

MINNESOTA'S Early Childhood Family Education: Answers to Commonly Asked Questions



Parenting in the 21st Century

Parents* are the most important and enduring influence on a child's physical health, mental health, moral values, and learning. Early parental influences form the foundation for school success and meaningful and productive adult life. Research shows that early childhood programs that include parents build protective factors through:

- 1 enhancing knowledge and skills related to child development and parenting,
- 2 building social networks that provide reassurance and support for busy and stressed parents, and
- 3 creating connections to community resources that address child, parent, and family needs.

All parents benefit from information and support during the early years. This information and support helps parents face the stresses of caring for and nurturing young children.

**The word "parents" includes all individuals who function in a parenting role – mothers, fathers, partners, grandparents and other relatives, foster parents, etc.*

In the 21st century families are vulnerable to stress from a variety of sources including demanding work expectations, presence of information technologies and social media, increased mobility, recent immigration, tensions in parenting partnerships, fragile family systems, and the complex choices of modern life including changing and often conflicting advice about child-rearing. Many children and families are living in poverty, which makes meeting even basic needs a daily struggle. Early childhood programs that include parents offer families in poverty additional support and connections to more intensive services. Despite these stresses all parents want their children to succeed in school and life.

1 Why are the early years of parenting important?

Children's early years are a period of rapid growth and development in the structure and function of their brain pathways. *Brain research confirms that the first three years are an extremely critical period in a child's development*, especially in the areas of language, emotional regulation, and social competence.

In addition, *the parent's sensitive and responsive interactions with their infant are necessary for secure attachment*, which influences healthy social and emotional development throughout the life span.

Parents also have a strong influence on the development of language and literacy skills during the first five years. *The parental influence on these critical areas of development is a foundation for school readiness and success.*

Informed parents who have a supportive family and friends and positive connections in their communities are better equipped for the challenges of caring for infants, toddlers, and young children. These early years are also a time when parents are most receptive to and can benefit from parent education and support.

2 What is Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)?

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a public school program for *all* Minnesota families with children prenatal to grade three. The program recognizes that families provide children's first and most important learning environments and parents are children's first and most significant teachers. Since adults and children both participate in ECFE, it is a two-generation program. *The mission of ECFE is to strengthen families through the education and support of all parents to provide the best possible environment for the healthy growth and development of their children.* Established in 1974, it is the largest and oldest program of its kind in the country and has been cited as a national model for parenting education and family support.

ECFE provides a place for parents to learn about and practice important parenting and family life skills and build supportive relationships with other parents from their community. ECFE supports the growth and learning of parents and children together at a critical time for building protective factors in families and resiliency in children.

Research confirms that children whose parents are engaged in their education and learning are more successful in school. A positive connection to the public school system enables a smooth transition to kindergarten and the K-12 system for both children and parents. Engaging families through ECFE services prior to kindergarten encourages parents to become involved in their children's learning from birth through the elementary years.

3

What are the goals for ECFE participants?

- 1** Parents understand the importance of their role and how it changes over time.
- 2** Parents have the knowledge and realistic expectations to anticipate and meet the developmental needs of their children.
- 3** Parents demonstrate sensitive and responsive care and interaction with their children.
- 4** Positive parent-child relationships support the child's development in:
 - physical well-being and motor development,
 - social and emotional development,
 - approaches to learning (e.g., curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, reflection, interpretation, imagination, invention), and
 - language development and communication skills, and cognition and general knowledge.
- 5** Families participate in formal and informal social networks in their communities that support effective parenting.
- 6** Families are knowledgeable about and use community resources.
- 7** Parents and children experience a smooth transition from early childhood programs and services into kindergarten and the K-12 school system, setting the stage for school and life success.
- 8** Parents are engaged in their children's learning and education in the school-age years.

4 What happens in ECFE?

All ECFE programs include parenting education, early childhood education, and parent-child interaction. Since ECFE programs are locally designed to meet the needs of children, parents, and families, programming and services are unique to each community.

Most programs include the following components based on best practices for children and parents:

- Parenting education classes guided by a licensed parenting educator focused on research-based curriculum topics related to child and parent development and learning and tailored to meet parent and family needs (some parenting education classes available online)
- Early childhood education activities for children based on their developmental needs planned by a licensed early childhood teacher
- Parent-child interaction activities during which parents observe positive models of interaction and build new skills in an environment that supports parent-child relationships
- **Family events** and other opportunities for building community connections
- Home visits to address individual child, parent, and family needs
- Early screening for children's health and developmental concerns
- Community resource information and referrals for families with young children

Programs are locally designed to meet the needs of parents and families in the community including fathers, parents of children with disabilities, first-time parents, teen parents, and culturally specific populations. ECFE functions as a base for more intensive, costly services which are made available to meet unique child, parent, and family needs through partnerships with other service providers. Examples include working with Early Head Start, adult basic education, family literacy programs, and collaborating with social services and child welfare.

Building community and social support is an important factor for young families' success. In ECFE parents learn about community resources and gain social support from relationships with other families that often continue long past the time families leave the program.

For more information contact the ECFE program in your local school district.

Examples of local program variations designed to meet community needs

St. Paul ECFE:

Classes for parents and their children birth-kindergarten meet in various school district locations. Classes focus on birth-kindergarten with age-specific programming. Culturally specific classes are taught in home languages. Families attend Family Literacy programs three times a week. Parenting education is provided in St. Paul High Schools for adolescent mothers. In addition, parenting education is provided at HUBBS Adult Basic Education Center for ELL students, transitional housing for families experiencing homelessness, Head Start, and community child care centers. Home visiting is provided by a cadre of culturally specific Family Connection Workers. Transportation is available to increase access for families.

Robbinsdale Area Schools ECFE:

In addition to regular parent groups, the program also provides preschool classes and one-on-one visits either in home, on site, or by phone consultation. There is an ECFE licensed parenting educator in each of the elementary schools. Parenting classes are offered at the district high schools. ECFE partners with Robbinsdale Area Schools preschool programs, Voluntary Pre-K, Early Childhood Special Education, Helping Us Grow (HUG), and Family Literacy programs.

Alexandria ECFE:

Co-location with Early Childhood Special Education, School Readiness Preschool, and Head Start allows for collaborative opportunities for families. ECFE class options are varied and include choices for different age groups, schedules, and interest areas. Book studies, grandparent events, music classes, social media networking, preschool parent groups, summer options, and special events are some of the ways families can participate. Partnerships with community agencies also contribute to the success of families and children including the Douglas County Early Childhood Initiative, Community Education, Parent-School Liaisons, Douglas County Food Shelf, and other local service providers.

5 Who participates in ECFE?

Parents and children usually participate together. Parents can also attend alone, and they can receive other services. Since the beginning of ECFE as a statewide program in 1984, hundreds of thousands of Minnesota parents and children have participated and benefitted from ECFE.

Participation by families is voluntary and services are offered free or for a nominal fee. Costs to deliver the program vary with extent, intensity, and location of services. Early Childhood Family Education is committed to universal access for *all* families. Availability of the program to all families avoids the potential segregation, stigma, and labeling associated with targeted programs. This also sets a norm for parenting education and support to be a valued service for all members of the community. *All parents can benefit from support and information, especially during the early years of parenting.*

6 How is ECFE funded?

ECFE is a low cost, low intensity, two-generation program that offers tailored and more intensive services based on family and local community needs. The programs are financed with combined local and state funding, which may be supplemented with registration fees and funds from other sources through partnerships and collaboration. Fees are typically based on a sliding scale, and no family is turned away due to inability to pay.

7 What do we know about the effectiveness of ECFE?

Studies over the 40 years of ECFE program services provide evidence of program effectiveness in several goal areas. Evaluations of the Minnesota programs and similar programs throughout the country show child and parent learning, school readiness, and prevention or reduction of later learning and social problems. Researchers have described dimensions of parenting behaviors that have been found to contribute to school readiness in children: nurturance, language use and reading, discipline, materials in the home, monitoring, management of the home, and direct teaching of skills to children. ECFE, through its licensed parenting educators, assists parents in developing and enhancing their knowledge and skills in all of these areas.

ECFE's history of state and local evaluations demonstrates a diversity of benefits, from increased family engagement in their children's education to improvement in parenting skills. Research tells us that children's academic success is profoundly impacted by parents' engagement in their children's education and schools. In a study of 2,276 parents of kindergarten and 3rd grade students in 13 Minnesota school districts, significant differences were reported between former ECFE participants and other parents in how they are involved in their children's learning both at home and with school. **Data from this study suggest that former ECFE participants arrive at school participating in their children's learning and in the school community and connected to other parents.**

Another Minnesota study of over 5,680 ECFE parents in 32 school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural communities concludes that both parents and children benefit from participating in ECFE. Parents reported improved parenting skills in communication and limit setting, understanding child development and individual differences, understanding their role in children's success in school, and awareness of community resources to help their family. **Parents also noted positive changes in their child's development in social skills, language skills, and problem solving based on attending ECFE programs. The greatest improvement was seen in lower-income families and families of color.**



What are the benefits of ECFE?

For parents & families:

- Support during the transition to parenthood
- Information on early development and what to expect from children
- Strategies for effective limit-setting and teaching
- Quality time with children in a supportive and stimulating learning environment
- Time with other parents to reflect on family values and parenting practices in a supportive group setting
- Enhanced family communication and co-parenting skills
- Strategies for balancing work and family and managing stress
- Familiarity with community resources for families with young children
- Comfort with schools and understanding the parent role in supporting kindergarten readiness and long-term school success

All of society benefits from strong families and healthy, capable children.

Strong families are the foundation of a strong society now and far into the future.

For children:

- Focused time with parent to learn and explore in an early childhood environment
- A home environment with parents who have positive parenting skills and promote healthy child development
- Positive changes in child development
- Social skills developed in interaction with other young children in a rich early childhood environment
- Early identification of developmental and learning concerns
- Familiarity and comfort with a school setting

For schools & communities:

- Parents who have positive connections to schools and other community programs
- Parents who are engaged and ready for leadership in the schools
- Enhanced social connections and informal support between families in the community
- Community norms for appropriate and effective discipline for young children



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