

The Family Connection: Activities & Accomplishments *Updated February 2015*

Introduction:

In response to the challenges of young children and their families in the USVI, as reported in the Community Foundation's annual USVI KIDS COUNT data book, combined with recent research in the fields of neuroscience, education, health, psychology, and economics on the critical importance of the first five years of life, the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands (CFVI) established an early childhood initiative in 2006 entitled "The Family Connection (TFC)."

TFC Mission: The mission of TFC was to strengthen the community child care and early education infrastructure in the USVI by building awareness of the importance of early learning and development for success and working with community agencies to promote quality care and education. To this end, TFC embarked on a three-pronged approach to successfully carry out its mission: 1) Policy and Advocacy; 2) Quality Improvement and Capacity Building; and 3) Community Engagement.

Policy and Advocacy

- Revised Child Care Rules and Regulations: In 2010, the V. I. Rules and Regulations for Child Care Facilities were adopted as an outcome of the work of an interagency committee, of which CFVI staff was an active member. This revision marked the first time in thirty years that the Rules and Regulations have been upgraded in an effort to improve the quality of care and education.
- Kindergarten Entrance Data: CFVI's leadership in the Virgin Islands' Kids Count efforts led to the awareness that a unified data system was necessary to track the outcomes of early childhood efforts and measure children's readiness for kindergarten. At that time, different assessment tools were being implemented in the St. Thomas/St. John and St. Croix districts. With advocacy from CFVI, both districts are now using the same assessment instruments enabling policymakers to compare results and follow progress.
- Taking Stock: In 2009, through funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, TFC contracted with staff from St. Joseph's University to conduct a study of the quality of early childhood care and education in a sampling of centers throughout the territory. Findings indicated there is much work to be done the need to improve the quality of early childhood experiences. In most programs there were health and safety issues and children had little or no opportunities to learn through play and active engagement. Although positive interactions did occur between teachers and students, the climate in many programs was stressful because of developmentally inappropriate expectations for the children. The results of this study provided clear evidence that improving the quality of care and education must be a priority.
- Leadership of ECAC: The Early Childhood Advisory Committee was established through Executive Order by Governor John P. deJongh, Jr. as a standing committee of the Governor's Children and Families Council in 2010. The ECAC is an interagency committee of early childhood professionals focused on the well-being of young children and families. CFVI was asked to take a leadership role by coordinating the ECAC; guiding members through the establishment of its vision, mission, guiding principles, and goals; and writing the federal grant application that secured three years of funding. Subsequently, CFVI has been

contracted by the Office of the Governor to continue to guide the work of the ECAC. Work Groups were established to focus on specific aspects of building the infrastructure to ensure that children are supported in their growth and development. Work Groups include: Health and Wellness, Quality Education, Professional Development, Strengthening Families, and Data. Interagency accomplishments of the Work Groups, under the leadership of CFVI, will be enumerated throughout the report.

- ECAC Strategic Reports: Annually, the ECAC Coordinator (staff of CFVI) writes a strategic report in which the data on the well-being of young children and families are reported on. Additionally, this comprehensive report provides information to policymakers and the community regarding its accomplishments and services provided to young children and families by various community agencies. For the first time, the "State of Preschool in the VI" was included based on criteria of quality established by the National Institute on Early Education Research (NIEER).
- Legislation of the ECAC: The ECAC was initially established through Executive Order and has received considerable support from the current government administration. In order to ensure continued focus and attention in future administrations, it is the intent of the Office of the Governor to institutionalize the ECAC as a standing committee of the Children and Families Council in legislation. In support of this endeavor, the ECAC has provided the Office of the Governor with recommendations to meet both federal mandates and local needs.
- Professional Development System: The ECAC, through consultation with representatives from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, developed "Pathways to Excellence," the USVI early childhood and professional development system plan. The focus of the plan is to ensure that all individuals who work in early childhood education have access to comprehensive, coordinated, and cross-sector learning opportunities that support the acquisition and ongoing demonstration of the knowledge, dispositions, and competencies necessary to facilitate the optimal growth and development of young children and to engage their families. To this end, career pathways were designed as a roadmap for entry into the profession and professional growth, as well as, core knowledge and competencies as the unifying framework for the profession and professional development.
- Recommendations for Implementation of Pre-K: In response to the passage of universal pre-kindergarten legislation, the ECAC authored recommendations and listed necessary considerations in the establishment of a pre-kindergarten program both within the Department of Education and through partnerships with Head Start and private child care.
- Adoption of the Strengthening Families Approach to working with families: The Strengthening Families approach builds on family strengths and protective factors that prevent child abuse and promote optimal child development and family functioning. these include:
 - Family resilience: Competence in coping with crisis and everyday challenges
 - Social connections: Having networks of friends and family who provide support
 - Concrete supports in times of need: Understanding family needs and knowing where and how to access services and goods

- Knowledge of parenting and child development: Awareness of typical stages of development, ways to promote healthy development, and appropriate discipline methods
 - Children’s social and emotional competence: Ability to recognize and express feelings; development of pro-social behaviors, self-confidence, self-efficacy, age-appropriate skills that support social adaptation
- Support of Territorial Initiatives: The ECAC serves as a supportive force and clearing house for programs and services serving young children and their families by recommending best practices and serving as an advisory board for programs mandated by their federal grants. Examples include the ECCS Grant (described above); Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, operated by the Department of Health; Child Care Research Partnership Grant, operated in collaboration with the Department of Human Services and UVI; and Longitudinal Data System, specifically in their integration of early childhood data with K-12 data, administrated by the Department of Education.
- Integration among systems: As much of the infrastructure and policy initiatives have been under development simultaneously, it has enabled us to integrate them in a way that creates a cohesive system. For example: The Professional Development System, Early Learning Guidelines, Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines and the Strengthening Families approach are all reflected in the quality standards of the QRIS. The CDA curriculum includes training in the Early Learning Guidelines, Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines and the Strengthening Families approach. We are currently working with UVI to articulate the CDA training with their Inclusive Early Childhood Education Program so that individuals will be able to earn college credit upon completion of the CDA.
- Workforce Study: Through funding from the Department of Human Services, a study of the educational levels of the child care work force was conducted to better understand their current status and professional developmental needs to meet the new licensing rules and regulations requiring a Child Development Associate credential and improve the quality of care and education for young children.
- Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Grant: This federal grant had been available for states and territories in years past, however, the Virgin Islands had never applied. This year there was renewed funding, so as not miss an opportunity, a few members of the ECAC worked together to apply and secure funding. The purpose of the USVI ECCS Grant is to mitigate toxic stress in infancy and early childhood through the development of a trauma-informed child and family service system and a protective factors approach to strengthen and support families in their roles as nurturers of their infants and young children. The grant will be managed under the Office of the Governor with the ECAC serving as the advisory board.

Quality Improvement and Capacity Building

- VI Early Learning Guidelines: The *Guidelines* focus on outcomes for three and four year olds and reflect what children need to know, understand, and be able to do by the time they reach kindergarten with suggestions for parents and teachers for supporting children’s development and learning. The content is alignment with the Common Core Standards

adopted by the public schools for grades K-12 - including workshops. The *Guidelines* were compiled by an interagency task force and initially published in 2010. Through ECAC funding, additional copies were printed. CFVI created workshops for child care providers and preschool teachers on how to use the *Guidelines* for curriculum planning and intentional teaching.

- *Infant Toddler Developmental Guidelines*: These are similar to those described above with the focus on children from birth to three years with suggestions for adults about ways they can support development. They are aligned with the *Early Learning Guidelines*.
- *Kindergarten Early Learning Guidelines*: These are aligned with the Common Core State Standards and the VI Early Learning Guidelines and in response to research and evidenced-based practices. Draft was sent out to principals and selected teachers for review and comment. The Guidelines were published in 2014.
- *Child Development Associate (CDA) Curriculum*: In recognition of the need for child care staff to meet the professional development requirements of the new licensing standards, the Department of Human Services contracted with TFC to a curriculum that both meets the national CDA training requirements and local priorities. This is a major step in the effort to boost the quality and developmental appropriateness in early childhood settings by providing for professional development of staff. The CDA is a national credential for entry level early childhood professionals. One goal of the curriculum is to align the content with courses at UVI to facilitate articulation and the ability of those who earn their CDA using this curriculum to earn college credit at UVI.
- *Development of a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)*: Initially, TFC was engaged in providing training to child care directors to facilitate their attainment of national NAEYC Accreditation. As we attempted to move forward, we realized that, for many, accreditation would require many changes that would perhaps take years to achieve. Recognizing that the movement around the country was towards the establishment of a QRIS. TFC partnered with the Department of Human Services and, under their leadership, created a QRIS, which is a method to provide incentives and supports to improve and communicate the level of quality of early childhood programs using defined standards of quality. This quality improvement initiative, includes standards to improve health and safety practices, professional development, support to families, and curriculum. A pilot project with 24 centers began in the fall 2013 in which these centers receive technical assistance to improve their standards of quality.
- *Training of Trainers: Mothers and Babies Course*: A training of trainers was provided to implement the "Mothers and Babies Course," an evidenced-based course for high risk mothers to prevent postpartum depression through teaching and enhancing mood-management skills and maternal self-efficacy to mothers-to-be and mothers. The training was taught by experts from George Washington University and John Hopkins University and offered to social workers, psychologists, counselors, nurses, home visitors and others who work with families. Participants learned how to implement the 8-week cognitive-behavioral intervention course aimed at addressing the needs and issues most salient during the perinatal period.
- *Training of Trainers: Community Cafes*: A Community Café is a strategy that is part of the Strengthening Families approach to working with families and designed to provide parents with opportunities to build their leadership skills and talk about how to keep their families

strong. Community Cafés are parent to parent conversations guided by trained hosts in which parents share their experiences, challenges, and rewards of being a parent. Training was provided to teach staff from various public and private agencies and parents on how to host successful community cafés. The course was taught by a parent leader consultant of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds and a core member of the Community Café Collaborative, Washington's Strengthening Families Leadership Team.

- The Virtues Project: The Virtues Project is an international initiative focused on building peaceful and caring communities aligned to virtues – such as “compassion,” “integrity,” “respect.” It was launched territory-wide the first week of October 2010. In the fall of 2011, Facilitators' training was conducted on the five strategies for implementing the Virtues Project within programs for children and families, the home, the workplace, and community, with 35 participants certified as Facilitators. The Department of Education disseminates the “Virtue of the Week” with VI proverbs and stories that exemplify the virtue to public school teachers. A small group of the early childhood professionals put together suggested activities and picture books appropriate for preschool children that are sent to Head Start and early childhood settings. CFVI disseminates them weekly to 51 Government agencies, 152 churches and other religious institutions, 19 private schools, 39 media outlets, 195 non-profit organizations, 630 donors/potential donors, 282 CFVI grantees, 3 Chambers of Commerce, and 61 businesses.
- Campaign for Grade Level Reading: A cross-sector interagency team was convened to develop a strategic plan as part of the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading by third Grade. The Campaign focuses on three community challenges that have the potential to positively impact grade level reading by the end of third grade: school readiness (already a focus of the ECAC), summer learning loss, and chronic school absence. Through the Governor's Summer Reading Challenge and the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands' Book Bank, an effort has been made to increase children's access to books and to decrease summer learning loss. Workshops were conducted to staff of summer programs and housing communities focused on how to support children's reading, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. Books were provided to participating programs. CFVI was awarded a national Pacesetters Award for its work in summer learning support from CGL in 2013.
- Striving Readers: To further enhance literacy from birth through college and through the federally funded Striving Readers Program, the Department of Education, with input from key partners, developed a comprehensive literacy plan. The purpose of this plan is to provide a framework for birth through college literacy development that takes place in Virgin Islands schools, university and the community. To avoid duplication and since the goals and objectives of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading could be encompassed by the larger Striving Readers Initiative, the merged Grade-Level Reading campaign under the Striving Readers' Literacy - with the motto "Literacy for Life."
- Outreach technical assistance to centers: TFC staff have worked with community-based child care programs to help build quality through quality improvement grants and technical assistance and modeling of best practices.
- Workshops: Workshops have been provided to community-based child care centers, Head Start, and Early Head Start on the following topics:
 - Supporting Language Development

- Implementing the Creative Curriculum (3-day each for Preschool and Infant/Toddler)
- Implementation of the Early Learning Guidelines - including sessions on each of the following - Orientation, Physical Health and Development, Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language and Literacy, and Mathematical Understanding
- Head Start Governance
- Strategies of the virtues Project
- NAEYC Accreditation (9-part series)
- Conducting developmental screening
- Putting Play in the Curriculum (3-part series)
- Working with Infants and Toddlers (3-part series)
- Strengthening Families approach
- Best Beginnings Early Childhood Conference: The 16th annual conference was held in May, 2014 with two days of workshops on St. Croix and two days on St. Thomas. Close to 1,000 teachers, child care providers, directors, and other interested members of the community attend this conference each year. CFVI/TFC has been a long-time partner in this initiative.
- Revitalization of Winston Raymo Playground: Through a partnership with Foresters Insurance and VI Parks and Recreation, the playground was redesigned, built and landscaped, including the installation of specific equipment and activities for preschoolers and a CFVI Born Learning Trail.

Community Engagement

- Book Bank: TFC collects gently used books for children ages birth to eight years to distribute directly to children throughout the community. Since February, 2012 12,000 books have been distributed at community events and from the TFC Center.
- TFC Center Activities: The TFC Center operated a lending library to provide books, educational materials, and toys to children, their parents, child care providers and teachers initially at Vitracco Mall and then at Tutu Park Mall on St. Thomas. Materials, especially designed for infants and toddlers and children with special needs, were added. Every child who visited the Center selected a book from the Book Bank to take with them. The Tutu Park Mall location was closed in October 2014 and the materials were moved to a new location at the campus of the Humane Society of St Thomas. The role of the TFC Center is currently under evaluation.
 - Readers' Theater; During the summer of 2013, bi-weekly reading events activities were sponsored at the TFC center hosting approximately 35 children per session
 - TFC Summer Camp: During the summer of 2014, TFC sponsored a summer camp for pre-Kindergarten children at E. Benjamin Oliver Elementary school on St. Thomas
- Born Learning Campaign: *Born Learning* is a national public engagement campaign – developed by the Ad Council and made available by United Way International – that is designed to help parents, caregivers and communities create early learning opportunities for young children. It focuses on awareness, education, and action. TFC

has brought Born Learning to the USVI. *Born Learning Kids Basic* printed materials have been disseminated in displays at community events and health fairs, to pregnant teens through high school nurses, at WIC centers, to parents of children in child care and Head Start as part of Children's Mental Health Awareness Day. "*Born Learning Trails*," designed to provide suggestions for activities that parents can do with their young children to stimulate parent-child interaction, playfulness, and learning in parks have been installed in 4 parks on St. Thomas, one on St. John and one on St. Croix. Portable trails to set up at community events are available on all three islands. "*Born Learning Workshops*," which focus on how children learn and the importance of high quality early childhood experiences, have been presented to child care providers and parents throughout the territory at 10 centers and 4 conference events.

- Text4baby: The USVI has been participating in the national "text4baby" campaign, a free text message mobile phone information service that provides pregnant women and new moms with information to help them care for themselves and their babies. The VI project has been nationally recognized twice for the number of women enrolled in the territory, and is ranked #1 among all states and territories for the number of women per 1000 estimated pregnancies and births with 86. In collaboration with the Office of the First Lady, "text4baby Showers" were held honoring women and their families who signed up for the service. The national campaign materials focus on women, and feature the slogan "One smart Mom." Posters were produced locally with the slogan "One Smart Couple" - to emphasize the importance of getting dads involved. In 2015 CFVI is exploring an expanded partnership through Text4baby's new initiative with Too Small to Fail's 'Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing' campaign.
- TFC newsletters: TFC has disseminated several newsletters, each with an important theme and message to parents and early childhood educators. These have included the following titles:
 - Born Learning
 - Give the Gift of Time
 - Ready for School
 - Transitions
 - Play
 - Teaching Virtues
 - What Every Child Needs
- Children's Health and Wellness Fairs: There is concern that some children may be falling through the cracks and not in a position to have consistent well child check-ups, dental evaluations and developmental, nutritional, hearing and vision screening particularly since 19% of children under five years do not have medical insurance. This is particularly true for those not enrolled in programs that provide these services. In response, the ECAC conducted Children's Health Fairs and expects to continue to do so on an annual basis. Interagency children's health and wellness fairs were held (4 on St. Croix and 3 on St. Thomas) at which children received developmental, hearing, vision, and dental screening, influenza immunizations and immunization assessments, and testing for BMI and vitals. Of the 209 children screened, 51 needed follow-up for developmental evaluations; 19 were referred for further hearing evaluations; 16 for vision follow-up; and 33 for dental. Results indicated that the Fairs have been

successful in providing early identification and intervention for children who otherwise may not have had access to needed services.

- Business Leaders Summits: Summits on St. Croix and St. Thomas were held in June 2010 through funding from the Edouard Foundation and in partnership with the VI Department of Human Services, the Governor's Children and Families Council, the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John Chambers of Commerce, the Economic Development Authority, and the PEW Charitable Trusts. The purpose was to inform VI business leaders on the evidence of the economic return on investment in high quality early childhood programs and for them to recognize their important leadership roles in advocacy and policy change. More than 100 leaders from the community attended. As a follow-up "Family Friendly" strategies for businesses were compiled and disseminated to participants.
- Summits on Strengthening Families to Support Early Childhood Development in Faith-Based Communities: In May 2012, Summits were held on St. Croix and St. Thomas with the goal of engaging the faith community about the importance of early childhood development and the Strengthening Families approach in working with and supporting families to promote optimal growth and development. 65 attended on St. Croix and 30 attended on St. Thomas. Discussion focused on what the faith-based community is already doing to strengthen families and what could be done to enhance their work.
- Policymakers Summits: Policymakers Summits on early childhood investment were held on both St. Croix and St. Thomas in 2013 with national experts presenting on early brain development and economic research supporting the importance of investing in quality care and education of our youngest children, from birth to age five years. Local presenters provided information on the status of our young children and the need to act on their behalf to improve outcomes for children and ensure they are ready to succeed when they enter kindergarten, as well as, current efforts in the Territory.
- Presentations to Rotaries: Presentations have been made to three Rotary Clubs, two on St. Croix and one on St. Thomas focusing on the importance of investments to support early childhood initiatives to individual success and long term community success.
- Posters for Laundromats: Posters to be displayed in laundromats, entitled "Doing Laundry" give parents suggestions about how they can engage their children in an everyday activity, such as doing laundry, and make it a fun learning activity.
- Posters for waiting rooms: Posters to be displayed in waiting rooms at doctors' offices, clinics, government and non-government agencies, and other waiting rooms, entitled "While You Wait" give parents suggestions about how they can engage their children in fun learning activities while waiting for services.
- Place mats for preschoolers: Placemats targeted for three and four-year olds have been created with information from the *VI Early Learning Guidelines* and Head Start School Readiness Goals with suggestions about how parents can help children achieve these benchmarks.
- Grocery Carts: With the theme of "Every Moment is a Learning Moment," signs have been installed in grocery carts that provide suggestions to parents about what they can do to engage their children in positive learning activities while grocery shopping.

- Welcome Baby Bags: "Welcome, Baby!" materials have been acquired to disseminate to mothers of newborns as they leave the hospitals. Materials include:
 - Diaper bags
 - Developmental Wheels provided by the Infants and Toddlers Program of the Department of Health
 - Booklets from the American Academy of Pediatrics that help parents keep track of their child's health information entitled, "Your Child's Health Record"
 - Three brochures: "10 Ways to Help Infant's Brain Development," "10 Tips on Breastfeeding with Confidence," and "10 Tips on How Dad Can Help with the Baby," all available in English and Spanish
 - Board books for infants to promote early literacy, with some in Spanish
- Children's Mental Health Awareness Week: For the past 3 years, the territory participated in National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day during the first week of May by focusing on activities that support social and emotional wellness of young children. The Governor proclaimed the day as VI Children's Mental Health Awareness Day, in conjunction with National Mental Health Awareness Month. A 30 second PSA was created with pictures taken locally, entitled "Relationships Matter" distributed to local TV media. A hand-out for parents in English and Spanish from the national Born Learning Campaign was distributed focused on how they can support their children's social and emotional development. Booklets, entitled "My Feelings," were created in which children could draw pictures about their feelings. These were disseminated to child care, Head Start, preschool and kindergarten programs.
- Radio, TV, and newspaper ads: A local advertising agency was contracted to assist with a public engagement campaign and messaging on the importance of parents' high quality interactions with their young children to promote development and learning. Messages were designed for radio, TV, and newspaper. The focus was on the theme "The First Years Make the Difference." A logo was created and a jingle and scripts were been aired on radio and TV.
- "Play and Learn" Activities: These are designed to encourage children and parents to engage in play and developmentally appropriate activities together guided by an early childhood professional, who models ways of promoting language, cognitive, and social skills. They have been provided at the Agriculture and Food Fair on St. Croix on an annual basis, during Week of the Young Child festivities on St. Thomas and St. Croix, for patrons of The Family Connection Center, and this year at the Governor's 3 children's Christmas parties. At the Agriculture Fair, parents were given a flyer entitled "Talk at the Fair," which provides suggestions and encourages parents to engage in conversations with their children as they enjoy the Fair.
- Obesity prevention and nutrition promotion: Several initiatives are designed to address the obesity prevention and promotion of good nutrition for children including workshops for teachers and parents, incorporation of best practices into the QRIS, and creation of "Cooking with Children," a cookbook of fun healthy snack ideas for adults and children to create together.