



July 23, 2009

## Children's brain development depends on teaching them early

By *Karina Donica*

*kdonica@thetowntalk.com*

A group of Central Louisiana nurses, social workers, educators and others gathered in Alexandria Wednesday to learn about the importance of early childhood development.

The Forum on Early Childhood, held at the Alexandria Convention Hall, was part of advocacy efforts by the United Way of Central Louisiana to provide information about the need to nurture children early in life.

Early development is the foundation of an individual's health, success and prosperity, Geoffrey Nagle, director of the Tulane Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health and keynote speaker, told the roughly 60 attendees.

Some 25 years ago, early childhood education was virtually non-existent, Nagle said, which meant that when a child missed education early in life he was skipping some of the building blocks of the brain's architectural makeup.

"So you have to learn A to get to B to get to C. You can go from A to C, but you're just not going to do as well as if you do it in a hierarchical way," Nagle said.

David T. Britt, president and CEO of the United Way of Central Louisiana, said one in three children in Rapides Parish is behind the standard developmental level by the time they get to pre-kindergarten.

"We cannot thrive as a community when a third of our children are lagging behind other children," Britt said. "We really need for our community to focus on very young children."

Britt also said a standard screening test typically performed by the local school district also shows that at least one-third of 4-year-olds in the parish can't recognize basic colors or identify single-digit numbers.

"If they had the appropriate support, they'd learn to read," Britt said, adding that too often parents don't realize how important early stages of life are to brain development.

The event featured several booths with information about resources and strategies to which the community has access.

One of the newest resources available to Rapides parents is the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program, sponsored by the United Way. The program also is available in Grant Parish.

The literacy program sends a child a free book each month from birth until age 5.

"It's a great program. It's an age-appropriate book, and there is no charge to the parent," said Sharon Grenier of United Way of Central Louisiana, adding that it cost from \$28 to \$30 a year to sponsor a child. "We are hoping to expand it to the entire region."

Grant Parish resident Amanda White and Julie DesJardins-Brewer and Cindy Besharatpour, both of Vernon Parish, were browsing some of the information available at the forum.

"We are very involved right now to try to improve childcare in Louisiana, so I thought this might offer

us more insight and community resources to pass on to the children," said Besharatpour, the owner of Dreams and Discoveries Child Care Center.

---