WHO THEY ARE

The YMCA's Early Learning

Readiness – Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregiver Program:

- **Is an early learning program aimed at informal child care providers.**
- **Has 7 pilot sites, with almost 50 local YMCA affiliates poised to participate.**
- **Has served 500 children and their caregivers in the pilot program.**

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that keep waiting lists for child care subsidies had almost 400,000 families on those lists in 2010.

While many professional and center-based programs derive funds from federal and state investments in quality child care, informal caregivers receive little or no early learning support. As a result, they have few if any opportunities to learn about and practice positive early learning experiences for children in their care.

It's no surprise that the YMCA, the nation's largest provider of child care, is taking on this challenge. At Y sites across the country, babies develop trust and security, pre-schoolers experience early literacy and gain the skills that prepare them for school, and school-age children do enrichment activities and homework during the year and keep learning through the summer. In addition to formal early learning models such as the FFN Caregiver Program, local Ys offer extensive after-school and summer camp programs. The Y's national focus on building strong, healthy families actively supports school readiness and academic achievement among young children.

"We focus holistically in anything we do," says Barb Roth, national director of youth and family for the YMCA of the USA. "We look at the whole child and everyone in the child's life. This new program for family, friend and neighbor caregivers highlights how we can use the Y's vast infrastructure to address the achievement gap."

Supporting important people

Currently, seven local affiliates have piloted the two-year-old FFN Caregiver Program, funded by a grant from the Boeing Corporation. The program helps caregivers understand their role in early learning development, addressing the often-overlooked opportunities they have to provide the nurturing relationships, positive interactions and stimulating experiences that promote school success. Trained facilitators at each site use a flexible curriculum that develops out of the needs and interests of the participants who enroll. In addition to teaching behaviors and skills that support children's development, the caregiver groups offer other benefits, ranging from access to the Y's many other programs to enduring social support networks. "People begin to connect outside the groups," says Roth, "and that has a long-term effect on these communities. We want caregivers to feel confident and connected. These are people who can make a significant difference in how well low-income children are prepared for school."

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

In 2009, caregivers in the Seattle Y's Early Learning Readiness – Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregiver Program:

- **Increased by at least 52% the time spent talking and reading to the children in their care and helping them interact with others.**
- **Improved their understanding of school readiness, developmental milestones and how children learn through play by at least 55%.**
- **Reduced feelings of caregiver isolation by 55%.**

HIGHLIGHTS

The Caregiver Program:

- **Organizes free, weekly group meetings of 90 or more minutes.**
- **Provides child-directed play.**
- **Creates opportunities for children to develop social skills by playing together.**
- **Takes a holistic approach to child development.**
- **Coordinates group activities.**
- **Turns weekly sessions into intentional caregiver learning.**
- **Fosters supportive relationships among caregivers.**