

When my son was 18 months old, I was at an event for parents of toddlers. I didn't take him many places those days, but as a stay at home mom, I was desperate for social contact. While we were there, he ran frantically from activity to activity, rarely stopping to fully participate in anything. He screamed when approached by anyone including me. He wasn't talking at all and couldn't communicate his wants or needs. A local professional approached me and asked, "Is he getting any help from anyone?". This was my introduction into the world of early intervention.

As a mom, I knew in my heart that something wasn't right. He was extremely active and didn't seem to feel pain. He often pushed his head into things so hard that it would leave marks on his forehead. As a graduate in the field of child development, I knew that he should at a minimum be saying some single words to communicate his needs. I also knew that I only had another year and a half before he turned three, the age when his brain would begin to become less malleable. By age five, 85% of his brain would be developed and many opportunities to help him would have passed us by.

The two years that followed required a complicated interplay of public and private systems, tremendous understanding and motivation on our part as parents, and countless resources. We had an Occupational Therapist that worked with us through Early On in our home, a Speech and Language Pathologist who consulted with me on strategies to develop his language, our regular pediatrician as well as a developmental pediatrician in Grand Rapids, a private physical therapist also in Grand Rapids, our insurance company who paid for some but not all of his treatments, and our large social network who provided respite for us, babysitting for our older daughter, and much emotional support. We also spent countless hours reading, researching, and talking to other parents about what we came to learn was a "sensory integration disorder".

Happily, he is now a well adjusted, well behaved (for the most part!) five year old. Many people who know him now would be shocked to learn of his early development. I often wonder what his life might have been like had he been living in a different environment. While we are by no means perfect parents, we were fortunate enough to have access to the many resources that he needed. We have insurance, transportation, flexible work schedules, and strong family support. Financially, we were able to absorb the cost of his treatments that our insurance did not pay for, as well as the cost for gas to drive him to his appointments.

Unfortunately, this is not the reality for many families in Michigan and in our local communities. They are suffering the economic downturn and desperately trying to meet basic needs for food, housing, and clothing. 1 in 4 children in Mason, Lake, and Oceana County lives in poverty. 1 in 10 is the victim of abuse or neglect. From 50% in Mason up to 80% in Lake County rely on Medicaid for insurance, while 5% have no insurance at all.

Research consistently shows that children who start school behind, stay behind. Support for our birth to five year olds is critical to their lifelong success. Children who participate in high quality early education programming are less likely to drop out of school, rely on public assistance as adults, become teen parents, or engage in criminal activity. They earn more money, are more likely to own a home, and graduate from college.

As Michigan faces continued budget challenges, we simply cannot afford to sacrifice our youngest citizens. Funding for early childhood system design, children's physical and behavioral health care, preschool programming, quality child care, and parenting education is critical to the economic recovery of our state and our community. For every \$1 we put into early childhood, we will see a return of \$7-17. Even more significant is that we will raise healthy productive citizens.

A child cannot choose the environment that he or she is born into. Some are fortunate to be born into a community rich with resources where their development is valued above all else. How might our community be different if every child entered school with a strong foundation of health, safety, and eagerness to learn?

Over the next few months, the Mason Lake and Oceana Great Start Collaborative will be conducting community focus groups to ask you that question. There are many things that we are doing right, and there are many areas where we can do better. Please feel free to contact me if you would be interested in more information about the Great Start Initiative, or if you would like to host a community focus group within your organization. Let's give our youngest a "Great Start"!