

Connect with Connections

5 Keys to Strengthening Families:

In this newsletter, you'll find topics and events that connect to these five keys to building stronger families. Look for the numbered bubbles to see which keys you're learning about.



Parental Resilience:
Be strong & flexible.



Social Connections:
Parents need friends.



Parenting Knowledge:
Being a great parent is part natural and part learned.



Concrete Support:
We all need help in times of need.



Social and Emotional Competence:
Parents help their children communicate.

Early Stages of Communication

Sandy Portko, PHD
Child Development Consultant, Family Futures



Babies begin communicating their needs immediately after birth by crying. The parent reacts, talks to the baby, and usually receives a response from the baby in the form of a smile or reduced crying. As the baby grows and produces more sounds like cooing and babbling and the parents continue to react then the baby becomes more vocal.

This is the beginning of language development. Babies have a fairly long time in which they learn the basics of their home language and begin to produce it. This time period ranges from around one year to close to three years of age. During this time, it is very important the parents and caregivers, talk to the babies, sing songs and nursery rhymes, and read stories.



Babies can't understand the stories, but they hear a large number of words which help increase their language. Each baby has its own timetable during which language will emerge—no two children are alike, even within the same family. Many children may use 3 to 6 words around 14 to 16 months and then seem to slow down until they reach the age of 22 to 26 months of age when a “language explosion” occurs. They have been understanding and reacting to language all this time but haven't been able to say many words.

However, around the age of two years, the brain has undergone a growth spurt with many new nerve connections in the language areas of the brain which allow for more speech production.

The Back-to-School Blues

Stacie Fifelski, MSW Intern, Family Futures



Feeling anxious about going back to school is something many, if not all, children experience at one time or another. Still in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is likely these feelings will be intensified this year. Supporting your child through their back-to-school anxiety can feel like a big job, but we've put together a few tips we hope will help support you and your child through this transition.

First, take your own temperature. If you are feeling anxious about the upcoming school year, be sure to talk with someone supportive about it. Try to avoid passing on stress to your kids. Next, listen to your child's worries. Validate their feelings and remind them that you are confident in their ability to manage the situation. Avoid questions that suggest you expect them to be anxious and ask about things in a more casual way.

It's important to get back into a structured routine a week or two before school starts. Make sure your child is getting enough sleep, is eating well, and stays hydrated. It may also be helpful to do a trial run before school starts. Bring your child to their school, talk to them about how the first day will go, and answer their questions. If your child is experiencing a high level of anxiety, it is a good idea to communicate with their teacher prior to the start of school. This will enable them to support your child from day one.

Remember: It takes a village!



Learning Kit 2021 Recap

Blakelee Dunkelberg, Volunteer and Communications Coordinator, Family Futures



Family Futures had an amazing summer delivering more than 750 learning kits to 3 and 4-year-olds in our Connections program! There were two themes for the kits: creativity and growth. The creativity kit featured a sandbox, giving children the opportunity to make their own kinetic sand. The growth kit featured a planter with soil so kids could grow their own green beans.

Here's some of the responses we received from our Connections families about the kits:

"The quality of the activities far exceeded my expectations. Thank you."
– Rachelle Sova, Connections Parent

"Thank you Family Futures for delivering this fun activity kit to our door, my little one enjoyed each activity thoroughly. I'm so glad to be a part of your group, you provide all necessary parental support and help me in engaging my toddler constructively!" – Niya Kanth, Connections Parent

Aside from the great responses received from families, a highlight to this project is the recognition it has received in the media. So far, articles about the learning kits have been featured in the Grand Rapids Business Journal and MLive. A story was also done on GVSU's University News Channel, GVNext.



Thanks to the *Ready by Five Early Childhood Millage* for making this possible and Ready for School for helping us make the kits. Be on the lookout for details about our 2022 learning kit project!

Diverse Books

Mindy Rietkerk, Grand Rapids Public Library

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It's never too early to introduce your child to books with diverse characters. Children readily absorb information. They copy what they see. Reading inclusive books will cultivate ideas of acceptance. The development of social awareness begins in infancy. Seeing different types of people in books builds empathy and respect for others. It is also important for children to see themselves and their world reflected in what they read. They can imagine new possibilities when they see themselves represented in books.

Here are some ways diverse books can benefit your child's growth:

- Board books and picture books are a great place to start! Books with characters of different races normalize diversity.
- Inclusive books help your child see how they are like other children. No matter their background, they will have something in common.
- Finding books with characters who look, act, and talk like your child will foster a sense of belonging. This is a great way for them to explore their identity.
- Start discussions about what is going on in the world by reading a variety of books with your child.



The library has a Social Justice Begins with Me program happening September-December, one Saturday each month. Everything from the library is free to use.

Learn more at www.grpl.org or call 616-988-5400.

Fun Fall Activities!

Karissa Monzo, Family Support Navigator, Family Futures

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Fall is such a fun time for families, there are so many fun places to go and see, but there are also lots of different activities that can be done in the comfort of your own home!

Save your paper towel or toilet paper rolls, and get some small pumpkins and go pumpkin bowling in your driveway, or in your basement! This is such a great activity to help kids focus on their gross motor skills, and helps with counting as well! Have them count how many "pins" they knocked over, and add them up to keep score.

Who doesn't love pumpkin "guts"? Playing with the insides of a pumpkin or squash is a fun and messy sensory experience for kiddos of all ages! Be ready for you little ones to try to taste it too! Let the older kids use their fine motor skills by using tweezers to pull out the seeds! Letting everyone squish their hands in the guts will be tons of fun! To make a less messy version of this activity, place the insides of a pumpkin in a Ziploc bag, and let them smush everything around inside of the bag.

Are you looking to get in touch with your family's creative side? Try using gourds as your "paint brush" Let your kiddos pick out some fun fall colors, and roll the bumpy gourds in the paint. They can then roll the gourds across paper to create different patterns and designs to decorate your walls with over the holiday season! Use larger rectangles and create place mats for holiday meals!

These activities are great for kids of all ages, and will be fun for the whole family to participate in.



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