The more we learn about how the brain functions, the closer we come to understanding the ways in which neglect or abuse in the years between birth and age five affect the psychological and behavioral well-being of a child.

Doctors now know that the years between birth and age five are critical in shaping how the brain will function for the rest of a person’s life. Here in Wisconsin, health care professionals, educators, and families are working together to ensure children stay healthy through kindergarten and the primary grades by focusing on not only better health care, but also by providing strong family support and positive early learning experiences.

A leader in the state, Appleton’s public schools play a large role in assisting parents in the early education of their birth-to-five children. Appleton Area School District (AASD) Superintendent Lee Allinger says that educating parents and the overall community about the vast resources available in the immediate region will continue to be an important piece of the early childhood equation.

The AASD strives to address the needs of all learners, and has adopted ten birth-to-five initiatives as a key component of its focus on early learning. One initiative, the Even Start Family Literacy program, is a comprehensive, integrated program that addresses the educational needs of families with children between birth and age eight. Parents learn to speak, read, and write English or acquire a GED in a supportive environment, while their children engage with trained early-childhood educators in a preschool setting.

Other AASD birth-to-five initiatives include Books for Babies, developmental screening for three- and four-year olds, and the Parents as Teachers project, which engages first-time parents of birth-to-three children in the early education of their children. Delivered with support from Parent Connection and Family Services of Northeast Wisconsin, Parents as Teachers is a national program designed to foster strong, loving relationships between parents and their children.

Strong families and positive early learning experiences start with parents, and helping them to make the best choices for their children is a challenge that demands a community approach, one that draws support from various areas. Considering that over half of the birth-to-five children in our state are in childcare because both parents are in the workforce, it’s crucial that children get the educational and health services they need. Traditional early childhood education programs—Head Start, childcare, or state pre-kindergarten, as well as health and family support services—have little continuity or communication between them and often lack funding for anything other than basic programming. According to a recent Children’s
Defense Fund report, over half of Wisconsin’s pre-K children aren’t enrolled in preschool. Of the approximately 1,307,986 children in the state, only 13,538 participate in Head Start and another 27,600 are served by Child Care and Development Block Grants. So what about the rest?

It is only in recent years that there has been an effort to develop more unified and comprehensive early-education systems. To do this, however, there has to be some sort of agreement between these entities as to what early childhood education goals should be. Some questions must be addressed: How do we rate these goals and what are the program guidelines? Who will support the program, the public or private sector? And, perhaps most importantly, Who will lead the way?

In the summer of 2007, parents, educators, and administrators in the Fox Valley area got together to try and address the complicated questions surrounding early childhood development and education. At the same time, longtime Wisconsin Academy Council member and retired cardiologist John Mielke and his wife Sally doing some work with CHAT, the Community Health Action Team. Organized by ThedaCare, CHAT gathers together Appleton-area community and government leaders in order to explore specific community issues and discuss possible solutions.

CHAT was seeking a way to address mental illness and brain development issues for an at-risk population in the downtown Appleton area. The Mielkes invited thirty friends and community leaders to their home to discuss these issues after reading in the front pages of a local paper an article describing the high number of young people with mental health issues gathering downtown at the end of the bus line. Clearly these people were not receiving the proper care they needed.

Speaking with the personal experience of mental illness in her family, one attendee wondered aloud that, if only more was known about early brain development, perhaps mental health issues later in life could be averted. A consensus developed among the group that a better understanding of the brain could help to detect and address early childhood developmental issues as well as improve the readiness of children to attend school.

But where to start and how to begin? Because the Mielkes are also members of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, they knew the organization might be the right catalyst for connecting Appleton’s concerned citizens with the best researchers in early childhood development from the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Waisman Center. In the true spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, top researchers met with community leaders and, with the added muscle of the Appleton Education Foundation (AEF), they hatched a plan for a new initiative: The 2008 “Brain to Five” community education series. The four-part series, held in Appleton, brought more than 2,200 people together to discuss the factors that shape the brains of birth-to-five children, and was recognized as an innovative educational forum.

Fox Cities parents, educators, and childcare providers will continue to benefit from the Appleton Education Foundation’s unique partnership with Waisman Center and the Wisconsin Academy as the three entities again join forces to bring the community the

**F o x  V a l l e y  “ B r a i n  t o  F i v e ”
2009 Series Lineup**

**AN UNANTICIPATED LIFE: PARENTING A CHILD WITH AUTISM**
Wednesday, February 18, 2009, 7:30 pm
Appleton East HS, 2121 E. Emmers Dr.

As autism diagnosis rates continue to climb and now affect nearly one in 150 children, Marsha Mailick Seltzer discusses the impact of this disorder on the entire family. She shares insight from studies on 400 families living with autism and explains how nurturing environments—both inside and outside the home—play such a critical role in development.

Wednesday, March 11, 2009, 7:00 pm
Appleton North HS, 5000 N Ballard Rd.

During pregnancy, prenatal and environmental influences can have a real impact on a child’s development. Mary Schneider will discuss these risks and focus on how parents can practice healthy lifestyles to give babies the best start in life.

Wednesday, April 22, 2009, 7:00 pm
Appleton North HS, 5000 N Ballard Rd

As director of the Waisman Center’s Infant-Parent Interaction Lab, Julie Poehlmann’s applied research with high-risk infants and children sheds light on how these age groups develop despite environmental challenges. Her presentation focuses on two specific risks affecting development: preterm birth and maternal depression.

Wednesday, May 6, 2009, 7:00 pm
Appleton North HS, 5000 N Ballard Rd

Recent developments in brain research reveal the incredible importance of healthy prenatal and early childhood environments. Nan Brien puts these findings into perspective by explaining the ways even the earliest experiences influence brain development and how positive interaction with our children makes a difference as they grow.
second installment of the “Brain to Five” series this spring. The 2009 series takes last year’s inaugural presentations to the next level by focusing on “Environmental Influences During Early Childhood.” Like the 2008 series, this year’s features four nationally renowned early childhood professionals.

In response to heightened community interest in helping young people with autism, the AEF will kick-off its new four-month series in late February by welcoming Waisman Center Director, Marsha Mailick Seltzer. Seltzer, one of three researchers with expertise in environmental influences, will be joined by fellow investigators Mary Schneider and Julie Poehlmann; all are noted for their groundbreaking research and studies related to human development and learning. Wrapping up the series with practical ideas on how research can be applied to real life is Nan Brien, the former associate director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families Inc. Underscoring the series theme of public and private collaboration, Apple Tree Connections, a local daycare provider, will offer free childcare during each of the four presentations.

The choice of Seltzer as the first speaker sets the tone for this year’s series: her research focuses on the impacts of disability on the family over the course of their lives. Seltzer is interested in how lifelong caregiving affects the well-being of parents and siblings of individuals with disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, and schizophrenia. Her longitudinal studies offer specific insights about parenting a child with a disability, revealing not only the stresses of this challenge and the resiliency of parents who cope successfully but also the reciprocal influences of parents and children on their unfolding and intersecting development across the life course.

For the Waisman Center and its wealth of intellectual talent, the continuing partnership represents another opportunity for its world-renowned researchers to share directly with parents and care providers the very latest innovations and discoveries. Dedicated to the advancement of knowledge about human development, developmental disabilities, and neurodegenerative diseases, the Waisman Center is home to one of the most remarkable neuroscience research facilities in the world. It is a place for discovery, care, and learning, with faculty developing new therapies and treatments for people with developmental disabilities. “In the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea, the Waisman Center is pleased to continue this connection with the Appleton–Fox Cities community, where my colleagues and I will share our most recent findings and research in areas such as autism, prenatal environments, and the importance of creating healthy surroundings for young children,” notes Seltzer.

Julie Krause, Appleton Education Foundation Executive Director, says the goal in continuing the cutting-edge series is to build on the success of last year’s inaugural presentations, while also underscoring the Appleton Area School District’s focus on school readiness through the district’s ten birth-to-five initiatives, adopted in 2007.

“In planning for 2009, the Foundation wanted to build on that success by continuing our partnership with UW–Madison and the Wisconsin Academy to bring shared knowledge and [the] opportunities to the community that help underscore the AEF’s mission of excellence in education,” says Krause. “The speaker series continues to be a great opportunity for us to do that while also highlighting our support of birth-to-five school readiness and early learning.” Adds Tim Riley, board president of the AEF, “the community has been very responsive to the Foundation’s purpose during the first ten years and . . . with budget challenges locally and statewide, we know the Foundation will need to both expand and be more proactive in ensuring educational excellence in Appleton.”

The partnership of the AEF, Waisman Center, and the Wisconsin Academy has been integral in bringing many Fox Cities resources together—including educators, childcare agencies, funding organizations, and businesses—into one dialogue. “The hope is that this community-wide momentum will further heighten awareness of early childhood learning, environmental influences, and the importance of brain development,” says Krause. As the birth-to-five movement continues gaining steam nationwide, Appleton and the Fox Cities have great potential to take a leading role in Wisconsin by delivering real solutions.

Special Waisman Center Documentary Film Screening

Due to the popularity, growth, and deepening understanding of contemplative practices, scientists are becoming increasingly interested in methods that may have discernable effects on the human mind and body. The Center for Creating a Healthy Mind, a new division of the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, was created to promote well being by providing a strong scientific foundation for understanding the mechanisms by which contemplative practices work in a healthy mind. As a part of their preliminary programming, the CCHM will host a free, public screening of The Dhamma Brothers, a documentary on meditation as a means of rehabilitating prisoners. The Dhamma Brothers tells a dramatic tale of human potential and transformation, following the stories of the prison inmates who enter into an arduous and intensive meditation program. The film challenges assumptions about the nature of prisons as places of punishment rather than rehabilitation. There will be two special screenings of the documentary: 7:00 pm on March 25 at the UW–Milwaukee Union Theater and 7:00 pm on March 26 at the Waisman Center in Madison. Both screenings will be followed by a panel discussion. For more information on the screening, contact Bonnie Thorne at 608-263-2743 or e-mail bthorne@wisc.edu.