



Teachers, Nurses, and Families: Countdown to a Healthy Start

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Nursery rhymes, ABCs, 123s, and the Golden Rule—these foundational concepts are often associated with a positive start to kindergarten. While these basics are important, overall health and well-being are critical to the successful beginning of a child's school career. Research shows that having sufficient readiness skills and positive health habits contribute to a successful start to school (Pati et al. 2009). It is time for families, teachers, child care providers, schools, and communities to embrace health and wellness as an important factor in the early childhood experience.

Countdown to a Healthy Start is a collaborative service-learning project in which undergraduate nursing and early childhood education students establish positive relationships with families to foster children's healthy development. Nursing and education pre-professionals developed and implemented family events to address the health needs of young children and further support their educational success. This type of collaboration among professionals strengthens services for families and children while offering multiple perspectives about contemporary issues.

Nurses focus on health education and its solutions to issues related to or affecting children's health while teachers focus on strategies and solutions to challenges in the classroom. This interdisciplinary partnership typifies authentic scenarios that early childhood educators encounter—consultations with other professionals and utilization of available resources to support children and families. The Countdown events provide a realistic preview of how this works. Throughout this project, the early childhood students gained practice interacting with other professionals and developed a mindset for collaboration and collegiality. The Countdown to a Healthy Start model can be replicated in a variety of settings in an array of partnership combinations to meet the needs of communities.

Developing collaborative partnerships

Developing collaborative partnerships with colleagues requires a personal connection, shared interest in service-learning, and a united commitment to the population being served. The authors, both college educators, created Countdown to a Healthy Start after connecting through professional workshops and through their children's school activities. They found out that they both taught courses that focused on the individual within a family and community setting, which allowed them to brainstorm ideas for developing a shared service-learning experience for the students in their respective disciplines. They used theoretical frameworks from each discipline to guide ideas for the shared project. Due to the concentration of the courses and the instructors' expertise, the project was developed to focus on family functions with a goal of reaching families preparing children to transition from preschool to kindergarten. The instructors then coordinated a combined class for the education and nursing students.

Forming partnerships with healthcare professionals

The complex needs of families and children demand that early childhood professionals foster relationships with many different agencies, organizations, and individuals. Understanding how to connect with resources, form partnerships, and work effectively with others requires skill, guidance, and training. Countdown to a Healthy Start offered future professionals a chance to practice collaboration with colleagues in a related field.

The nursing and early childhood education students engaged with Countdown to a Healthy Start were enrolled in pre-professional undergraduate programs at Purdue University North Central, a regional campus of Purdue University in Indiana. Students in these programs are required to complete clinical and field experiences in health-related and educational settings. Countdown to a Healthy Start reinforced the interdisciplinary nature of the early childhood and nursing professions. The theory-into-practice group project formed an essential foundation to the students' career development.

Pre-professional nursing and early childhood education students partnered to design, create, and implement informative, interactive workshops to support families preparing to transition from child care and/or preschool settings to elementary school by strengthening healthy family behaviors. The open house-style events were held in community centers, parks departments, and child care centers. Families were invited to drop in and enjoy interactive learning stations and receive take-home resources. To facilitate the family education workshops, the nursing students served as health consultants and the early childhood students offered support for using developmentally appropriate strategies.

The nursing students incorporated the concept of community health, focusing on the role of families in their preschool children's socialization to the formal school environment of kindergarten. The nursing students supported the socialization and health function of the family by concentrating on health promotion and disease prevention in the preschool– kindergarten age child. The early childhood students concentrated on encouraging family/school/community partnerships formed among teachers, parents, and children, as the children become participants in the school environment. Students served as peer coaches to exchange information about health and wellness as well as strategies to incorporate this knowledge into early childhood settings. As part of their academic work, the nursing students taught the early childhood students about family functions of health promotion and issues including childhood obesity, sleep habits, immunizations, and disease prevention. Early childhood students taught nursing students about working in school and community settings—e.g., the daily routines of early childhood classrooms, strategies for communicating with families, and developmentally appropriate approaches to planning interactive experiences for children. Through this service to the community, students in both programs learned about a variety of available resources and recognized the interconnectedness of the helping professions.

Valuing partnerships and creating an interdisciplinary dialogue

In practice, educators and clinicians are specialists in their disciplines. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of the specialization is critical for building a strong infrastructure for supporting families and communities. As Allred and Hancock state, there is a “gap between the early childhood field's knowledge of the best family-centered practices and the time, resources, and abilities to carry out these practices” (2015, 52). Through Countdown to a Healthy Start, future early childhood educators were introduced to the value of partnerships as a means to leverage resources and professional expertise. Working with the nursing students, they applied their knowledge of family-centered practices. All stakeholders benefit when early childhood professionals collaborate with others, resulting in positive outcomes for communities, schools, child care facilities, families, and children.

Developing a common language and shared goals was critical to establishing an effective partnership. Face-to-face meetings, guided discussions, and clear expectations of roles allowed the students to understand the unique vocabulary and perspectives from each field. Taking time for this dialogue at the beginning of the partnership demonstrated to the students the importance of cultivating reciprocal and respectful professional relationships.

Common goals

Within the area of health promotion for families, the early childhood and nursing students identified six areas of wellness—emotional health, nutrition, sleep, activity/exercise, safety, and disease prevention—that contribute to a healthy start to kindergarten. These commonalities provided a foundation for collaboration. The learning goals for the education and nursing courses were similar and emphasized the role of promoting partnerships.

Learning goals for the early childhood course included connecting with a community partner; creating, implementing, and evaluating an interactive, educational family event focused on family engagement; and gaining awareness of available community resources. The nursing course goals contained similar objectives such as collaborating with an interdisciplinary team to develop strategies for family interventions and coordinating interventions to raise awareness and promote health within the family context.

These goals highlight the similarities between the early childhood and nursing professions: an emphasis on dispositions for nurturing and caring; attention to family relationships; and a focus on holistic, healthy growth and development. Both sets of specialists adhere to common professional standards, which often overlap. Early childhood educators adhere to the professional standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC 2010). The nursing profession follows the standards set forth by the American Nurses Association (ANA 2010).

Countdown to a Healthy Start: Service-learning for preprofessionals

The pedagogy of service-learning is a fitting means for bridging academic, professional content with authentic, real-world experience (Briody 2005; Meaney, Griffin, & Bohler 2009). Countdown to a Healthy Start materialized because two college instructors were committed to creating service-learning opportunities for pre-professionals to demonstrate competency in working with community resources. The goals of the service-learning project were to

1. Foster interdisciplinary collaboration and teamwork among pre-professionals in health and education
2. Engage the community and provide support for families as they transition into the formal school setting of kindergarten
3. Design and implement local family events with a focus on teaching children and families the skills and knowledge necessary for a successful and healthy start to school

The students first gathered at a meet-and-greet where the nursing students presented on childhood obesity for the education students. Then all students brainstormed to identify themes from the presentation: exercise, sleep, food choices, food amounts, eating habits, and family mealtimes. The students were organized into smaller groups (two or three nursing students and two or three education students) and assigned a specific topic. They then cooperatively developed learning activities for the family events.

Additionally, the course instructors created partnerships with outside agencies to help present the activities. The education instructor collaborated with her contacts in local social service agencies, schools, child care centers, preschools, and park districts to develop the agenda for the family events. The two sides discussed their respective expectations to determine the amount of community outreach that would occur. Aurilio and O'Dell (2010) identified the importance of defining the parameters of students' performance for community agencies to avoid possible conflicts regarding unclear expectations.

Through the service-learning, future teachers met the NAEYC Professional Preparation Standards (NAEYC 2010). For example, they developed culturally responsive strategies for involving families in children's learning and development (NAEYC Standard 1). Similarly, the future nurses addressed their professional standard, 5B Health teaching and health promotion, to integrate teaching-learning processes in the delivery of health care to individuals, families, and communities (ANA 2010). The service-learning project culminated with three community events hosted by the undergraduate students for families and young children in the community.

Establishing needs, objectives, and expectations

From the outset, community need was the driving force behind this project. The nursing students researched local health demographics as part of their coursework and in their roles as consultants to the early childhood students. The data provided evidence of community need for education about children's health and wellness that contribute to school readiness such as sleep habits, immunizations, nutrition, and cognitive development. The early childhood students then gathered more specific information about the needs of families and children at their respective sites during their weekly service learning. For example, the director of the local Parents as Teachers (PAT) affiliate served as the key liaison and also secured a site for the community events. During planning meetings, the PAT director described a gaping need for school supplies among local preschoolers. She explained that many of the children who would attend Countdown lacked access to scissors, crayons, and glue sticks during the summer, and the opportunity to gain valuable fine motor practice and language skills before entering kindergarten. This important detail shaped the entire event and the service-learning partnership resulted in a highly successful community outreach for family health education.

After determining the specific needs of the community, interdisciplinary teams devised learning goals for their specific station (see "Planning Template for Family Health Event"). The students prioritized the topics for the facilitated learning centers: nutrition, sleep, cognitive development, physical activity, and family meal times.

The Countdown to a Healthy Start model can be replicated in other settings. Collaboration efforts should include an outline of expectations from each participant, along with estimated time allotment and clear objectives for the event. Any personal preferences or agency rules should be identified during the planning stages (for example, no use of peanut products allowed). Guidelines for student dress codes, privacy issues (e.g. use of photography, sharing names of participants), permissible physical interactions (high fiving, hugging, holding hands, a child sitting on a university student's lap), and professional communication should also be discussed and agreed upon during planning meetings.

The community events were held in the spring at a variety of local sites including a parks department community building, the common area of a health clinic, the YMCA gym, and at the university's annual early childhood conference. Every Countdown to a Healthy Start event featured six to seven interactive stations with activities, information, and resources to prepare adults and children for a smooth transition into formal schooling (see "Countdown to a Healthy Start—Interactive Learning Stations"). Each station included an activity related to the information presented by the nurses as well as a take-home resource to help families support children's development before the start of kindergarten.

Project for family health education

Our view of family health education embraced a holistic approach to school readiness, which followed the theoretical frameworks used to guide both the preprofessional nursing and education courses. The unique blending of the two professions to reach a common goal of caring for the whole child provided the perfect foundation for this collaboration.

Outside of a formal education setting, this format could look like a parent or relative of a student who is willing to provide an educational opportunity to children in an early childhood setting. Encouraging the sharing of expertise can provide enrichment for the classroom and be a rewarding experience for the expert.

Planning a family health event

1. Identify the needs of families. For the Countdown, the early childhood students asked their service-learning site mentor what their constituents and clients needed. Working with other community partners, such as Parents as Teachers, we learned that families were not aware of the health and wellness components for kindergarten entrance.

2. Research recommendations to meet the need and invite community partners to collaborate (see “Suggested Resources for Children’s Health Information”).

3. Determine appropriate learning outcomes for children and families in consultation with health professionals.

4. Plan learning stations with interactive materials that are appealing and appropriate for a variety of learners such as parents, soon-to-be kindergartners, siblings, and grandparents. Consider the importance of safety, movement, and play to make the stations inviting and memorable.

5. Create take-home resources to help families apply the new knowledge or strategy at home. Limited funding prevented us from providing translations of the Countdown event resources, however we deliberately used print materials that incorporated graphics, pictures, and symbols to help convey the message and accommodate different levels of literacy.

6. Invite other community agencies to participate. For example, the local Lions Club offered vision screenings, and a local school provided a bus and driver for children to practice bus safety.

Countdown to a Healthy Start—Interactive Learning Stations

Learning Station	Rationale	Activity	Take-home Materials
Off to School	Children need to know basic concepts such as colors, letters, and numbers before entering kindergarten	Playdough, writing on white boards	Playdough recipe; school box with pencil, glue stick, crayons, scissors
The Land of Nod	Bedtime routines are important to ensure that children have a healthy amount of sleep	Dramatic play involving bedtime	Toothbrush; bedtime conversation starters; books; reading journal
School Bus Safety	Children need to know safe procedures for taking the bus to school	Board a school bus and practice entering and exiting	Bus rules magnet; bus safety coloring book
Family Games	Family game time is important for building cognitive skills and sharing positive interactions	The Dot Game (dice game with counting)	Individual dot game
Move It, Move It	Children need physical activity for good health Exercise is fun	Obstacle course with hoops and Frisbees, jumping rope, dancing, hopscotch	Hula hoops with the printed message “One hour of activity per day” attached to the hoops
Table Talk	Family mealtimes are important for instilling healthy habits for nutrition, hygiene, and communication	Coloring placemats, practicing hand washing, and making table talk cards	Placemats with healthy food choices; hand sanitizer; table talk prompts
Try & Taste	Choosing healthy snacks is essential for children’s development	Dramatic play with food items and place settings; Myplate placemats Vegetables for tasting	Recipe cards with pictures and symbols for healthy snacks
Dare to Prepare	Preparing for kindergarten includes having required immunizations and knowing the guidelines for when to keep children home from school (e.g., colds, flu, vomiting, fever)	Informational presentation board	Brochure for families with guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding communicable illnesses as well as local health department contact information

Considerations for planning

› **Time.** What is a convenient day and time for families to participate? How can families incorporate the event into their routines of drop-off, pick-up, weekends, or other activities?

› **Location.** Where do families naturally congregate? Is the site easily accessible by public transportation? Will the space accommodate the expected number of participants and the planned activities? How will the facility be set up for a smooth flow of participation?

› **Marketing and publicity.** How will families find out about this event? Are local media outlets willing to provide public service announcements? Will families respond to social media posts about the event?

› **Volunteers.** How many people are needed to facilitate the learning stations and guide children through the activities? What is the expectation for volunteers (dress, responsibilities, time commitment, etc.). Who will be the main contact during the event?

- › **Supplies.** What materials are needed for the activities? Who is responsible for assembling the materials and setting up the stations? Are the materials safe, non-toxic and large enough not to present a choking hazard for young children?

- › **Other.** Will refreshments be served? Who is responsible for cleanup and returning any surplus materials?

Funding sources

It was important that the family events be free and open to all families in the community. We relied on donations of materials, food, space, time, and money to bring the Countdown to life. For the family events, we were fortunate to receive financial and in-kind support from Indiana Campus Compact, UnitedHealth HEROES, and many community partners. Not only did the generosity of others provide the resources necessary to make the event a reality, but those who supported the event with donations were also more invested in the project.

Follow-up

After each event, the students expressed appreciation and asked for feedback to foster reciprocal collaboration and continue open communication. The instructors modeled professional collaboration by sharing their reflections about the experience. The education and nursing students created thank you cards for the agencies who hosted the family events. The education students also sent a thank you card to the nursing course. All students submitted a written reflection of the experience. Many students noted that they enjoyed building relationships with students from another professional track.

Gathering feedback from the Countdown participants was also key to program evaluation. At the conclusion of each event, families were asked to complete a short, formal questionnaire. Young participants were encouraged to write or draw a picture of what they learned on large sheets of paper posted on the walls. These responses were shared with all parties involved in the events and provided ideas for improving and refining future experiences for participants.

Conclusion

The collaboration, interaction, and collegiality among the students and faculty from the two programs provided a glimpse of how a professional alliance can serve the community. At the same time, students learned about the importance of fostering positive, respectful, and reciprocal relationships with families and community partners. Such partnerships bolster an early childhood practitioner's commitment to the profession and to helping children achieve a healthy start to school.

Suggested Resources for Children's Health Information

■ United States Department of Agriculture

MyPlate activity sheets and links to portion control, diet, and exercise recommendations for children and adults

[ChooseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov)

■ National Sleep Foundation

Information about sleep needs for children of different ages, and tips for getting better sleep

<https://sleepfoundation.org/how-sleep-works/how-much-sleep-do-we-really-...>

■ Kids Health

Resources on topics including children's developmental stages, nutrition and fitness, general health, school and family life

Kidshealth.org

■ The Family Dinner Project

Evidence that family mealtime is important; recipes, activities, and conversation starters for mealtimes

thefamilydinnerproject.org

■ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Immunization schedule for children by the CDC

www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/easy-to-read/child.html

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Age: *Kindergarten, Preschool*

Topics: *Child Development, Physical, Fitness, Health, Other Topics, Family Engagement, Community Outreach, YC*

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