

Baby Steps

Empowering Parents Community Newsletter

506 W. Monroe Street • Okolona, MS 38860 • Phone: 662-447-5040 • takebabysteps.com • Spring 2009

A Word From the Founder



I am greatly encouraged by the Obama Administration's emphasis on improving public education. I have always believed that education — including a love for learning — is the one thing we can give our children that will sustain them in good and bad times. But I also fear that the American economy — even when it is fully recovered — will find too many of our young people unequipped to participate in it. They won't have the kind of education needed for the modern world.

A first-rate education begins before children ever get near a school. It begins with parents' understanding something about how children's brains develop — which kinds of parent-child activities promote reading readiness, what sorts of books are most helpful in developing a healthy curiosity, what kinds of exercise, nutrition and health habits are conducive to producing the "strong minds in strong bodies" that will help children thrive.

That is why it is such a good thing that a part of President Obama's emphasis is on *early childhood education*. We can hope that pre-kindergarten education will be available to more and more of our children, helping them to build the foundation that produces school success.

But there is one thing we must not forget: What the president is urging in terms of policy and funding is only a part of what is needed. Some parents seem to believe that education is the sole responsibility of those who get paid to provide it: teachers, principals, school boards, governors and presidents. While it is vital that these education *officials* do their job, it is not enough.

Think of it this way. We pay the medical professionals to see to our children's health. But the best doctors and nurses and hospitals cannot guarantee us healthy children unless we also do what WE need to do at home. Hospitals can treat, nurses can inoculate, doctors can prescribe — but unless parents make sure their children get proper nutrition and rest and exercise, and follow the doctors' advice, what the professionals do won't be enough. Yes, we have to demand that the experts do what only they can do, but we also have to do what only WE can do.

That's exactly the way it is with early learning. The professionals must be held accountable for doing what they are trained and paid to do. But we as parents must hold ourselves accountable for doing what only we can do. That is the heart of the Baby Steps approach. We want parents to get involved in early learning — and not just "book learning," but also the kinds of mental habits and attitudes that encourage children to ask and probe and wonder and solve and think.

Our children's education is too important to be left to the professionals alone.

Bill Raspberry
Founder and President

Baby Steps Promotes Community Involvement with Focus on Children

Since its inception in Okolona, *Baby Steps* has created excitement and a sense of involvement in the community through its focus on children. *Baby Steps* has provided parents a location and numerous opportunities to gain knowledge of activities and learning strategies to use to help better prepare their children with the readiness skills needed for school. Another invaluable service of *Baby Steps* is its outstanding staff. The staff has worked with area childcare providers by sharing readiness activities they can use to help children, as well as parents as they learn how to assist their children.

Baby Steps brought a focus point to the community: parents, grandparents, and interested citizens can be involved in working for the academic success of children. *Children have a better chance to be ready for school through their involvement in Baby Steps.* The skills children gain in the *Baby Steps* program will only help build a quality educational foundation.

As an educator, it is a blessing to know that there is a community program to work with children and parents in an educational setting. Children receive the early preparation they need and parents learn how to be a vital part of their children's education. *Baby Steps* has placed the community of Okolona in a "win-win" situation. We can only continue to hope for greater things for the children and parents of Okolona.

Eddie M. Prather
Board of Directors





Dr. Seuss' 105th Birthday Celebration! March 2, 2009

Baby Steps celebrated Dr. Seuss' 105th Birthday on Monday, March 2. Participants in the celebration included the day care, pre-k, and kindergarten children, along with their parents. The activities for the children were engaging, learning-oriented, and exciting. The events included fun small and large motor skills games and readings from some of the children's favorite Dr. Seuss books by several Alliance Members. The children were allowed to visit gaming stations and were given a prize at each station for completing the activity. At the beginning of each activity, a book that connected with the game was read to the children. Some of the games included: Pin the Hat on the Cat, Ten Apples Up On Top, Cat In the Hat Puzzle, Musical Feet, and I Can Do Tricks. The final activity included all the children and their parents. Mrs. James read the book *Green Eggs and Ham* to the group. After reading the book, Mrs. James demonstrated how to make green eggs and ham. One child said, "I don't like green eggs and ham because they are not supposed to be green." However, when the child tried the green eggs and ham, he admitted that they were tasty and wanted some more. All parents and children were allowed to try the green eggs and ham.



A total of 73 people attended this event. Everyone had a wonderful time celebrating Dr. Seuss' 105th Birthday, as well as with reading and enjoying the activities with the children.

Making a Difference for Our Community

The National Council of Negro Women-Okolona Section, in partnership with Baby Steps Inc., provided free tax filing services for the citizens of Okolona. Since the beginning of the tax season on January 16, a total of 44 citizens filed taxes with assistance through these organizations. This is a free service provided by the Benefit Bank in partnership with the Children's Defense Fund-Southern Regional Office in Jackson, Mississippi. Trained counselors from the NCNW and Baby Steps provided the citizens with these services.



The National Council of Negro Women and the Baby Steps Alliance Group I- Parental Involvement visited one of the local Day Care Centers in Okolona and shared with parents the importance of reading with their children. Parents of children from Hazel Ivy's Child Care Center participated in a one hour session, learning ways to get their children to love reading and preparing them for kindergarten. A total of 15 parents attended the session. An activity was completed with both the parents and the children. Each child received a book. The NCNW continues to make a difference for our children in Okolona.



Focus on Obesity

by Dr. Gerri A. Cannon-Smith, FAAP

After lunch, the preschoolers marched out in line to the playground and then spread out like a fan-shaped marching band toward the playground equipment. Brandon, a bright-eyed, chubby 4 year old, struggles to keep up with his classmates playing on the monkey bars. As he runs, I notice that he briefly places his hand over his rounded tummy, reminding me of the extra servings he had just finished. Always a few paces behind his friends, he struggles valiantly, always cheerful, to keep up, but lags further behind by the end of recess period. Yesterday, his teacher confronted his mother after she had missed the third nutrition referral appointment. When asked why she had not come, the mother replied indignantly, "Brandon's not overweight. Everybody on his daddy's side of the family is 'stout' " But at 43 inches tall and 53 pounds, he falls in the very overweight or obese (>95th BMI percentile) category, increasing his risk for health problems now and later.

Mississippi has been selected as "the fattest state" in the nation for the third year in a row because 2/3 of the adult population is overweight or very overweight (obese). The state also has more overweight children and adolescents. Brandon (in the story above) represents the growing number of overweight and obese preschoolers. In a preschool class of twenty, you would generally expect one child to be overweight.

Never Too Early to Start Healthy Habits

Obesity Prevention

Yet, here in Mississippi, on average nearly four preschoolers in a class of twenty are classified as very overweight or obese (i.e., > 95th BMI percentile for height, weight, age, and gender). There are many other trends associated with this increase in obesity, which has tripled over the past three decades. Overweight preschoolers are heavier than they have been in past decades, and they are staying overweight longer. As many as three out of every five preschoolers who are very overweight and who have a family history of obesity remain overweight into adulthood. In addition, there are more adult type illnesses in younger and younger children like Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, fatty liver, and metabolic syndrome. Being overweight increases the risk of asthma and other respiratory conditions, orthopedic problems, and can lead to decreased self-esteem and depressive symptoms.

We all want children to be the best that they can be with healthy, fit bodies and minds. We know that education and healthy habits start early, long before school starts. So, it's never too early to get preschoolers off to a healthy start for a lifetime of fitness. Obesity is a complex condition and is determined by a combination of factors including heredity, behavior, and the environment, but it can be prevented in most cases. Here are some things that we can do to prevent obesity in preschoolers.

things to do at home

Know your child's weight status.

The Body Mass Index (BMI) helps your child's health care provider determine weight status.

- Underweight- Less than the 5th BMI percentile
- Normal weight- 5th-85th BMI percentile
- Overweight-85th-95th BMI percentile
- Very Overweight or Obese- > 95th BMI percentile

To maintain healthy nutrition and physical activity children should . . .

- Eat at least 5 fruits and vegetables per day
- Get 1 hour of physical activity a day (does not need to be all at one time)
- Limit TV time/video game/computer time to less than 2 hours a day
- Limit sugar sweetened beverages
- Eat breakfast daily
- Switch to low-fat dairy products
- Regularly eat family meals together
- Limit fast food, take out, and eating out
- Prepare foods at home as a family
- Eat foods rich in calcium and high in fiber

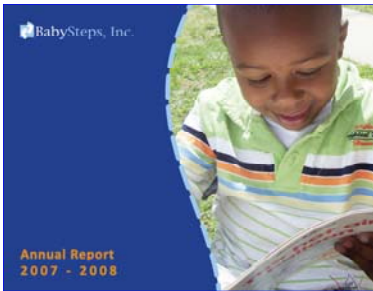
Be a good role model and make healthy habits a family affair!

things to do outside the home

- Read labels as you shop to cut down on calories, sugar, and fats (especially trans fats)
- Request nutrition information (calories, fat, salt, sugar) when you eat out
- Walk instead of taking the elevator
- Encourage parks, recreation facilities, and walking/biking trails in your community
- Encourage home and community gardens
- Don't forget to drink plenty of water
- Get regular routine physical examinations and screenings
- Keep the mind and body fit

tips

- Keep healthy snacks (carrots, fruit) available during car trips
- Variety in fruits and vegetables is good; but you may have to offer new food items many times.
- Don't give up.



Annual Report

The *Baby Steps Annual Report for 2007-2008* is available on our website! To view or download, please visit www.takebabysteps.com.

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Baby Steps Parents' Success Stories

I have been a parent in *Baby Steps* since April 2006. My three year old has come a long way. When my other child was growing up, I did not read with her and to be honest, I didn't spend as much time with her. Now, she is in the 1st grade and I can tell that I didn't do what I should have as a parent. Now that I am in *Baby Steps*, I am eager to learn all that I can to make sure my three year old is ready to keep up in school. I make sure I attend the sessions and I'm at home for my home visits. My child wakes up each day and asks me: "Are we going to *Baby Steps* today?" When we visit public places, we always take a book. When we go to Wal-Mart, I never leave without buying *us* a book. I hear my child saying more words now. Also, my other child is doing better now that I take more time reading with her and helping her with her homework. *Baby Steps* shows parents how to be a good teacher for their children. I am glad I am in *Baby Steps* and it has made a big difference in my life and in the lives of my family members.

Baby Steps Parent

I am a grandparent who has never been a good reader because I dropped out of high school. I have five grandchildren who live with me each day. I find myself wanting more for my grandchildren. I want them to have what I didn't have growing up. When I became involved in *Baby Steps*, I knew that this was going to help me be a good parent for my grandchildren. From attending the meetings and *Baby Steps* coming over to do home visits with me, I have been helped so much. I feel that even though I can't read that well, I can still help my grandchildren. Two of them are in public schools and they attend the Wednesday class at *Baby Steps*. The other three are at home with me daily. Everyday, we read books. One of my daughters is helping me learn how to read. Now, I can look at pictures and be involved in reading with my grandchildren. If it had not been for *Baby Steps*, I would not be involved in my grandchildren's education. I am glad *Baby Steps* is in Okolona and it is my wish that more parents will become a part of it.

Baby Steps Parent

As a parent in *Baby Steps*, I have learned to be patient and to spend more time with my children. I have been in the program for two years. I have learned the importance of reading and talking to my three year old. I have two other children and wished that *Baby Steps* had been around when they were growing up. I wasn't as involved with them as I am now. My three year old wants to be read to each night and all through the day. He attends the Wednesday class with Ms. Courtney and he loves it. I have no problem waking him up on Wednesday mornings. As a result of my involvement in, *Baby Steps* I have noticed a difference in myself as a parent and in my child. I seem to want to learn all that I can to get him ready for "big school." I am proud to be in the *Baby Steps* program.

Baby Steps Parent