Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

Early Childhood x Memphis, TN

Advancing Community Solutions: A Spotlight

By Mark Swartz



"What's it like raising children in Memphis?" That's the question at the heart of a new landscape analysis conducted by First 8 Memphis. The answer matters because adults' well-being shapes the development and well-being of the children in their lives.

"Primarily, when we talk about mental health at this stage of life," explains Kandace Thomas, MPP, PhD, executive director of First 8 Memphis, "it's the relationships young children have with the adults who care for them, which is why it's often also referred to as 'early relational health,'" a term that was developed from the science of child development and infant and early childhood mental health."

To gain a better understanding of the context for the relationships shaping the young minds of Memphis, First 8 Memphis went to the experts – the adults in their lives. The analysis originated in 2020 when Dr. Thomas arrived from Chicago, where she was a senior program officer with the Irving Harris Foundation, and reviewed the Shelby County Early Childhood Education Plan. She seized upon the dearth of community input. As she recalls, "I kept asking, 'How many parents and providers did we talk to?' and the answer was: not nearly enough."

The resulting endeavor, which goes by the name Lovin' on Our Babies: An Assessment of the Social-Emotional Landscape in Memphis and Shelby County, TN, was designed to engage as many stakeholders as possible. "When you do things collaboratively, it takes longer, but the

collaboration is so important," says Dr. Thomas. Start Early Consulting and Urban Child Institute joined forces to make it a reality.

From September to December 2023, First 8 Memphis conducted 18 interviews with systems leaders, 13 interviews with families and providers, and 10 focus groups with families and providers. It collected nearly 400 responses from families and providers. It also convened a sense-making session with 20 providers, including Kimberly Carter, owner of the Brilliant Minds Child Development Center, who told the Meanwhile in Memphis podcast "How We Are Shapes How They Are": "Our families need help, and they need it as soon as they can get it."

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More than half of respondents reported stress, citing poverty, isolation, racism, and discrimination as obstacles to delivering care as they hoped to. Regarding the local care economy, the survey found:

- Prenatal care is unavailable for too many people.
- High-quality child care costs too much, and waitlists are too long.
- Racial and cultural representation among service providers is inadequate, and not enough of them speak languages other than English.

Lovin' on Our Babies points to significant opportunities to build upon existing supports for families. Respondents weren't aware of the full range of programs and services available to them.

The survey is informing First 8 Memphis's strategies for strengthening the care infrastructure of Memphis and Shelby County through better, more targeted home visiting programs, family supports, shared data infrastructure, and more. Launched by Seeding Success in 2019, the organization has found trust to be a crucial asset for partnering with the Black community. "Word of mouth drives our outreach," Dr. Thomas says. "If people know the organization, or they know someone we know, they will be more likely to join." Trust will matter even more as the community

changes and diversifies. Immigrants and refugees from Latin America and beyond make up an increasing part of the cultural mix, with more than 40 languages spoken at Carter's child care center.

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Thomas credits the Shelby County **Early Success Coalition** for its prenatal–5 systems work, including a dynamic home visiting network as well as parent advocacy and training. A 10-session training organized by the 170-year-old social services nonprofit **Porter-Leath** focused on core competencies required of infant and early childhood mental health professionals. The program supports the translation of specialized knowledge into practice. **The Association of Infant Mental Health in Tennessee** also took part in the effort.

Among other key findings of the landscape analysis, Dr. Thomas mentions that many, but not enough, professionals already possess considerable knowledge about infant mental health and child development and how to promote healthy development. At the same time, she points out the isolation felt by pregnant parents. "Medical professionals aren't listening to them," she recounts. "Doulas feel disregarded as well."

Parents and caregivers of children on the autism spectrum said it was too hard to get assessments and diagnoses, even though intervention before 3 years old is ideal. At the same time, those who did gain access to support praised the **Tennessee Early Intervention System**. (Carter, a mother of twins, was a benefactor of TEIS and says it helped, so she advises parents, "You have to be aggressive. Don't take no for an answer.")

Violent crime is the foremost source of stress mentioned by respondents, with one home visitor saying, "It takes a toll on us. We see a lot every day. It's borderline traumatizing. We see everything. We see it all. A lot of doctors in the hospital don't see it all, but we do in our homes. It weighs on us." Insufficient transportation and stable housing also came up frequently.

At the same time, the survey captures the city's spirit of neighbors helping neighbors. As Dr. Thomas says, "The history of Memphis and Black people is a history of strength and resilience."

Systemic change in this environment, she continues, takes long-term commitment, constant reflection, and, above all, a recognition that relationships drive children's social-emotional development, which in turn, she says, "really sets the stage for all of the markers of success."

As one Memphis parent summarized: "I hope that all families in our community are able to fully enjoy every aspect of their life through the supportive relationships, communities, and systems. I hope for increased wages, decreased child care costs, enhanced health care, and more flexible academic institutions."



This Spotlight is part of the Stanford Center on Early Childhood's new initiative to advance early childhood systems solutions. Communities everywhere are turning their focus to ways in which they can support young children and the adults in their lives. **Early Childhood X** (ECX) was created to celebrate and amplify these transformative place-based efforts. To read more ECX publications, visit **earlychildhood.stanford.edu/publications.**

*About the author: **Mark Swartz** is a regular contributor to **Early Learning Nation**. The author of the children's books Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe, Lost Flamingo, Magpie Bridge and The Giant of the Flood, as well as a few novels, he lives in Takoma Park, MD, with his wife and two children.*