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## Creative Solutions for Emerging Child Care Needs

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## Creative Solutions for Emerging Child Care Needs

### Abstract

Harnett County has one of the fastest growing populations of families with children ages birth to 5 among rural counties in North Carolina. Collaborative partnerships have addressed this emerging need through the creation of Cooperative Extension's Child Care Resource and Referral Program. This progressive, educational effort meets the unique needs of Harnett County families through six initiatives: comprehensive training; referral line; child care data base; resource library; development of new child care; and newsletters. Results include 11,033 providers trained, 4,707 new child care spaces created, and 81 family child care homes increasing quality indicators.

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## Introduction

What can happen when you combine collaborative partnerships with emerging county needs? You may create an innovative, educational solution like Cooperative Extension's Child Care Resource and Referral Program in Harnett County, North Carolina. Harnett County has experienced one of the fastest growing populations of families with children ages birth to 5 among rural counties in North Carolina. Child care has come to center stage as 86% of the county's children ages 0-5 have parents who work outside of the home.

## Initial Collaboration

In 1992, Harnett County held its first State of the Child Conference, in which five key issues facing families with children were determined. Not surprisingly, child care made the list. Based on conference recommendations, Cooperative Extension established a task force to study Harnett County's present and emerging childcare needs (e.g., Walker, 2003).

A diverse group of business, civic, agency, child care, and community leaders spent a year studying our county needs and reviewing successful strategies implemented throughout the state. The task force recommended creating a Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) program as an outreach of Extension's Family and Consumer Science child care efforts, the first of its kind within the state.

Beginning in 1994, the program is run by one coordinator and three parent referral specialists and receives funding from grants, local contributions, and county government funds. A collaboration of county interests and a committed advisory board have steered the creation and evolution of this program for the past 12 years (Bergstrom et al., 1995). The result is a progressive, educational effort meeting the unique needs of Harnett County families.

# Collaboration Initiatives

CCR&R addresses the growing needs of families and child care through six initiatives.

## 1. Referral Line

The free referral line operates 8 hours a day, Monday through Friday, assisting families in their search for child care. When families call for referrals, they receive the names of legally operating child care programs in their area. Parent referral specialists offer valuable information on quality child care while addressing individual concerns, including referring families to other county programs and services.

## 2. Database

CCR&R maintains a current database of child care needs and services in the county. Citizens, civic leaders, policy planners, potential new business leaders, and others rely on CCR&R for information regarding the status and quality of area child care.

## 3. Resource Library

Through their resource library, CCR&R offers curriculum and educational resources to help child care facilities with curriculum development, staff training, and professional development. Students and instructors at local colleges and universities, and parents also use these materials. Resources include 107 age-specific teaching tubs developed to enhance curriculum experiences at child care centers and homes. Designed around a book, tubs offers a variety of related teaching activities and materials aimed at fostering the multiple domains of a child's development.

## 4. Development of New Child Care

Free technical assistance and educational information offer prospective child care providers much needed support as they begin operation, and quarterly prelicensing workshops assist those persons interested in opening new family child care homes. Existing facilities also receive individualized educational assistance, helping them to constantly improve the quality of care they deliver and ensure their continued success.

## 5. Newsletters

In addition to developing numerous educational publications, CCR&R distributes several monthly newsletters. *Home Away From Home* addresses the specialized needs of family child care homes. *The Childhood Scene* serves providers in five counties with useful educational information, along with child care training calendars for each county. *Parent Pages* addresses parental concerns and the developmental needs of children.

## 6. Educational Training

Comprehensive and diversified trainings are offered free or at minimal costs to address provider needs and area child care consultant concerns. Centers and homes may receive on-site training in response to special concerns or compliance issues. CCR&R staff are certified to teach specific classes, such as Color Me Healthy, Transportation Safety, Playground Safety, ITS/SIDS, and others. In light of saddening rates of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) in Harnett County, CCR&R has been in great demand as it employs the county's only certified SIDS trainers (Malley, 2002).

## Special Projects

CCR&R administers numerous special programs to enhance the quality of care and learning environments. Through the Top Notch Teacher Project, child care providers are supported to reduce turnover, encourage stability in the workplace, and increase income for quality providers. Another project, North Carolina's Star Rated License Program, uses stars to rate the quality of child care programs; one star indicates lowest and five stars highest quality. Because in 2001, only one family child care home in Harnett had a star rating of higher than one star, CCR&R initiated the Family Child Care Home Licensure Project to assist family child care homes increase their star ratings and address issues of quality.

## The Results

How have these initiatives benefited child care?

- 3,753+ families assisted in searching for quality child care.
- 630+ training workshops offered increasing the skills and knowledge of 11,033 child care providers.
- Shared quality child care educational knowledge and materials with 73,000+ community

contacts.

- Resource library utilized weekly.
- Provided education and technical assistance for 221 new child care facilities, creating 4,707 new child care spaces.
- Reaching 3,600 childcare providers, agencies, and decision makers through monthly regional newsletters *The Childhood Scene* and 100 family child care providers through *Home Away from Home*.
- 704 child care providers, early childhood students, parents, and church nursery workers trained to implement Infant/Toddler Safe Sleep practices in an effort to reduce the risk of SIDS.
- Discouraged turnover and increased workplace stability with monetary incentives through the Top Notch Teacher Project.
- 100% of enrolled homes (i.e., 81 family child care homes) increased their star ratings from one star to three stars or higher, increasing safety and quality of care for Harnett County children through the Family Childcare Home Licensure Project.

What can happen when diverse partnerships join with Extension to address urgent needs? For Harnett County, the result has been a unique and comprehensive educational program leading to increased quality, availability, and safety in our child care facilities.

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