

MUCH MORE THAN ABC's

East Durham nonprofit creates team to promote early-childhood learning

By Holly West
UNC Staff Writer

When it comes to education, one east Durham nonprofit organization knows it's important to start as early as possible.

The East Durham Children's Initiative, known as EDCI, assembled a team in January to make sure at-risk children in the neighborhood get a head start on learning. Ebonyse Mead, one of EDCI's early-childhood parent advocates, said a lot of children's brain development happens in their early years, so it's important to begin promoting learning before they enter elementary school.

"We didn't want to miss that window of early opportunity," she said. "We can step in and do some cognitive development, language development and learning skills to help them prepare for kindergarten. It will help them have better outcomes later on in life."

The early-childhood team, which works with kids from birth to 5 years old, makes monthly visits to the homes of the children in the program, bringing along what it calls "visit kits."

The kits include a variety of craft materials, books and toys, which the team members use to play with the children. They make sure parents get involved during the visit too.

"The whole purpose is to provide those parent-child activities and to promote early learning in the home through play," Mead said.



EDCI volunteer Deb Wong (left) plays with D'mai Brock during a Story Hour. D'mai's mother plans to sign her family up for EDCI's new early-childhood team's home-visit program. (Staff photo by Holly West)

While the home visits are a new addition, EDCI has always known that reaching younger children is key.

"Early childhood itself has been a focus of EDCI programming ever since this program began," said EDCI Communications Coordinator Samantha Cole. "There's a real focus on applying early childhood intervention here in the community."

There are only a handful of families in the program right now, but it is still in its early stages, Mead said. Her goal is to eventually have each of the two early-childhood parent advocates work with at least 50 families per month.

The early-childhood team works with organizations such as the Durham County Department of Social Services and Durham Early Head Start to recruit families into the program. They also target parents who take part in more established EDCI programs like Story Hour, a partnership with the Durham Public Library.

Story Hour sessions are held weekly at the Durham Housing Authority on

Hoover Road and monthly at EDCI's office on Driver Street. Staff and volunteers read and play with children, much like they would at an at-home visit.

Durham resident Shazondra Alford said she has taken her toddler to Story Hour at the Hoover Road location twice.

"We're going to come every week," Alford said. "She likes it."

After meeting Mead at one of those sessions, Alford decided to sign her family up

for the early childhood team's home-visit program.

And Alford soon realized children aren't the

only ones that benefit from the program. While a volunteer played with Alford's daughter D'mai Brock at a Tuesday morning Story Hour, EDCI staff talked to Alford, who recently moved to Durham, about where to look for work in the area.

This type of parent connection is exactly what the new early-childhood team hopes to strengthen.

"When it's that one-on-one you can talk about different things," Mead said. "You can't necessarily do that when there are a lot of people."

East Durham Children's Initiative
107 N. Driver St., 3rd Floor
Durham, NC 27703
(919) 908-8709