



## **SPECS: Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings: Program Evaluation Research Team**

EARLY CHILDHOOD PARTNERSHIPS  
CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OF PITTSBURGH  
THE UCLID CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

*Dr. Bagnato and his Early Childhood Partnerships program were recipients of the 2001 University of Pittsburgh Chancellor's Distinguished Public Service Award for their innovative program of consultation and applied program evaluation research through SPECS in the Early Childhood Initiative (ECI). The award was sponsored and championed by notable representatives from community-based early care and education agencies in the Pittsburgh region.*

### WHAT IS SPECS?

**SPECS (Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings)** is an interdisciplinary team composed of faculty, fellows, and staff from Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and the UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh who specialize in applied program evaluation research in partnership with early childhood intervention programs and school districts in natural community settings. SPECS research monitors the effectiveness of programs in helping children acquire competencies for early school success.

### WHAT MAKES SPECS RESEARCH METHODS UNIQUE?

SPECS is an innovative approach to conduct practical research on the status, progress, efficacy, and outcomes of early childhood intervention programs in natural community settings for children at developmental risk or with developmental disabilities. SPECS research methods are designed through collaborative partnerships that help community-based programs such as Early Head Start and Head Start, early intervention, early care and education, early literacy, and other programs demonstrate "how good you are at what you do". SPECS uses an evaluation approach and evidence based practices that have been field-validated through "natural experiments" in real-life community settings rather than laboratory-type settings. The SPECS research approach is known as **authentic assessment and program evaluation in early childhood settings (Bagnato, 2002)**.

### HOW DOES SPECS WORK?

The SPECS Team uses assessment techniques that rely on the collection of authentic information in everyday home, preschool, and community contexts. SPECS program evaluation research strategies are distinctive and effective in nine ways; SPECS strategies: (1) employ a collaborative or participatory research model with community partners for formative and summative research phases; (2) address the central goal of "Does the program work in natural settings?" rather than "Can the program work in laboratory settings?"; (3) assess ALL children, families, and programs in the study without exclusions for research purposes; (4) apply the developmentally-appropriate quality guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), Council for Exceptional Children, and the Head Start Performance Standards; (5) do not use traditional "table-top testing" methods that are unusual for young children and remove the child, teachers, or parents from their natural situation or "developmental ecology"; (6) rely on ongoing observations from consistent caregivers in the child's life-teachers, parents, and others; (7) sample skills within the preschool's developmental curriculum that are teachable and predictive of future kindergarten success; and (8) offer ongoing feedback to teachers, parents, and the community about children's learning and needed program refinements; and (9) operationalize a longitudinal repeated-measures design using HLM and Path analysis strategies.

SPECS evaluation strategies track progress and interrelationships among multiple factors like children's development (e.g., basic concepts, literacy, social skills and self-control behaviors); parenting and family strengths; the quality and infusion of effective teaching and care standards and "best practices" into early childhood programs; and the creation of unique neighborhood resources and interagency partnerships in systems reform efforts.

#### WHAT ARE SOME NOTABLE SPECS RESEARCH VENTURES?

- **Heinz Pennsylvania Early Childhood Initiatives (ECI), Vira and Howard Heinz Endowments (1997-2007)** Longitudinal evaluation of the efficacy and success of intensive quality mentoring on the capacity of all types of early care and education programs to promote developmental, behavioral, and early school success for children in high-risk environments and to foster parent participation, and innovative interagency partnerships in a systems reform effort. ECI research shows dramatic and positive effects for children in its first four years.
- **Beacon Plus Early Literacy Institute, Heinz Endowments (1999-2002)** Program evaluation research of the efficacy of a community-based early literacy mentoring project for child care providers through Beginning with Books;
- **Alliance for Infants and Toddlers, Allegheny County Office of Mental Health (1998-present)** Design, implementation and evaluation of the capabilities of a laptop-based, portable data management and program evaluation system to enable parents and service coordinators to document program quality, outcomes, satisfaction, and child/family progress for young children with disabilities;
- **Special Vision Telemedicine Project, US Department of Commerce (1999-2002)** Longitudinal program evaluation research of the design and impact of a Web-based strategy for formatting, accessing, and using the health records of children with chronic health conditions and neurodevelopmental disabilities by parents and allied health professionals;
- **EPICenter Preschool-Kindergarten Records Communication Project (1999-2000);** Danforth Foundation. Evaluation of the practical impact of technology to enable parents to transmit child preschool progress records to kindergarten teachers and principals to promote collaboration and mutual planning for kindergarten transition;
- **Authentic Assessment Research for the Early Detection of Developmental and Behavioral Needs of Young Children in Early Intervention Programs, Department of Human Services, Children First, State of Georgia (2001-2002)** State-wide mentoring, implementation, and evaluation of the use of developmentally appropriate forms of assessment for the early detection and ongoing programmatic assessment and program evaluation for young children with special needs;
- **Authentic Evaluation of Child Outcomes in Early Head Start and Head Start, CenClear Child Services, Phillipsburg, PA (2001-present)** System-wide, computer-based evaluation of ongoing child curricular progress in a rural Head Start program to document developmental progress, school readiness, and early school success.

#### WHAT SPECS RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS ARE AVAILABLE?

- Bagnato, SJ, Neisworth, JT (1993). The Pennsylvania Preschool Integration Initiative (PAPII), The efficacy of inclusive preschool intervention: A Three-Year Longitudinal Evaluation Research Study, Harrisburg, PA: Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Bureau of Special Education (1990-1993)
- Bagnato, SJ (2002). Quality early learning—Key to school success: A first-phase 3-Year program evaluation research report for Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), Pittsburgh, PA: SPECS Evaluation Team, Early Childhood Partnerships, Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.
- Bagnato, SJ, Suen, HK, Brickley, D, Smith-Jones, J, Dettore, E (2002). Child developmental impact of Pittsburgh's Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) in high-risk communities: First phase authentic evaluation research. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(4), 559-580.

#### HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SPECS?

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