

## Stark conference focuses on early education

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Posted Mar 9, 2018 at 5:51 PM

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**JACKSON TWP.** Educators, experts and community leaders met Friday to focus on Stark County's youngest residents.

The Early Childhood Advantage: A Symposium on School Readiness, held at the Kent State University at Stark campus, is the first conference of its kind. It was organized by the Great Start for Great Futures symposium planning committee and several area organizations, including the Early Childhood Resource Center, the Stark County District Library and the Stark Education Partnership.

The intent was to bring together "really all the folks who touch the lives of children... as well as those who are visionaries" to talk about the importance of early childhood education, its impact on brain development and the importance of investing in young children, said Angela Moses, director of early care and education services at the Early Childhood Resource Center.

About 500 people attended, far more than organizers anticipated.

The daylong event included sessions on family engagement, literacy, empathy and resilience.

Organizers are hoping to spark a conversation and help business, nonprofit and community leaders see the bigger picture of early education and how they can play a role, said Kristine Filhour, Early Childhood Resource Center regional coordinator.

It's vital to invest in children early as major brain development happens in the first three years, Filhour said.

What happens in those years impacts a person's approach to education, their success in school and their social and emotional development, she said.

The event was sponsored by PNC as part of its Grow up Great initiative, which focuses on children from birth to age 5.

Early childhood education is the most underfunded segment of the educational pipeline, said Jennifer Fox of PNC.

Research shows that quality early childhood experiences lead to kids doing better in school, higher graduation rates and a stronger workforce, Fox said. "It's an economic driver in our community."

## Trauma

The conference keynote focused on understanding childhood trauma, its impact on development and how to recognize and mitigate some of its effects.

“Trauma is an experience that threatens a person’s very life, that threatens the possibility of death” or permanent separation or loss of someone they love or depend on, said speaker Julian Ford, a clinical psychologist and tenured professor of the psychiatry of law at the University of Connecticut.

Trauma comes in different forms and can include abuse (verbal, emotional, physical or sexual), neglect, violence or witnessing violence, or being involved in an accident or natural disaster.

A traumatic event doesn’t have to be life threatening in a physical sense. Verbal or emotional abuse can make a child feel worthless and unworthy of living. Bullying can make someone feel suicidal and like their life is over, Ford said.

Ford shared some stats on trauma:

- By age 4, one in four kids have experienced at least one traumatic event. For kids in poverty, that doubles to 50 percent.
- By adulthood, about 60 percent of people have experienced at least one traumatic event, often more.
- About 90 percent of kids and teenagers involved in the juvenile justice system have experienced trauma.

Trauma can cause people, including children, to live in near constant states of stress. Kids who’ve experience trauma can be stuck in survival mode -- hyper-vigilant and constantly on edge -- waiting for the next awful thing to happen, Ford said.

Kids often don’t realize or understand why they’re reacting that way, he said.

That stress can manifest in emotional and behavioral problems including: aggression, delinquency, problems with learning and concentration, hyperactivity, risky behavior, defiance, withdrawal, sleep problems, self-harm or depression.

Those behaviors are “a way of carrying on in situations that seem impossible to endure,” Ford said.

## Tips

He encouraged the audience to become “trauma informed.”

Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with you?” ask three questions: What happened to you? What did you need to do to not give up? What do you do now that gives life meaning?

“Nothing’s the matter with that child, something is the matter for that child,” he said.

He also introduced ways of mitigating stress reactions.

The SOS approach has three steps:

1. Stop. Slow down. Sweep your mind clear. Notice how body feels as you breathe in and out. Let your mind be a river that carries every thought away.
2. Orient yourself. Focus on just thought or on the one hope, goal or relationship you value the most.
3. Self-check your level of alarm and focus.

“The goal is not to reduce stress because stress is life. The goal is to increase personal control,” Ford said, adding that control is our ability to think clearly under stress.

Those who work with children should adopt the SOS method for themselves, he said.

“If kids who’ve survived trauma and are helped to do that and have role models who show them how to do that without ever saying it, they pick up on that and it shows them that they do have someone they can trust,” he said.

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