

sauk rapids—rice early childhood family program

Sauk Rapids, MN

Overview

Sauk Rapids—Rice Early Childhood Family Program is part of Minnesota’s statewide Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) program. ECFE provides parent education, parent-child activities, early childhood education, and socialization activities for all parents with young children in the state.

Sauk Rapids—Rice Early Childhood Family Program provides ECFE in a school setting. It also offers activities for special populations, including families with children with special needs, parents who experienced neglect or abuse as children, teen parents, single parents, low-income families, childcare providers, and parents of newborns.

Most of the time, when children are attending the program’s school readiness-oriented preschool, their parents are on-site taking part in parent education or support activities or working toward their high school diplomas. Parents and children take part in many activities together, including Even Start family literacy.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Sauk Rapids—Rice Early Childhood Family Program builds five key protective factors that reduce child abuse and neglect. Programs, services, and characteristics contributing to each protective factor are listed below:

Profile

Staffing

- Early Childhood / Parent Educators: 16

Children & Families Served

Children

- Family literacy: 25
- Preschool: 150
- Other: 375

Parents

- Total: 725

Budget

\$485,000

Per Family

\$600

Services Provided On-Site

- Even Start family literacy
- High school classes for teen parents
- Home visits
- Mental health therapy

Parental Resilience

- De-stressing and Social Activities
- Enlightened Parenting Class
- Family Literacy

Social Connections

- De-stressing and Social Activities
- Parent-Child Activities
- Second Step Curriculum
- Violence Prevention Curriculum

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Classroom Observation
- Early Childhood Family Education
- Home Visits
- Parent Education

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Behavioral Assistance Team
- Family Advocate
- Mental Health Services
- Parent Educators
- Special Families Group

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Character Counts Curriculum
- Second Step Curriculum

Key Program Features

Behavioral Assistance Team

The Behavioral Assistance Team is composed of a variety of school-based staff, including teachers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language clinicians. Originally a collaboration among the school district, the University of Minnesota, and the U.S. Department of Education, the team intervenes in response to troubling child behavior. They work with those in the child's life—family

- Parent-child activities
- Parent education and support groups
- Preschool

Partners

- Federal Adult Basic Education program
- Benton County Human Services
- Central Minnesota Mental Health Center
- Early Childhood Special Education
- Early Head Start
- Head Start
- Lutheran Social Services
- Saint Cloud State University
- Saint Cloud Technical College

Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

Teachers receive ongoing training and support from mental health specialists and a family advocate in identifying families at risk and resources available to them.

Staff Resources

When staff are concerned about a family, they can get support and information from:

- Home visits by licensed parent educators
- On-site family advocate
- Licensed mental health therapists
- Links to services in the community

Staff receive regular updates and training from the county department of human services regarding child protection.

members, teachers, and others—to change the child’s environment and teach him or her more effective ways to communicate. Saint Cloud State University also trains teachers on the functional behavior assessment used by the Behavioral Assistance Team.

Classroom Observation

At the back of each preschool classroom is an observation room. Parents can view their children and the teacher through a glass wall, which is a mirror on the other side.

Observation is an important part of ongoing parent education. Parents are guided by parent educators to notice aspects of their children’s behavior that relate to topics currently being covered in the parent education curriculum. Parents are able to watch preschool staff model strategies for interacting with their children and practice these skills during parent-child activities following the observation. Observation also allows parents to compare the behavior of their children to that of others; many find it reassuring to see that their children are “normal.”

Community Partnerships

Sauk Rapids–Rice Early Childhood Family Program builds partnerships with other community-based organizations that provide services for children and families. For example, the Benton County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative funds an on-site family advocate from Lutheran Social Services, who assists parents with housing, medical, financial, and mental health needs. The director of the program actively pursued this partnership.

Other partnerships are also in place, increasing resources available to families participating in the program: Central Minnesota Mental Health Center provides an on-site therapist. Mental health services are also shared with local Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

Response Protocol

If staff suspect child abuse or neglect, the following occurs:

- Teacher discusses concerns with team teacher
- Teacher talks to program director
- Teacher talks with parent
- Home visiting may be suggested
- Teacher may make referral to outside services
- Referral may be made to Behavioral Assistance Team

What People Say

“For the first few months, no one came and talked with me. So I started going into the classroom and playing with the kids. After a while of seeing my face all the time, [the parents] have gotten comfortable with me. Now they come in.”

—Mental health consultant

“The parents I work with are excited. Their kids get to interact with a professional and I’m getting training without having to cancel childcare. I get to choose the topic and they come to my house.”

—Home day care provider

“If we can get families connected to ECFE, it opens doors to many more services than we can offer. Having [the program director] on the child protection consultation team brings so much—it helps to keep family issues on the table.”

—Child protective services worker

The program director is active on the Benton County Child Protection Case Consultation Team, comprised of community providers of all types. The team advises social workers in the state's child protection system on child abuse and neglect cases and helps ensure that families referred for additional support access services.

The program has many other partners:

- The Benton County Department of Human Services provides on-site public health and social services.
- Through a partnership with Saint Cloud State University, graduate students studying speech communication disorders provide therapeutic activities in children's classrooms.
- Saint Cloud Technical College helps those who have participated in family literacy at the program make the transition to higher education.
- The state's special education agencies are partners with the program, and the Interagency Early Intervention Committee offers support sessions and other resources for parents of children with special needs.

De-stressing and Social Activities

Regularly scheduled activities help to build parents' resilience by reducing their stress and strengthening their social connections. These include infant massage demonstrations, makeovers, trips to theater productions, Family Fun Nights, gym activities, and more.

Early Childhood Family Education

All families taking part in the program's preschool or family literacy activities also participate in Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE). ECFE consists of weekly, facilitated parent-child activities and parent education. Parent education is carried out by licensed staff who provide informal case management and help connect families to resources they need. They have expertise in parenting, adult learning, family systems, and child development.

The integration of ECFE with preschool helps ensure that not just children, but parents, get support in their growth and development. Preschool teachers and parent educators meet regularly to identify and meet the needs of families who require extra support. Some staff are dual-licensed as both parent educators and preschool teachers. Staff of both types are considered family educators, and all staff understand the importance of nurturing children while supporting their parents.

Enlightened Parenting

Enlightened Parenting is a parent education course for parents who did not receive adequate nurturing care when they were children. It allows parents to understand how their own childhood experiences impact their ability to nurture their children and to learn new parenting strategies. The class meets weekly, is two hours long, and is led by a parent educator and a preschool teacher together. While parents participate in the group, their children engage in child development activities with a licensed teacher. The curriculum for the program was developed by staff of the Sauk Rapids–Rice Early Childhood Family Program.

Family Literacy

The Even Start family literacy program is free for parents who qualify for federally funded adult basic education programs. Through it, parents can get a GED, get a standard high school diploma (through a partnership with the public school system), or work on basic literacy skills.

Parents can bring their children and receive free preschool and childcare. Parent education and parent-child activities are integrated into their literacy coursework. Each module includes objectives and activities that advance the parent's literacy and academic goals while furthering his or her parenting skills and knowledge. The program also helps teen parents stay in school while being closely connected to their children.

Family literacy program activities include:

- Adult basic education (reading, writing, and math)
- Career exploration
- Early childhood education
- Food program
- Home visits and transportation
- Mental health services
- Parent-child activities
- Parent education
- Volunteerism

Home-based Childcare Provider Network

The program provides home-based childcare providers in the Benton County area with a number of supports: First, it provides home visits from a team that includes an early childhood educator and a certified family educator. The team visits while the provider has children in his or her care and models child development and family support skills. Second, the program provides continuing education credits for all licensed providers who receive these visits. Third, home childcare providers can bring children in their care to on-site activities. Finally, these providers can get support from mental health and child development specialists in responding to troubling behavior or signs of developmental delay in children.

Home Visits

Parents participate in either short-term or ongoing home visits, depending on their needs. Preschool teachers and parent educators visit in pairs, so that they can cover both child development and family support issues. Topics covered include attachment, realistic expectations, communication, effective and positive discipline, co-parenting, family stress, balancing work and family, and other issues.

The First Step home visiting program sends parent educators to the homes of parent with infants to address attachment and early brain and infant development. The 10 sessions are videotaped, and parents receive the tapes.

Mental Health Services

Mental health services are an important part of the Sauk Rapids–Rice Early Childhood Family Program. Many families access mental health services at the program because they are offered at a place that is safe and familiar to them; if this were not the case, they would probably go without.

Two licensed therapists are available two days a week to families participating in programs. They work individually with parents, lead support groups on depression and mental health issues, and provide play therapy and parent-child–interaction therapy. Therapy is available to parents on a sign-up basis, at no cost to them. A Special Families group is provided for families with children with special needs.

Additionally, a therapist consultant meets with staff on a regular basis to advise them in their work with families in crisis. These meetings support staff and also build their skills.

Central Minnesota Mental Health Center provides a mental health therapist on-site. Other partners include the Benton County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative, Lutheran Social Services, and Early Head Start. These partnerships help to ensure that needed mental health services are available, without requiring insurance, paperwork, or money from families.

Mentor Project

Sauk Rapids–Rice Early Childhood Family Program is one of four programs statewide to mentor other centers on family literacy. Its staff provide the staff of other centers with workshops, site visits, and in-person and phone technical assistance to enhance their family

literacy skills. They also present at regional and state conferences. This mentoring is funded by a federal grant secured by the state in 2000.

Second Step

Second Step is a violence prevention curriculum that builds three essential social competencies in children:

- Empathy
- Impulse control and problem solving
- Anger management

Second Step teaches children how to deal with emotions, resolve conflicts, and understand the consequences of their actions. By first identifying their own and others' feelings, children learn to understand issues that lead to conflicts, and then use problem-solving strategies to resolve and avoid conflicts. They learn by modeling, practice, and reinforcement. At the preschool level, Second Step focuses on helping children learn how to recognize and talk about their feelings. Second Step is complemented by the Character Counts curriculum. A violence prevention curriculum is also part of the program's parent education groups, contributing to positive conflict resolution and social connections in the community.

Parents notice the results of the program's violence prevention activities quickly and consistently: These activities not only build children's social and emotional skills, but give parents strategies for addressing violent or difficult child behavior—and help them see their children in a different way.