



Oct. 8, 2014

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Building a Strong Foundation for Success



THE AECC: A WELL OF HOPE FOR AUSTIN'S YOUNG CHILDREN AND THOSE WHO RAISE THEM PAGE 3

RAISING OUR YOUNG CHILDREN PAGE 5 | HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT PAGE 6

THE AECC AWARDEES PAGE 7





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## INTRODUCTION

### Welcome to Austin

Children's early experiences shape their ability to learn and develop into healthy and productive adults. Young children need loving and caring relationships with adults, safe homes and neighborhoods, and opportunities to learn. It truly takes a community to raise a child.

In Austin, community leaders -- parents, educators, childcare providers, business owners, and elected officials -- are coming together to ensure that children and families have the supports they need in order to thrive. Schools and childcare businesses are being transformed into vibrant centers of learning; parents and grandparents are fostering nurturant home environments; and community members are organizing to build safe and supportive neighborhoods.

The following stories profile several of the leaders of this movement and the work they are doing to transform early childhood care and education in Austin. I hope that you will consider joining us in our work to secure a healthy future for all of Austin's children!

*Ruth Kimble*

**Ruth Kimble**  
Chair  
Austin Early Childhood  
Collaborative

# The AECC: A well of hope for Austin's young children and those who raise them

By Michael Romain

Since its inception, the Austin Early Childhood Collaborative (AECC) has been an indispensable reservoir of information, resources and support for the parents, teachers, caregivers and childcare providers responsible for raising Austin's future generations.

Formed in 2012 as a branch of the community building organization Austin Coming Together (ACT), AECC is the result of a rich collaboration between a diverse group of community members and partner organizations within and outside of Austin. Key organizational partners include the Austin Childcare Providers Network and Erikson Institute.

The purpose of the AECC is to create and sustain a seamless, accessible and high-quality support system for children, ages 0 to 8, and their families. To do this, the AECC is committed to a range of core values that include placing children first, empowering parents and primary caregivers to become children's first teachers, nurturing healthy and transparent relationships with community stakeholders, and building a network of accountable, team-based leadership.

The whole idea behind the AECC is to give voice to Austin's caregivers and child advocates and mobilize the people, institutions, and funding needed to enhance their ability to nurture and educate young children. There are countless community members that give children the love, attention, knowledge, and skills they need, but many times their abilities are constrained by broader



DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer

*Lead VOCEL teacher Jesse Ilhardt settles a dispute during play time.*

systemic issues. Whether it's a lack of resources, a dysfunctional public support system, or policies that don't make sense for our community, AECC wants to tackle the bigger picture problems that prohibit nurturers and providers from making a bigger impact on their children's lives.

In 2014, AECC partners provided more than 1,000 hours of free professional development and training to over 150 caregivers in Austin. The AECC's flagship project is its annual Early Childhood Symposium, which features panel discussions, informative workshops and an awards ceremony that acknowledges individuals and

organizations that are vanguards in promoting early childhood development in the community. The theme for AECC's 2014 Symposium is "Building a Strong Foundation for Success." This theme was chosen because effective early childhood education not only builds the foundation for success in the individual lives of children; it also builds the foundation for community change and restoration. Many issues that arise later in a child's life, like dropping out of school, unemployment, violence, and drug abuse, can be prevented by providing them with nurturing, stable, and stimulating environments during their early years.

The AECC strives to instill this message with providers and other community leaders, and mobilize the community around this cause.

"In the future, we hope to engage more and more community members and continue to mobilize resources around young children and their families," says Andrew Born, ACT's Director of Programs and Development. "There are many systemic issues yet to be addressed like access to healthcare, home visiting services, school systems, unemployment, and mass incarceration. As we build our capacity as an organization, we hope to take on more issues that impact our young learners' readiness for school and the rest of their lives."



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*La Shawn K. Ford*

**La Shawn K. Ford**  
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# Raising our young children



## Finding partners to offer help

By Michael Romain

"This year, we focused on bringing awareness to employers in the Austin community and surrounding areas so they could understand why it's important to nurture the right social and emotional skills in young people at a very early age," said Durriyyah Kemp, chair of the AECC's Community Engagement Committee and a community health educator with the University of Illinois Extension.

Kemp and her team have worked to educate local businesses and the larger community on why early childhood development and education should be a concern even for people who aren't parents and may not be directly involved in caring for children.

"We've found numerous research done with current business leaders and employers suggesting that people come

into the workforce with the hard skills to do the job, but they often lack the social and emotional skills to be successful," Kemp said. "Team skills, leadership skills, the ability to manage your emotions effectively and to work together with other people are important. This is why we should get behind early childhood education and make business leaders and employers aware of its importance to them and their workforce."

To that end, the AECC's Community Engagement Committee will collaborate with Loretto Hospital to host a screening of a new documentary called "The Raising of America," which illustrates the larger societal significance of early childhood development and education. After the screening, community members will participate in a town hall discussion about the film and the issues it covers.

## Supporting families as they raise their kids

By Michael Romain

"One of our goals this year was to find ways to reach out to parents in Austin and get them to join the table," said Sara Anderson, a staff clinician at the Erikson Institute and the co-chair of the AECC's Family Engagement Committee.

To that end, the AECC launched a partnership this year with Commu-

nity Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), an organization that has been turning everyday residents into grassroots leaders for 19 years.

"What made me realize the importance of early learning and [deep parental] engagement was when I started having children over 40 years ago," said Gloria Harris, a parent peer trainer with COFI who is also a proud product

of the kind of training that other parents will undergo through the AECC/COFI partnership.

"I had 12 kids and they all went to early learning programs," she said. "The brain works more actively between the ages of 0 to 5 than at any other time in a person's life. If we can get kids to learn in positive social, mental and physical environments at young ages, then we may be able to lower the dropout rate."

Between September and early October, the COFI/AECC collaboration will recruit and train approximately 30 parents -- one group comprising 15-20 parents of infants, toddlers and preschoolers, and another group comprising 15-20 parents of children in grades K-3.

Since the AECC understands that not all Austin parents will be able to participate in this intense training, it also supports similar projects, namely the Erikson Institute's Parent Cafes, from which many more



parents, childcare providers, teachers, caregivers and other members of the community can benefit.

"Parent Cafes are a good way to bring parents together informally over a nice meal to talk about early childhood and gain support from professionals in the field," Anderson said. The Parent Cafes are hosted by staff at the Erikson Institute and are held at DePriest

Elementary, 139 S. Parkside, from 8-9am on Mondays; and at Channing's Childcare Academy, 5701 W. Division, from 4-5pm on Tuesdays. They are informal weekly drop-in sessions in which parents can share a meal, talk about challenges and victories in their parenting, and get feedback and information from professionals in the field of early childhood.



*A cooking activity at Channing's Childcare Academy.*

DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer



# Healthy development of your young children

## Tools to help young children overcome trauma

By La Risa Lynch

Acting out, constant crying and fighting may seem like signs of a tantrum, but those behaviors may indicate children who have experienced some form of trauma.

Trauma goes beyond the gun violence which dominates headlines, says University of Chicago professor Bradley C. Stolbach. Trauma ranges from domestic violence, drug addicted parents, having an incarcerated parent, or being placed in foster care to gang violence or being involved in a car accident.

"Many children, particularly in some communities in Chicago, have been exposed to trauma [and] violence even if they haven't been directly injured," said Stolbach, a project director of Trauma-Informed Care for Youth Injured by Violence. "They have their daily lives shaped by it."

Ruth Kimble, owner of Channing's Child-care Academy and chair of the Austin Early Childhood Collaborative (AECC), believes day-care operators are the first line of defense to spot behavioral issues associated with trauma.

"We have kids that when they are acting out sometimes they mention 'We are going

to call the po-po on you.' So that means they are in an environment that speaks about police all the time," said Kimble.

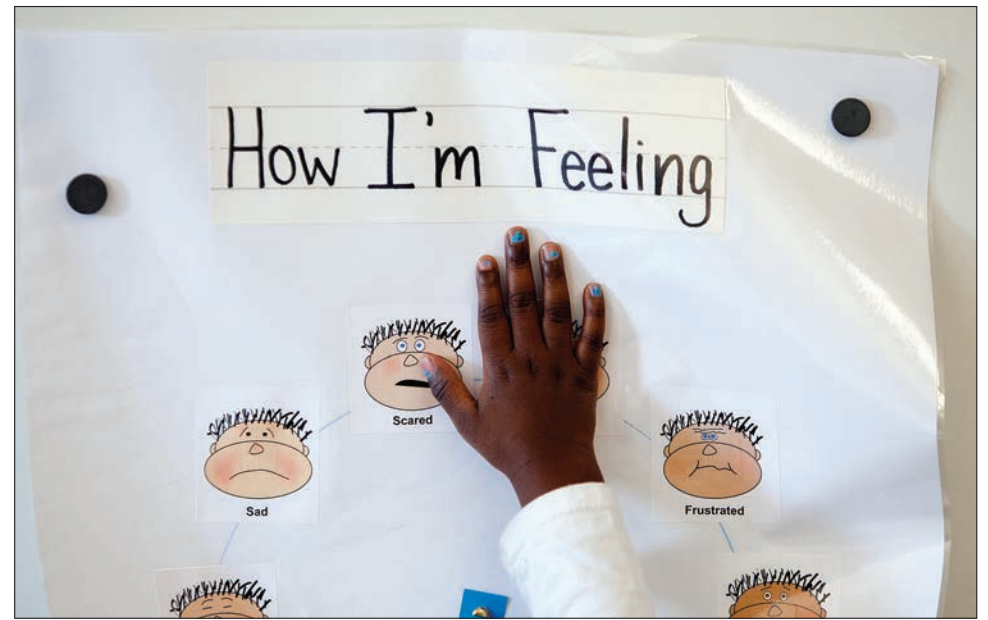
To children who come from physically or verbally abusive environments, hitting and fighting seem normal, Kimble said. But these behaviors can be disruptive to a learning environment in daycare settings, she added.

Agreeing, Stolbach said chronic stress and trauma can affect young children's social and educational development. These children, he said, are always in a state of heightened awareness and perceive threats that aren't there. They can become emotionally detached and have difficulty maintaining relationships.

"When you are in that alarm state all the time it makes it very difficult to do anything else," he said.

Kimble added that trauma affects children's ability to learn because they cannot focus, which is crucial for success in school. Recognizing the effects of trauma can help childcare providers and parents understand why kids are acting out and offer tools to help kids to settle down both at home and in school, she said.

Stolbach noted that childcare providers should make children feel that they are in a



DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer

A child uses a Feelings Chart to identify her emotions.

safe place and adults are here to keep them safe. Childcare providers should also tell children that they are not bad, but good and have a future, he added.

"If we embed those messages into the sys-

tems that are taking care of children then we stand a much better chance of helping them not to become traumatized or help them recover when they have the trauma," Stolbach said.

## Closing the word gap, improving literacy

By La Risa Lynch

By age three, children in low income families have heard 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers, according to a 1995 study by University of Kansas child psychologists Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. But a duo of University of Illinois at Chicago students hopes to close what has become known as the word gap to improve Austin preschoolers' literacy skills.

"We know that students who are not reading at grade level tend to struggle in school. We know that it is difficult for students who have fallen behind to catch up to their peers.

Our mission is to give students the best chance at success in early literacy," said Colleen Whittingham, a UIC doctoral candidate and member of Austin Early Childhood Collaborative (AECC).

But she stressed that it's not so much the number of words a child hears or says but the quality of conversation among parents and children.

"It doesn't help a child who is one to read them 'War and Peace' from cover to cover," Whittingham said. "The richness of those conversations is really where people should be focusing."

Whittingham and her colleague, Emily

Hoffman, also a UIC doctoral candidate, conducted a study of early literacy practices in Austin homes and childcare businesses. They plan to use the information help parents and childcare providers foster literacy skills such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

Whittingham and Hoffman want to show parents and childcare providers that play can be used to teach literacy. During a child's early learning years, from birth to age eight, learning and playing "look and feel like the same thing," Whittingham said.

"Play and informal learning actions with children are as effective ... as focusing on



those school type skills ... to build that vocabulary..." she said.

Improving literacy skills helps a child's social/emotional development, the doctoral students said. Critical thinking skills, comprehension and writing are skills that can begin in early childhood by engaging them in thought-provoking conversations, Whittingham said.

"So much of what we know about children's social and emotional wellbeing is tied to their abilities to express themselves through language and to have a rich vocabulary to talk to peers, parents and to have relationships and to handle conflict," she said.

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# The AECC Awardees

From an influential legislator and policymaker to the humble owner of a beloved daycare center, this year's AECC honorees are a diverse lot -- and that's exactly how it should be, says the AECC's Program Manager Amy Voegel.

"That diversity is what gives this group its strength in terms of early childhood awareness. We just have a really broad range of people committed to this work who are really interested in making sure children in the Austin community have what they need to be successful," Voegel said.

The awards, which are given out each year at the AECC's annual Early Childhood Symposium, are designed to acknowledge individuals who, and organizations that, are committed to providing high quality services for Austin's young children. Although this year's eight awardees are different in many ways, they are united by one very unique quality -- they don't have to do what they're doing, but they're doing it anyway. That takes deep passion and a lot of love.

Take Ozzie Itson for instance, the owner of Itson's Day Care. Itson, has owned and operated her daycare for 14 years, but she began caring for children much earlier. Ironically, Itson's passion for childcare development was prompted by a bad experience. She remembers picking up her baby son from the person with whom she'd entrusted him and noticing that his pants were wet. She re-

alized he wasn't being properly taken care of.

"I wanted to keep other people's kids so that they would be kept right and they wouldn't have to worry about them when they left them with me," Itson said. She went from keeping watch over children in her church's youth center to owning a daycare center of her own. Just recently, at 75 years old, Itson graduated with a 3.3 GPA from Malcolm X College. She said she obtained an associate's degree in child development so she could be even better at her life's first love.

The same spirit of excellence animates VOCEL, a nonprofit preschool for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old in the Austin community. Founders Kelly Lambrinatos and Jesse Ilhardt, both Teach For America alumnus, could probably have started careers and launched projects anywhere in the country, but they chose Austin.

"There was a need and a desire in this community," Lambrinatos said. "It really came down to the fact that there are so many kids in Austin who need care, but don't necessarily have access to it. People really seem hungry for this." These representative stories are only quick snapshots of the depth of commitment and the degree of passion embodied by this year's eight awardees, each of whom fills an irreplaceable niche in Austin's diverse and mutually beneficial early childhood environment.

— Michael Romain



Kelly Lambrinatos



Jesse Ilhardt



Dr. Shawn Jackson



Ozzie Itson



Rep. LaShawn Ford



Lisa Smith



Donnita Travis



Lenita Edgeworth



Cynthia Peterson

## Awards for Excellence in Professional Development

Founded in 2013 by Teach for America alumni Kelly Lambrinatos and Jesse Ilhardt, VOCEL has quickly emerged as one of Chicago's most imaginative early education institutions. Every year since its launch, VOCEL -- which serves children ages 6 months to 5 years old -- has been named either a semi-finalist or finalist in A Better Chicago's Project Impact competition. Project Impact provides funding to the most innovative nonprofit organizations throughout the city.

Dr. Shawn Jackson is the principal of Austin's Spencer Technology Academy. At the helm since 2007, Jackson has more than tripled the percentage of students at Spencer testing at grade level and infused a culture of hope and success by implementing innovative programs such as Parent University and Parent Scholars. "There are no successful schools without parental involvement," Jackson told the Chicago Sun-Times in 2012.

Since its founding 14 years ago by Ozzie Itson, Itson's Day Care, which Ozzie manages with her daughter, has become beloved and respected throughout the Austin area. A long-time volunteer in the Mars Hill Baptist Church's children's department,

Ozzie Itson recently attained an associate's degree in child development from Malcolm X College. At 75 years old, she graduated with a 3.3 GPA.

## Awards for Excellence in Community Engagement

Elected to the State's General Assembly in 2007, Rep. LaShawn Ford (D-8th) has been one of the city's most dynamic forces for early childhood development and education awareness. A key force behind the formation of the AECC's parent organization, Austin Coming Together, Ford has presided over numerous subcommittee hearings on elementary and secondary education in Springfield. One of his primary legislative platforms is the expansion of early childhood education.

Lisa Smith, a head start teacher at DePriest Elementary School, has nearly 20 years of experience in early childhood education. While at DePriest, Smith has been instrumental in some of the school's most imaginative programming, such as the Keep Kids Learning Summer Camp, a project designed to engage the whole child beyond the regular school year, and to encourage students to think about careers early on.

Founded in 2001 by former advertising executive Donnita Travis, the By the Hand Club for Kids

serves public school students in some of Chicago's toughest housing projects and neighborhoods, Austin included. In 2005, the Chicago Housing Authority called By the Hand its "most effective social service agency." Since its founding, the organization has nurtured thousands of children in communities across the city.

## Awards for Excellence in Family Engagement

Lenita Edgeworth has been a parent educator with the nonprofit Bethel New Life for four years. She has a bachelor's in criminal justice from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and a paralegal certificate from Roosevelt University. In her work, Edgeworth encourages parents to engage their small children "one step at a time."

Cynthia Peterson has been a family community resource coordinator at Spencer Elementary Technology Academy in Austin for 23 years. A resident of the Austin neighborhood for over 30 years, Peterson has played a critical role in implementing the school's Parent Scholars and Parent University programs. She believes that the collaboration between parents and the community is essential for student success.



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