

## Supporting Return to School Supporting Children’s Virtual Learning and Before- and After-School Experiences

Supporting Return to School, a new Office for Children program created in response to this year’s virtual return to school, reflects Fairfax County’s and Fairfax County Public Schools’ joint commitment to One Fairfax. Serving children and youth at 37 Fairfax County Public School locations, the program helps to ensure families have equitable access to the services they need to support children’s virtual learning.

SRS works in partnership with families and FCPS to ensure children receive guidance and support during the FCPS virtual academic day. Staff assist with technology needs, help children follow their daily schedule, facilitate opportunities for active breaks, and provide support for synchronous and asynchronous learning. SRS staff also provides opportunities for children to be outdoors, connect with friends, and participate in engaging activities before and after school.

The SRS curriculum, “The Great Outdoors: Road Trips Through the Americas,” provides a great way for children to experience locations near and far through virtual travel! While some centers like Bucknell SRS are staying local to explore hidden gems such as the marshlands of Huntley Meadows Park in Alexandria, other centers are traveling to destinations across the Americas. Children at Westgate SRS are exploring the DC area by trolley and boat before traveling across the U.S. to marvel at the Northern Lights, Earth’s natural light display.

Providence SRS is traveling along Route 66, with stopovers at the Houston Space Center in Texas, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the Albuquerque Balloon Festival in New Mexico, and more. Children at

Bailey’s SRS began their journey in California, stopped in Mexico to explore the Sonoran Desert and Cuernavaca, the City of Eternal Spring, and then headed to South America to learn about Rio de Janeiro and the unique plants and flowers of the Amazon Rainforest.

Children are also participating in traditional fall activities such as making scarecrows, picking pumpkins, and fun-filled Spirit Week celebrations culminating with a Costume Day. At Centre Ridge SRS, children enjoyed nature walks and collecting a variety of leaves and twigs. Enthusiastic about contributing to a collaborative project, each child thoughtfully placed their collection of leaves on a large painted canvas to create a fabulous fall mural.

Central to the SRS program is an unwavering dedication to protecting the health and safety of all children, families and staff. Comprehensive health and safety protocols include conducting daily health screenings and temperature checks; maintaining small groups of children and consistent staff to limit exposure; requiring the use of face coverings for staff and children; physical distancing; hand washing; and enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, especially of high-touch surfaces.

SRS families are appreciative of the time, care and special attention SRS staff provide to their children during virtual learning as well as for the opportunities for children to participate in creative and engaging experiences. As one family recently shared, “[The SRS staff] truly made an impact and allowed the kids to have a wonderful time.”



At Weyanoke SRS, children participate in virtual learning and enjoy time outside.



Nature walks at Centre Ridge SRS inspired children to collaborate on the creation of this amazing fall mural.



Children at Saratoga and Westgate SRS enjoy Spirit Week activities, including Costume Day.



# ITC Drive-Through Graduations

## Celebrating Children's Achievements

Graduation at the Infant & Toddler Connection is one of our most celebrated events of the year. It provides a chance for staff and families to recognize those children who will be moving on from our program.

Children leave the program when they turn 3 years old or when they have met all the goals outlined in their Individualized Family Service Plan. Next steps for these children vary; some begin services with Fairfax County Public Schools, some pursue private community supports, and others look for early childhood opportunities in their neighborhoods. For all of these graduates, we celebrate the parents' role in helping their children meet milestones.

In years past, our celebrations were held outdoors at county parks large enough to accommodate an interaction station with a pony, live music, toys and food. Due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, it became clear that this year would be different. Carolina Kasper and Mia Batson, both ITC family support liaisons, immediately got to work thinking of ways to celebrate our 2020 graduates.

With the help of NCS Community Center staff, they created a drive-through option called Graduation Station to show our graduates and families that we would remember and cherish

their time with us. Families had the choice of attending a morning drive-through at Mott Community Center or an afternoon drive-through at James Lee Community Center.

ITC staff members lined the sidewalks hula-hooping and cheering with pom-poms. Some staff had puppets on their hands or wore silly costumes to entertain the children as they looked out the car windows. We even had an ITC staff member dress up as a bunny at the Mott location, and it was a hit with the kids! At James Lee, we had a dog and a polar bear smiling and waving as the cars proceeded through. Each child's name was announced over the loudspeaker as they pulled up to receive their graduation certificate, a bubble wand, and a purple ITC t-shirt.

A total of 80 families participated in Graduation Station 2020. Although the celebration was brief this year, it was well attended. Siblings and grandparents even rode along to join in the fun. Everyone at ITC was grateful for the opportunity to continue this tradition of honoring our graduates.

Congratulations to ITC's 2020 graduates! We look forward to hearing all about your future successes.



**Maintaining a clean and safe environment remains a top priority for child care programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.** To assist with this effort, the Office for Children has been working with various organizations to collect donated cleaning supplies and distribute them to providers.

This summer, OFC partnered with Volunteer Fairfax to hold a supply drive to collect cleaning products. Community members donated items such as hand soap, paper towels, toilet paper, disinfectant wipes, disinfectant spray, bleach, hand sanitizer, disposable gloves and diapers. In addition to the supplies brought in by the Volunteer Fairfax drive, cleaning items were also collected from other organizations, including the nonprofit Fairfax Futures, which received a \$10,000 grant from Wells Fargo to purchase cleaning supplies and PPE to support family child care providers during the pandemic.

As the supplies were collected, OFC and Fairfax Futures staff created supply kits for distribution to child care providers.

OFC also worked with volunteers from the community and Fairfax County's Community Emergency Response Team which supported a contactless drive-through supplies pick up event and assembled hundreds of supply kits at Lincolnia Senior Center on October 13 and 14.

Over 500 kits were distributed including items such as paper products and disinfectants that support child care programs providing essential services during the pandemic.

Child care programs throughout the county have expressed their thanks for the supply kits and the recognition and support of the work that they do. OFC and the community appreciate all that programs do for children and families!



## Donation Drive a Success Thanks to Teamwork





# Exploring the Impact of Unstructured Outdoor Play on Young Children



## Fairfax Futures' 16th Annual School Readiness Symposium Goes Virtual

On Saturday, October 17, Fairfax Futures hosted its 16th Annual School Readiness Symposium with one major change – this year the symposium was held virtually on GoToWebinar to ensure the safety of all participants.

The annual event celebrates early childhood educators' work in our community and provides them an opportunity to focus on an early childhood topic in depth. Participants include educators working in center-based programs, family child care homes and elementary school PreK programs.

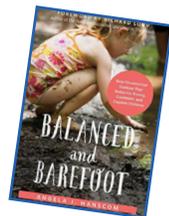
Sallyann Bergh, Executive Director of Fairfax Futures, kicked off the event by welcoming the early childhood educators in attendance. She then introduced special guests Mr. D. Jermaine Johnson, Regional President of PNC Bank's Greater Washington region, and Providence District Supervisor Dalia Palchik.

Mr. Johnson spoke about the importance of school readiness in preparing children for later success and how PNC supports that effort through their Grow Up Great program, their signature philanthropic initiative that supports school readiness through grants, mobile educational tours and professional development opportunities. Supervisor Palchik spoke about Fairfax County's commitment to making early childhood education a priority. She also thanked the educators in attendance for their hard work and for partnering with families to help young children develop the skills they need to build a solid foundation for success in school and beyond.



The symposium's keynote speaker was Angela Hanscom, author of *Balanced and Barefoot: How Unrestricted Outdoor Play Makes for Strong, Confident, and Capable Children* speaking on the topic of "Unstructured Play: Creating Natural Sensory Experiences for Young Children." Hanscom, a pediatric occupational

therapist and founder of TimberNook, an award-winning developmental and nature-based program, shared her belief that the decline of outdoor play is tied to the rise of sensory and motor issues in children. She stressed that "the occupation of a child is play" and adults can best support children's learning by allowing their play time to be child-directed. Some highlights of her presentation included:



- Children play, connect and heal through play outdoors.
- On average, children today play outdoors for over 3 hours less per day than today's adults did when they were children.
- The rapid head movement that occurs when children play outdoors helps develop a child's vestibular sense, the sensory system that contributes to balance and the sense of spatial orientation. Children need to be able to move their bodies in all different directions (swinging, jumping, rolling down a hill) to strengthen their vestibular sense.
- Being outdoors better allows sensory integration to happen. Sensory integration is the process by which we receive information through our senses, organize this information, and use it to participate in everyday activities.

**Nature is therapeutic.**

- Fosters listening
- Improves visual skills
- Enhances the sense of touch

Consider the value kids derive from:

- Going barefoot
- Playing in the dark



**Major lifestyle changes**



Children today spend far less time outdoors than prior generations did (from 4-6 hours per day in 1984 to just 48 minutes per day now).

- Increased technology use
- Increased fear
- Increased focus on academics
- Reduction in recess time
- Overscheduled families

**The vestibular system**

- Uses hair cells in the inner ear complex
- Helps children know where their body is in space
- Supports all six eye muscles for reading and writing
- Maintains the Reticular Activating System, which turns the brain on and allows us to pay attention
- Feeds into the limbic system, the center for emotional regulation



**Find ways to enhance the experience of play.**



- Adults may step back.
- Extend the time for play.
- Impose fewer rules.
- Provide loose parts.
- Provide the freedom to get dirty.

Symposium participants were offered the opportunity to continue to explore this topic during a 4-week course focusing on Ms. Hanscom's book, with each educator receiving a copy of the book. The course, hosted in partnership with OFC, was offered in both English and Spanish.

This professional learning opportunity was made possible through a generous grant from the PNC Foundation's Grow Up Great Initiative and in partnership with Fairfax County Office for Children.

# Happy to be Back and Virtual Learning Webinars

## OFC Offers Webinars to Early Childhood Educators on Supporting Children During the Pandemic



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fairfax County Office for Children offered two webinar series during the summer and fall, one to share information with early childhood educators about returning to programs during COVID-19, and the other to support educators who are assisting school-age children with the virtual return to school.

In July and August, more than 400 early childhood educators participated in a three-part discussion series titled Happy to Be Back, which took place as children began to return in larger numbers to early childhood programs. OFC partners from the Fairfax County Health Department, Fairfax Falls-Church Community Services Board, and early childhood programs presented their experiences and guidelines about bringing young children back into group experiences. Participants who were preparing for children to return to their programs appreciated the advice and insight shared by the presenters.

A continuation of the series, Happy to Be Back: The Conversation Continues, was held in September and October. Attended by nearly 400 early childhood educators, these three sessions offered updates and guidance on recommended procedures and discussions about new ways to implement best practices, factoring in current county guidelines to contain the spread of COVID-19. These panel discussions were led by early

childhood educators from center and family child care programs, early childhood center program directors, a maternal child health nurse manager and a nationally certified therapist. The sessions included:

### ■ **Connecting and Sharing in New Ways**

A four-person panel about reconnecting and sharing new ways to create engaging learning environments, maintain social distancing and continue positive interactions.

### ■ **Preparing for a Healthy Return**

A three-person panel about the unique needs of children and families with information on safety guidance provided by the Fairfax County Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control.

### ■ **Promoting the Best for Infants and Toddlers - Supporting Social Distancing While Maintaining Positive Relationships**

A three-person panel about strategies for creating engaging learning environments and joyful play with infants and toddlers during COVID-19.

In partnership with Fairfax County Public Schools, OFC also offered a four-part webinar series, Virtual Back to School, providing information on how to set up a virtual learning environment and offer

appropriate grade-level support for school-age children who spend their day in community early childhood programs.

Offered in both English and Spanish, topics included:

### ■ **Creating a Safe and Productive Learning Environment**

Learn how to set up a virtual workspace, create schedules for learning, and access technology support from FCPS.

### ■ **Exploring the different independent learning programs and learning how to support school-age children who will be using these platforms.**

Programs include Blackboard Collaborate Ultra and Schoology; Google Classroom and Google Meet; CLEVER and Online Academic Program.

For those unable to attend the live sessions of Virtual Back to School, recordings are available on the OFC website at [fairfaxcounty.gov/office-for-children/resources-supporting-school-age-online-learning](https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/office-for-children/resources-supporting-school-age-online-learning).

Fairfax County

**O F C** Office for Children

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