

Care Subsidy Program, which provides vouchers to qualifying families who wish to enroll their kids, ages birth to five, in high-quality, licensed, early childhood education programs. “Over 900 families in Buncombe County are on the wait list, and probably more who simply are not applying,” says Amy. “By providing additional funding to this program, we can bring relief to a lot of working families for whom the cost of high quality programs (up to \$8,000 per child per year) is a big financial stress.”

While 20-30% of Buncombe County’s 14,000 kids are currently enrolled in licensed early education programs, some are staying at home with loving adults. Smart Start has resources for these families as well.

Play and Learn Groups meet weekly for eight sessions. The groups are free, and focus on pre-literacy skills, using hands-on activities such as puppet shows and sing-a-longs. In addition to providing social and educational time for their kids, parents are given strategies for adopting similar learning/play activities at home.

“I’m much better at finding educational opportunities in everyday activities, and setting aside time each day for more focused learning,” says program participant Kristina Robinson. “My child has learned letter recognition, rhyming, and is writing his name.”

Smart Start’s programs go beyond learning activities for kids. Of the organization’s eight main programs, several are designed to support parents and early educators. The Incredible Years Parent Education Program is a 14-week parenting series for families of three- to five-year-olds identified as having challenging behaviors. It helps provide strategies for creating more ease in the future of these children.

Another, the Child Care WAGE\$ Project, provides early childhood educators professional development supplements based on their level of education in an effort to stabilize the workforce and encourage increased education. Another successful initiative is the Transition to Kindergarten Program. In these free workshops, families learn what to expect as a child enters kindergarten, how to choose schools, and how to support their children during the first year of



transition into school.

“We help make early education less stressful for both children and their parents,” continues Amy. “Poverty is a big stressor, and with 25% of Buncombe County’s young children living at or below the poverty line, the programs we support help put kids on better footing for the future.”

Helping Smart Start are 21 local “First 2000 Days Champions for Children” (people such as Buncombe County Commissioner Holly Jones, local business leader Jennie Eblen, and Buncombe County Sheriff Van Duncan) who help spread the Smart Start message throughout the region.

For more information about Smart Start or to become a volunteer or Champion for Children, visit smartstart-buncombe.org. Photos courtesy of Smart Start.