Vermont Birth to Three (VB3) continues to make great strides in improving the quality of infant and toddler care throughout the state of Vermont. Through our various initiatives, one focus remains constant—quality. We build and grow initiatives by fostering relationships and working with already established programs throughout the state. As we identify gaps and bright spots, we ‘build up’ these areas to help cultivate the care and resources that are being delivered to children and families throughout Vermont.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Data and Evaluation .............................................. 2
Peer Mentoring Program ................................. 2
Teaching Strategies Gold ................................. 4
Small Grants Program ................................. 5
STARS ................................................................. 6
Starting Points .................................................. 8
Family, Friend and Neighbor ......................... 9
Professional Development ......................... 11
Shared Services ............................................... 12
Strengthening Families ................................. 13
Resources ......................................................... 14

“Vermont Birth to Three (VB3) continues to make great strides in improving the quality of infant and toddler care throughout the state of Vermont. Through our various initiatives, one focus remains constant—quality. We build and grow initiatives by fostering relationships and working with already established programs.”
DATA AND EVALUATION

A key component to help guide our initiatives and overall strategy

The Vermont Birth to Three Data and Evaluation enterprise is responsible for measuring the impact of VB3’s initiatives and services. The Data and Evaluation Consultant and Data and Technology Coordinator work with VB3’s program specialists and state and community partners to collect qualitative and quantitative information to tell the story of the importance of prioritizing early childhood development programs.

VB3’s Data and Evaluation enterprise is essential to ensuring a results-based approach to improving the quality of infant and toddler care. VB3’s data tracking efforts guide internal decision-making and resource allocation, by answering such questions as, “Are VB3’s strategies working and, if so, how well?,” “What should VB3 be doing more of, less of, or differently?,” “Are VB3’s inputs leading to the desired outcomes?”, and other key questions - the answers to which are essential to VB3 operating in a strategic way that ultimately improves the quality of infant and toddler care. VB3’s Data and Evaluation enterprise also strives to ensure that VB3’s programs and strategies are based on sound research about best practices.

PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

An organic approach to quality

One primary initiative that spans Vermont is our Peer Mentoring Program. Vermont Birth to Three has peer mentors supporting home-based child care providers serving children ages birth to 3 years. Our mentoring services are free and available to home-based infant and toddler child care providers who are:

- Registered; Licensed; Legally Exempt Child Care; Family, Friend and Neighbor Care;
- Providers planning on starting a program in one of the above categories.

We continue to experience tremendous growth and traction with our mentoring program, with rising demand and referrals.
PEER MENTORING
Stories from the field

IT’S NEVER TOO LATE - A 61-year-old child care provider has been supported by a VB3 mentor for the past two years. Early in the mentoring relationship, she revealed that she had never completed high school, and subsequently was not eligible to participate in professional credentialing and quality rating improvement systems. With the support of her VB3 mentor she began to explore obtaining her GED. Ultimately, she decided to participate in the Vermont High School Completion Program and has since taken and passed the standardized assessments needed to earn her high school diploma. This June she will participate in the Windsor High School commencement ceremony as a member of the 2014 graduating class. She told her mentor that if it were not for the support of VB3, she would not have had the courage to go through this process.

THE JOURNEY TO QUALITY — Following an intake visit with a provider, a VB3 mentor was not certain if the provider should continue to offer care due to the condition of her environment and lack of engagement and credentials. The mentor committed to offering her support to turn things around. In the past two years the provider has achieved the following benchmarks:

- Level I & II Credentials
- 1, 2 and 3 STARS
- Filed a plan with the Agency of Education to go to 4 STARS
- Has taken Fundamentals
- Received her Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™
- Took an Assessment of Prior Learning earning 40 college credits
- Enrolled in college and has taken 3 courses to date
- Is transitioning to a Bachelor’s Degree program this spring
- Joined the Starting Points Provider Network
- Provided leadership to the Week of the Young Child events in 2013 & 2014
- Is leading Provider Appreciation efforts for 2014
- Has entered a Pre-K partnership

The provider has reinvested all of the funds she received from bonuses, grants, and incentives into her program. She has completely renovated her home, vastly improved her environment, and replaced all of her child care furnishings and equipment. She told her VB3 mentor that it has always been her dream to be a preschool teacher, and that with
support and hard work she has achieved her dream. She currently operates a multi-age program serving children birth to 6 years.

As Vermont Birth to Three looks to 2014, our organic approach to mentoring will be complemented with a number of research-informed elements to ensure the learning potential and sustainability of the program are maximized.

**TEACHING STRATEGIES GOLD**

**Broadening our reach by partnering with the Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative**

Beginning in July 2013, The Vermont Community Preschool Collaborative (VCPC) and Vermont Birth to Three partnered to bring the Teaching Strategies Gold Child Assessment program to providers who care for Vermont’s young children in home-based and center-based child care programs. The project is connecting community-based child care programs to the state-wide system of assessment and is currently serving 34 providers.

The knowledge, skills, and ability to assess a child’s developmental progress – and to use assessment data to support developmental progress and provide instruction – are recognized as essential elements of a high quality early childhood program. Teaching Strategies Gold equips early childhood professionals with the formula to succeed. It also includes tools that give providers a powerful way to communicate with families about their children’s development, providing a rich portfolio of information about each child. The program helps to inform and support curriculum development.

Pilot participants benefit (at no cost) by receiving intense training, access to a network of resources – both people and materials – and ongoing support to help them grow and succeed. In addition, we are providing advanced training and distributing iPads to pilot participants to use as a tool for observing and documenting. We understand the foundation must remain strong for continued use of and comfort with Teaching Strategies Gold.

To date, our commitment from our pilot providers has been strong. They are committed to submitting development checkpoints for each child, and working with us to evaluate the program by engaging in surveys throughout the pilot. Most importantly, they are using Teaching Strategies Gold results to engage with parents about their child’s development.
Since Teaching Strategies Gold is the state-wide child assessment tool in publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs, this project can help prepare programs in pursuit of a contract (Act 62) with a school district and to work with VCPC to develop a school/provider pre-k partnership. In addition, we anticipate that the program will lead to an increase in STARS ratings since the use of assessment and linking it to the provider’s curriculum is a component of the STARS rating system.

Overall, pilot participants have widely reported that using Teaching Strategies Gold has positively impacted their work with children as described by the following testimonials:

“It has helped to guide the types and age appropriateness of the activities I plan. It has also given me a wonderful way to share with parents all the things we do at daycare. I also love the strength-based perspective of the conference forms, and think it is a fantastic way to communicate with the parents. I’ve had nothing but positive feedback from the parents.”

“It’s made me think more about the activities that I plan and how the activities help advance the children’s development.”

“It has helped me complete more documentation, knowing what I am truly assessing.”

“Using Teaching Strategies Gold has had a positive impact on our classroom curriculum, classroom behaviors and supports we can offer to children as we notice a need arising.”

“We love the program and the benefits. Now we see that our planning supports the developmental levels and reflects the children’s needs.”

For 2014, we are looking at a pilot with the same number of providers, but limiting it to two regions. Feedback from mid-pilot evaluations and anecdotal experiences will be considered as we make slight adjustments to the pilot delivery format.

**SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM**

**Helping to foster a quality environment**

In 2013, the Small Grants Program provided an opportunity for home-based providers to purchase high quality items for children ages birth to 36 months. Our focus was to help providers obtain durable equipment and materials they wouldn’t otherwise be able to afford, to help further quality in their programs.

Our Small Grants Program has been well received since its inception in 2012. This year we put ourselves into our customers’ shoes, and simplified the grant process by incorporating an online application. In 2013, we distributed
$154,591 to close to 300 home-based providers. Following are some stories that highlight what the Small Grants Program has meant to providers:

“This has been a wonderful benefit for me that has allowed me to purchase items for the benefit of the children that I otherwise would have not been able to purchase due to cost. With the stroller, we will be able to go out into the community, go to the library, and go to parks and for walks. Thank you so much. I look forward to future grants for a sand and water table.”

“This is our first and only rocking chair at our daycare. I will love rocking babies and having quiet moments in it. Thanks you so much. I love it!”

**STARS**

**Fostering quality through Vermont’s STep Ahead Recognition System**

Vermont Birth to Three’s primary mission is to improve the quality of care for Vermont’s infants and toddlers. As such, STARS – Vermont’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System for Early Childhood Care and Education Programs – remains a pivotal component of this overarching mission. Our mission is supported by our primary goals:

- **Improve** access to developmentally beneficial infant and toddler care
  (help make sure our babies get what they need as their brains develop)
- **Improve** supports for all caregivers serving infants and toddlers
  (help caregivers with the challenge of giving babies what they need)
- **Improve** supports for families’ capacity to enhance their child’s development
  (help families meet the challenge of supporting their child’s development)

STARS helps to improve the quality of infant and toddler care by encouraging providers to continue to meet professional development and child care program enhancement goals. STARS also provides support and guidance for caregivers who are committed to continual improvement. In addition, STARS ratings and information equip families with important information in making the best child care decisions for their child’s development.

Vermont Birth to Three continues to team with the STARS Administrators and Vermont’s Child Development Division (CDD) to focus on provider engagement, education, and enrollment, while breaking down barriers to entry. Mid-year, Vermont Birth to Three worked in conjunction with the CDD to create and publish a STARS video. Our messaging included the voices of parents, STARS Administrators, and home-providers. Our focus will shift to marketing the program as a ‘must have’ (STARS participation) for parents making that very important decision about child care.
In addition to enhanced marketing efforts, Vermont Birth to Three and the STARS Administrators hosted some outreach events, invited providers to a brunch or dinner, provided a STARS educational component, and helped foster networking. This proved to be an effective way to engage providers, and will be a primary component of our project plan in 2014. The events also allow us to provide an added level of support to providers, and connect them with one of our peer mentors, if desired.

Overall, our focus on STARS resulted in tremendous engagement and enrollment across the home-based provider landscape, dramatically increasing participation by 58% from a year ago, and by more than 150% since VB3 was launched.

**STARS**

**Breaking down the barriers**

The creation of the STARS EASY Application for One and Two STARS has helped break down the application barrier in a significant way. In collaboration with the STARS Coordinators, Vermont Birth to Three played a major role in reducing the entry point to STARS by helping to create a 10 page (versus 30 page) application that is more user-friendly for providers, as they are often overwhelmed by the process.

VB3 mentoring for STARS remains an integral component in the success of STARS participation over the past two years, and will continue to play an important role in helping us meet our goals for 2014.

“I wouldn’t have been able to submit my STARS application without the help of my Mentor. She helped me understand the process, and not be so intimidated by it.”
Research by Zero to Three\(^2\) suggests that provider networks are an effective strategy for improving quality. In 2013, Vermont Birth to Three continued to support the development and growth of organized, highly-functioning networks through grant funding and leadership technical assistance. The Starting Points Networks are able to do quite a bit with very little funding. The professional development, recognition events, leadership meetings, family outreach, and networking activities all contribute to the goal of improving quality and participation in the STARS system.

The beauty and success of the Starting Points initiative stems from the ideas and goals of child care providers. The investment child care providers make in themselves and each other, for the sake of the children and families in their care, is immeasurable. Ideas and plans originate from individual and regional needs. Providers are invested and eager to participate as they mentor each other, plan leadership retreats, purchase quality curriculum materials to enhance environments, and sponsor professional development and provider recognition events.

All twelve regions received 2013 Starting Points grants from Vermont Birth to Three – amounting to up to $10,000 per region. In addition, the Child Development Division provided close to the same amount per region. All regions continue to thrive and grow.

In 2013, the Vermont Birth to Three Starting Points grants providers took advantage of an additional 250 hours of professional development. Regions recognized their members through a variety of ways including: appreciation dinners, stipends, events, and gifts for achievements and/or retreats. One of the most crucial benefits to being part of a Starting Points network is the peer camaraderie, encouragement, and support. At Starting Points meetings, providers encourage one another to move up the career ladder, take on new challenges and participate in STARS. In fact, providers who are Starting Points members are more likely to participate in STARS than those who are not. The percentage of registered home-based providers in STARS is 38%, where among Starting Points member it is 79% (including center-based programs). Feeling comfortable, valued, and acknowledged while professional (and some personal) needs are being identified and met will continue to be part of the Starting Points way, because it works!

Feedback from “Infant/Toddler Curriculum Network” participants – funded via Addison Vermont Birth to Three Starting Points

“I have been using more curriculum and projects with the children, who have been much more engaged in all of their play. I have been trying to coordinate art projects with books we are reading or with the pretend play the children are doing.”
“I have implemented a lot more outside to inside play with nature and taking kids on nature walks.”

Feedback from the “Healthy Cooking Workshop” participants, funded via Rutland Vermont Birth to Three Starting Points

The class was held in collaboration with the Stafford Technical Institute Culinary Arts Program, and included cooking demonstrations, sampling nutritious snacks, creating side dishes, and receiving give away items to help make cooking preparation fun and easy for young children. The participants received professional development credit hours toward re-registration or the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

“Best class I’ve attended in 30 years.”

“Healthy eating habits need to be addressed more often.”

“Great food and fun. I loved being able to talk with other providers who do the same job.”

All in all, we are extremely pleased with the autonomy and leadership each Starting Points region has shown. We look forward to connecting with all of the leaders again, both in the field and at our Vermont Birth to Three sponsored semi-annual Starting Points Leader meetings.

FAMILY, FRIEND & NEIGHBOR

Providing support and resources to the informal caregiver

Early care and education has been in the spotlight lately, but Family, Friend and Neighbor (FFN) caregivers have been largely overlooked. An FFN provider is someone who is regularly taking care of a child or children, but is not typically connected to the regulated system of care.

Evidence from around the United States shows that Family, Friend and Neighbor caregivers are more likely than regulated caregivers to lack knowledge in child development, safety, attachment, and brain development. As such, Vermont Birth to Three continues to develop outreach strategies with the goal of connecting informal caregivers with resources in order to improve quality child care for children birth to five years old.

Initially, identifying Family, Friend and Neighbor caregivers is challenging. To support our outreach efforts, we have created materials and resources, along with a ‘virtual’ network to engage these hard to reach caregivers. Some materials included a KidBits Resource Guide, What's Going on With Me? flyer, and KidBits online newsletter, along with offering a warm line for caregivers to call. In addition, we have distributed a variety of board books, blocks, bibs, and other resources far and wide via Playgroups, U.S. Mail, Libraries, Legally Exempt Child Care mailing list, Child Care Support Agencies, Vermont Kin As Parents, Winooski Day, and other venues.
Throughout 2013, Vermont Birth to Three collaborated with established programs to increase outreach and services to Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers. Local programs that have established trusting relationships with providers proved to be the most effective way to reach this population.

**COMMUNITY LIBRARIES**

A strong connection to our Family, Friend and Neighbor population

Community libraries are a strong link to Family, Friend, and Neighbor caregivers. In 2013, we offered grants to build on work already being done to reach and support FFN.

Vermont Birth to Three Library Grants were allocated to five libraries in Lamoille, Caledonia, Chittenden, and Orange counties. The selected libraries are making a personal connection to the isolated FFN population and expanding their services to FFN caregivers. Identifying gaps, distributing resources, and connecting FFNs to Vermont Birth to Three’s e-network are some of their goals.

**GRANDPARENT BACKPACKS**

Excerpt from Westford Library Grant Application

Many of our FFNs are grandparents. They watch their grandchildren one or two days a week. They do not have a large home collection of books, toys, puzzles, or games. Often times, grandparents will come in to the library the day before their grandchild is to arrive. They do not know what books are great – they stopped paying attention after their own kids outgrew picture books. Most grandparents don’t know who Pete the Cat is or the myriad of other new, exciting and very entertaining picture books that have come along. They are likely to grab an armful of disjointed books that might not be the best to read to their grandchild. I would like to have five thematic backpacks ready for them to check out. Each backpack would contain 7 picture books related to a theme (dinosaurs, construction, animals, etc.) and it would also contain a toy or puzzle. The materials would be high quality, fun, and convenient. I have mentioned this idea to several grandparents and they LOVE it. It would be great to have the means to do it right and in a high quality fashion. Once the packs have circulated for a while, I would change them out for different themes and replace the books with others from our collection.

**NEW AMERICAN ENTREPRENEURS**

Welcoming New American Women as child care entrepreneurs

In December 2012, ten Somali refugee women started the New American Child Care training program with the goal of becoming legally-exempt child care providers. Several organizations provided support to the New American project. Vermont Birth to Three provided funding to the local child care support agency (Child Care Resource) to secure a mentor to work with the women, and has also provided on-going support to that mentor.

The New American initiative was a perfect fit for our Family, Friend and Neighbor initiative. These women take care of a variety of children in their homes, many free of charge. The program led to many of these women becoming registered child care providers, and more are becoming registered each day – all with STARS enrollment in sight.
With the help of a translator (the women don’t read or speak English), the providers were able to work through all components of starting their own businesses.

In October, a graduation ceremony was held to celebrate the accomplishments of eight New American women that completed the program. Graduates were given certificates of achievement, materials for their programs, and received recognition by over 20 representatives from a variety of agencies and organizations including Child Care Resource, United Way, Greater Burlington YMCA, VT 211, Fanny Allen, Vermont Birth to Three, AALV, Mercy Connections, AHS refugee office, Opportunities Credit Union, and the A.D. Henderson Foundation.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Collaborating across the Vermont landscape to complement and fill in gaps**

Vermont Birth to Three continues to identify training needs to increase the knowledge and skills of caregivers who work and play with infants and toddlers. A variety of professional development opportunities have been offered around the state. Examples include: Child Development, Teaching and Learning, Families and Communities, Program Management and Professionalism. Each aligns with the standards set by Vermont’s professional development system for child care (Northern Lights Core Competencies).

Vermont Birth to Three uses local trainers, collaborates with Child Care Support Agencies, trains mentors, and uses existing opportunities (VAEYC, Starting Points) to increase professional development for people who care for infants and toddlers.

In 2013, Vermont Birth to Three supported 35 training events held in 13 different locations, serving 963 participants, including 168.5 hours of training provided by 29 different presenters. Over half of the training focused on infant and toddler development. Other training included language and literacy, prevention of child abuse and neglect, and Teaching Strategies Gold – and about a third focused on a variety of other topics. 97% of the trainings were listed in the Northern Lights/ BFIS course calendar, and 14% of the trainings were reported to have involved Resource & Referral Agency collaboration.

In the second half of 2013, we began using the Child Development Division Common Evaluation form. For all of the trainings that were evaluated, the overall response scores to the questions “Gained new knowledge” and “Will apply what I learned” were 4.7 and 4.6 respectively on a scale of 1-5.
Overall, our training was very well received and attended. We continue to find ways to collaborate and complement training with a focus on added professional development opportunities and sustainability.

**SHARED SERVICES**

An emerging initiative focused on sustainable business

Vermont Birth to Three continues to play a key role in the implementation of Shared Services in Vermont. *Shared Services for the child care industry is emerging as a successful strategy to enable programs serving children to improve their bottom line while increasing the quality of their programs.* A Shared Services Alliance is a community-based partnership, comprised of centers and/or family child care homes, working together to share costs such as book-keeping, billing and collections, purchasing, insurance, access to nurses, mental health consultants and substitutes, and capacity to apply for grant funding. Participants in an Alliance become stronger, more efficient, more financially sound, and better able to deliver high-quality child care services.

Most importantly, sharing resources frees early childhood professionals from time-consuming administrative tasks and financial burdens, allowing them to focus on what they do best – providing young children with the high quality experiences essential to their development.

In an effort to share information, increase understanding, and learn about interest in this model, VAEYC and VB3 “hit the road” throughout the fall, scheduling almost a dozen sessions in November and December, with more planned for the winter.

In-person sessions were held at Building Bright Future Council meetings and Starting Points group meetings, as well as webinar offerings. In communities throughout Vermont, the VAEYC-delivered “road show” has built awareness about both web-based and intensive shared services. This map illustrates concentrated areas where individuals have stepped up to help provide a voice, vision, and guidance as we continue to shape Shared Services in Vermont.

Throughout this ‘discovery phase’, in addition to listening to local voices to learn what the greatest needs are, we hired a consultant to perform research via interviews of those already participating in shared services throughout the country. The results of this research are contained in a *Shared Services Report*. 
Vermont Birth to Three continues to work with industry expert, Louise Stoney, in addition to the Seacoast Early Learning Alliance (a successful alliance in New Hampshire) to better understand their journey while we build our project plan to roll-out Shared Services in Vermont in 2014.

**STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION**

All families experience stress, but the causes and amounts vary, as does the family’s ability to cope with that stress. Research tells us that when a child experiences stress such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, family substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship, it can be truly toxic.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has identified five research-based Protective Factors, such as parental resiliency and social connections that help strengthen families and protect children from toxic stress. Based on this research, the CSSP developed a framework and tools for helping families build the Protective Factors. It is called the Strengthening Families approach.

VB3 is using the Strengthening Families approach to expand the naturally occurring relationship between home-based child care providers and families. At the heart of this opportunity is the providers’ unique, positive and personal connection with parents. VB3’s Strengthening Families project builds hub-and-spoke networks where home-based providers receive extensive training in building protective factors, make a strong connection to community resources and help to connect families to needed supports and services.

Our first pilot was launched in 2013 with Lamoille Family Center (LFC) serving as the hub for a network of 11 home-based providers. All of the providers completed a pre-pilot Strengthening Families self-assessment survey. The providers are currently participating in regular training and reflective practice sessions. In addition to the monthly training sessions, each of the providers works with a coach from the LFC. During the sessions with their coach, providers discuss how they are implementing the Strengthening Families approach into their programs. As part of the network, child care providers have been connected to other service professionals – meeting with individuals such as a local pediatrician, child care licensor, teacher from alternative high school, and representative of the federal food program.

VB3 will use the information gained from the pilot to inform future collaboration with Vermont’s Department for Children and Families, local school districts, regional parent-child centers, and other partners with expertise in supporting families. The state included funds to expand the VB3 Strengthening Families pilot in the 2013 application for the federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. The grant has been awarded and VB3 is working with the Child Development Division to launch networks based on the LFC model in one or two regions in 2014.

Vermont Birth to Three is an established force in the state, and we continue to experience solid growth. Our name is well known across Vermont, we’re collaborating more than ever with existing systems and efforts, and our focus remains strong – to improve the quality of infant and toddler care in Vermont. We’re now seen as a critical resource for children and families in Vermont.
RESOURCES

STARS¹ – Vermont’s Quality Recognition and Improvement System is a program of the Vermont Department for Children and Families, Child Development Division. http://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/stars

Zero to Three² – www.zerotothree.org

