



BRIGHT SPOTS

EUGENE, OREGON

To arrive in kindergarten ready to learn, young children need not only basic literacy skills — how to hold a book, recognize letters, read the text rather than the photos — but basic self-regulation and social skills — how to sit still, how to handle disappointment, how to share.

“Teaching self-regulation is in many ways a lot harder,” says Dr. Katherine Pears, of the Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC), a nonprofit research organization in Eugene. “And for some children, it’s really necessary,” especially “children who have seen a fair amount of adversity,” such as experiencing foster care, social/emotional deprivation or a chaotic environment.

In Eugene and surrounding Lane County, at-risk children have received help to boost their literacy, self-regulation and social skills from the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) program — an evidence-based school readiness intervention developed in 2002 by OSLC and now offered to almost 400 children.

A brief, targeted and standardized program, KITS is offered in the summer before kindergarten through the early fall. It includes a 24-session school readiness group for children and a 12-session workshop for parents or caregivers.

After research-proven success — first with children in foster care and then with children who have behavioral disabilities — KITS expanded in 2010, with support from the United Way of Lane County, to serve children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods that participate in a local place-based initiative designed to incubate promising programs and strategies.

“It had phenomenal results so we thought this would be a great strategy to take out to the general population,” says Holly Mar-Conte, at United Way, the community lead for Eugene’s grade-level reading campaign.

Two studies — each comparing a KITS group and a non-KITS group — found that KITS significantly affected children’s skills. For children in foster care as well as for children with behavior and/or social problems, KITS was associated with:

- Gains in early literacy during the summer.

At-risk children have received help to boost their literacy, self-regulation and social skills from the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) program.



Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

- Gains in self-regulation skills during the summer before and through the end of kindergarten.
- Less oppositional and aggressive classroom behavior in the spring of kindergarten.
- Decreases in ineffective parenting across the summer, leading to more parental involvement during kindergarten.

Early results from a study of Promise Neighborhood children showed similar gains. Evaluation is ongoing, with some former KITS children now being followed through seventh grade.

Provided free of charge, thanks to government funding and United Way dollars, KITS will serve about 140 children in summer 2014, expanding into 11 elementary schools in five districts. KITS also will serve children in families receiving child welfare services and working to remain intact.

Resembling a half-day kindergarten, the children's group meets twice weekly for eight weeks in the summer and once weekly for eight weeks after kindergarten starts. Transportation also is provided. Instructors range from school teaching assistants to University of Oregon graduate students. Class size began at 15 and is now 20-25, with three teachers per class. A well-defined model with a standard curriculum and structure is carefully implemented via a manual and staff training.

Held weekly in the summer and every other week in the fall, the parent workshop is led by facilitators, ranging from school psychologists to early childhood educators. Parents learn how to increase early literacy skills at home, encourage positive behavior, establish routines that prepare children for school and connect with schools.

To address a significant challenge — recruiting families — volunteers each spring go door-to-door in Promise Neighborhoods. Work is also underway to broaden the program's scale locally and beyond via training and supervision, provided remotely.

"We've seen it work across populations and had a lot of positive response. Parents really like this program. They see changes in their children. They feel like their stress goes down around the transition," says Pears. "Given the huge interest right now in school readiness, we want to make this more available."

For more information, contact Katherine Pears at 541-485-2711 or katherinep@oslc.org.