

Month of the Young Child

Thursday, 05 April 2007

Hugo, Oklahoma– Smart Start Tri-County is celebrating Month of the Young Child (April 2007) to recognize the needs of young children and thank early childhood professionals and others involved in building better futures for all children. Month of the Young Child is celebrated across the country by hundreds of local organizations working to improve opportunities for all young children.

“Early learning experiences, positive or negative, shape the growth and development of young children,” said Nancy vonBargen, Executive Director of Smart Start Oklahoma. “Month of the Young Child provides opportunities for all of us to recognize the importance of the early years and seek ways to improve lifelong outcomes for Oklahoma’s youngest citizens,” concluded vonBargen.

Month of the Young Child, sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), is a time to recognize the people, programs and policies that are helping families do the best job possible in raising successful children. It is also an opportunity to increase awareness that helping children get a great start brings lasting benefits for our society as a whole.

While the state is recognized nationally for pre-kindergarten and child care quality, Oklahoma families face more challenges than in other parts of the nation. Many children are growing up in environments over which they have no control. These situations often pose challenges that make it difficult for children to succeed in school and in life. If you are a young child growing up in Oklahoma, your odds are not good.

- >1 in 2 children under six lives in a low-income family.
- >More than 1 in 2 children under age 6 live in a home where there is a single parent or both parents work.
- >More than 1 in 3 children are born to unmarried mothers.
- >1 in 10 children under age 6 are being raised by a relative.
- >More than 1 in 10 children under age 6 are without health insurance.
- >1 in 50 children under age 6 are abused or neglected.
- >More than 1 in 4 children need reading remediation in grades one through three.

“To address the many challenges faced by families with young children, Smart Start Tri-County is collaborating with active coalitions in Choctaw, McCurtain, and Pushmataha counties. The three coalitions are unified in their overall message to promote the importance of early childhood. Each are unique in that they determine local needs and seek ways to better serve families with young children in their respective counties,” said Dennis Willeford, Smart Start Tri-County Coordinator. “The three coalitions are comprised of community volunteers who meet monthly to focus on issues affecting our youngest citizens. I would encourage anyone from these communities to attend a coalition meeting in your area and take part in this great effort,” concluded Willeford.

Coalitions meet in the following areas at the times listed below:

- >Pushmataha County Turning Point Coalition - the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 am at the Antlers Church of Christ
- >Choctaw County Turning Point Coalition - the third Tuesday of each month at 2 :00 pm at the Kiamichi Tech Center in Hugo
- >McCurtain County Coalition for Change – the third Tuesday of each month at 11:00 am at 103 N.E. A in Idabel.

Smart Start Tri-County and its contracting agent, Little Dixie Community Action Agency, work closely together to accomplish success in Choctaw, McCurtain, and Pushmataha counties. Together they have raised enough money to purchase Raising A Reader kits for 54 early childhood locations in the three counties. Raising A Reader is a nationally recognized early literacy program that fosters early literacy skills critical for kindergarten success by engaging parents in a daily read-aloud routine with their children from birth to age five. The book bag rotation, combined with research-

based training and a strong connection to the local library, motivates families to establish "book cuddling" routines with their little ones, leading to a love of books that lasts a lifetime.

Smart Start Oklahoma is a grassroots initiative that supports families as they raise children who are safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school. By making local civic and business leaders, educators and volunteers aware of children's needs and by collaborating with local service providers, Smart Start makes better use of programs or resources that already exist. There are currently 16 Smart Start Oklahoma communities including Smart Start Tri-County.

For more information about Smart Start Oklahoma visit www.smartstartok.org or contact Dennis Willeford, Smart Start Tri-County Coordinator at 580-326-5201 or by email at tricountysmartstart@yahoo.com.