

Document is sized for print.

MITTS for Parents

[Previous issues](#)

[Text only](#)

MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Welcome

Welcome to the final edition of MITTS for Parents, a bimonthly newsletter created especially for parents of children in the Mississippi First Steps Early Intervention Program. While reading this newsletter, you will discover information and resources that should be useful to you. If you have questions or comments about MITTS for Parents, please send an e-mail to susan.phillips@usm.edu or call 1.888.671.0051.

Special Note About MITTS

The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) has been involved in early intervention services in the state since the early 1980s. From receiving the first 99-457 planning grant, to transitioning the grant to the State Department of Health and developing model sites in Hattiesburg and the Delta, to maintaining the training arm of the program under Part C, IDS has strived to support First Steps staff, children and families. As Project MITTS (Mississippi Infant and Toddler Technical Support) comes to a close, I would like to thank everyone who worked so hard to promote quality training and services across the state. To everyone who has served on project committees, participated in training, and collaborated as training sponsors, I would like to express my deepest gratitude and thanks. I especially thank Stella Fair for the many years that she gave her heart to Project MITTS. My hope is that First Steps will continue on the path of insuring that all young children with disabilities and their families in our state receive the best of the best of services – they deserve no less. IDS will continue to support First Steps in any way that we can and we will continue to offer training events in the area of early intervention. The Institute and our staff members look forward to many productive years ahead – Thanks to all!



Dr. Jane Siders, Executive Director



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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



Document is sized for print.

MITTS for Parents

[Previous issues](#)

[Text only](#)

MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast Transition Initiative

BY LIBBIE SONNIER



The following article was written by Libbie Sonnier, M.Ed., who currently serves as the EHDI (Early Hearing Detection and Intervention) Director for the First Steps Early Intervention Program. The article discusses the new Mississippi Gulf Coast Transition Initiative which has been designed to ease the transition process from Part C (birth – 2 years) to Part B (3– 5 years) for children and their families.

With local school districts and early intervention working together as a team, children and families are getting the best of both worlds. In this process, school districts and early intervention teams evaluate and rule eligibility on children together at one time. This allows both programs to meet the unique needs of families and children as well as plan. By ruling eligibility together at initial evaluation, families do not have to go through unnecessary evaluations and paperwork. It allows the families to focus on the needs of their family. This process also places parents in the role as advocates with their local school district instead of adversaries by being educated from time of enrollment about what they next possible step is for their children.

The goals of the project are to reduce the stress for families and agencies; eliminate unnecessary evaluations and paperwork; improve child find efforts; and ensure Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and services are in place by age 3. It is the intent that this process will better serve children and families and make the best use of resources.

As an early intervention system, we want to find children who are potentially eligible for our program. By working hand in hand with the schools as partners, we are able to help one another identify children who may possibly need services. All children deserve the best possible outcomes and we believe this process of

2



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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

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Document is sized for print.

MITTS for Parents

[Previous issues](#)

[Text only](#)

MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Feature Story (continued from page 2)

the schools and early intervention working together allows that to happen from enrollment into school services.

At this time, new school districts are participating in this initiative throughout the state of Mississippi. We are excited about the opportunity to better serve children and families. Hopefully this process allows everyone to learn, change, and grow together from the families and children to the schools and early intervention providers in the community.

If you would like more information about this initiative or any of the proposed solutions, please contact Ms. Sonnier at the First Steps office at 1.800.451.3903. You may also e-mail her at libbie.sonnier@msdh.state.ms.us.

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent Advisor Leslie Junkin

In order to find out more about the role of parent advisors in each district, we talked with district and service coordinators across the state. Although districts utilize the abilities of parent advisors (PAs) in various ways, the common theme is their ability to provide family centered support to those receiving early intervention services. Currently, not all districts have a parent advisor on staff. Previous issues of MITTS for Parents have spotlighted various parent advisors. Featured below is the story of Leslie Junkin who serves as parent advisor for District IV.



Hello, my name is Leslie Junkin and I am the parent of a beautiful 6-year-old daughter, Isabella. She is in kindergarten and has Down syndrome. Isabella's diagnosis at 3 months was devastating. I left the pediatrician's office with no information and nowhere to go to find it. When I got home I called other pediatricians looking for answers and support. I found just that with Dr. Deborah

3



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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

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MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Parent Perspectives (continued from page 3)

Shirley in Starkville, Miss. She immediately told me about early intervention, arranged for an appointment, and referred us for an evaluation. The rest, as they say, is history. I met with Service Coordinator Richard Davis a few days later and from there I began to learn about life as the parent of a child with a developmental disability. I discovered the world that my daughter and I were to live in for the rest of our lives. It was difficult and overwhelming at times, and it still is. However, by empowering myself with knowledge and every day the fear is not as strong now, although the need for knowledge is always there. My daughter is, without a doubt, the best person that I have ever known. I hope that anyone who meets her understands the lessons she can teach.

I began working for the First Steps Early Intervention Program as the parent advisor in District IV two years ago. I am a full-time student in my last year at Mississippi University for Women majoring in Family Studies. I am a member of the Emerson Family Resource Group, The Arc of Lowndes County, and The Arc of MS. These groups provide workshops, advocacy, and lifelines of hope, inspiration, and knowledge for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

First Steps is a wonderful program and it offers parents access to countless services that otherwise might not be available. The position of Parent Advisor has offered me many great opportunities and, in the future, I hope to see those opportunities grow even more. Parents need support, education, and empowerment. It is crucial to the future success of our children with disabilities. Children's best advocates will always be their parents, but the parents need knowledge, they need support, and they need access to information, agencies, and programs. They also need the wisdom of others who have walked in their shoes. Life does not stop after early intervention, and parents in the first years sometimes do not realize the value of educating themselves about every facet of life for their child with a disability. This is where I think the role of parent advisor will be of significant meaning to these families.



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MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Parent Perspectives (continued from page 4)

My goal is that every parent who has a child that may face lifelong challenges will be able to find other parents, support, knowledge, and the ability to say, "I may not know what's out there, but I have the tools necessary to find it."

To contact this parent advisor, please e-mail lesliejunkin@hotmail.com or call her at 662.327.2965.

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring of Early Intervention Services in Mississippi

BY DARLENE GORE, MARTY CHUNN, AND DEBRA KOONCE

Our goal as quality monitors is to ensure that the early intervention experience (i.e., the process of determining the need for and provision of early intervention services): a) meets the unique needs of children and families; b) runs smoothly from referral through transition; and c) is in compliance with federal regulations.

In order to make sure Mississippi is providing early intervention services to meet the needs of each family served, there are quality monitors who visit each district in the state. The focus of each district's monitoring visits is to investigate and address factors impacting services. These factors are identified through data patterns, each district's self-review, informal and formal complaints, input from families and other community members, monitoring, and those identified while providing technical assistance. The monitoring team will work with the district staff to identify and address the factors, and a process will be tailored to address the needs of each district. The goals of monitoring include identifying, enhancing, and utilizing the district's strengths as well as weaknesses.



Prior to visiting each district, the monitoring team



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MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Quality Monitor Update (continued from page 5)

will review the District's self-review, request records from the District, publicize the community meetings, schedule the interviews, and notify parents of methods of giving input. Monitoring will be conducted through observations, interviews, and record reviews. During the site visit, the team will determine resources needed to address any systemic findings, as well as concerns relating to how services are provided. Before the site visit ends a draft of an improvement will be developed and then technical assistance will be provided through training to early intervention providers.

The quality monitors are

Darlene Gore - Districts I, II, and III

Marty Chun - Districts IV, V, and VI

Debra Koonce – Districts VII, VIII, and IX

Previous issues of MITTS for Parents have spotlighted each of these quality monitors. For more information about each of them, please access the archived issues link. If you would like to speak to one of these quality monitors, please contact your child's service coordinator for contact information.

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun!

BY DONNA STAUTER, OTR/L, BCP

Summer is such a natural time to play in the pool and get a break from the heat! Children often love it and it is an easy and fun time to get some physical exercise by strengthening those growing muscles. One fun pool activity is to use "noodles" with the



Remember to use sunscreen!



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Disabilities Education, Research and Service located at
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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



Document is sized for print.

MITTS for Parents

[Previous issues](#)

[Text only](#)

MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Therapy Corner (continued from page 6)

child straddling the noodle and kicking with legs to move their selves across the pool. Kickboards are also nice because you can have your child lay on his or her tummy, pushing away from the pool edge or from parents' hands with a backward push. This is great for leg and shoulder strength. Water weights are available from pool accessory suppliers to wear around ankles or wrists and these help to increase the resistance provided in the water. If you prefer to use something from around the house, simply use half-gallon milk cartons to push under water and let them pop to the top. These can be partially filled with water allowing more resistance when the water inside is less. This also provides a good grip surface for little hands around the handles. Smaller water bottles can be used as well to encourage pouring into other containers. Water squirt bottles allow children to squeeze to get the water out, and this promotes hand strength and coordination. There are many fun activities you can do in the pool, so get wet and have a blast in the pool this summer! And get a bit of physical development in while you are there!

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

BY ELIZABETH BEAVERS



“There are few places outside his own play where a child can contribute to the world in which he finds himself.” (author unknown)

As a parent, you are your child's most interactive toy. The engaging things you do are more beneficial than any toy you can buy. Essentially, you are your child's world and what a priceless thing that is. Therefore, how you interact with your child

7



Institute for Disability Studies
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Disabilities Education, Research and Service located at
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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Literacy Connections (continued from page 7)

is a critical aspect of the foundation for your child's development; his or her play; social development; and yes, even literacy development.

Quality interactions are a key component of fostering your child's development and learning. The following A B C and D of play describe suggestions for enhancing interactions through play.

- A** Allow your child to lead.
 - Notice what your child is looking at or interested in.
 - Watch your child's expressions and exaggerate your own when interacting.
 - Look to your child's body language as cues for continuing play.
- B** Be sure to talk WITH your child.
 - Repeat sounds.
 - Make associations.
 - Sing and play with words.
 - Play word games.
 - Talk with your child about everything.
 - Name what you see. Describe what you are doing. Ask questions.
- C** Create new experiences.
 - Encourage curiosity.
 - Create adventures.
 - Rehearse and extend new skills.
 - Take trips.
- D** Discover the fun of books.
 - Read Aloud.
 - Use different voice tones and inflections.
 - Make reading a part of your daily routine.
 - Encourage your child to talk about books.
 - Model for your child to learn to listen.
 - What your child has to say is critically important no matter how trivial it may seem to you.



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Disabilities Education, Research and Service located at
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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Literacy Connections (continued from page 8)

Ask questions.

Expand on story experiences through play.

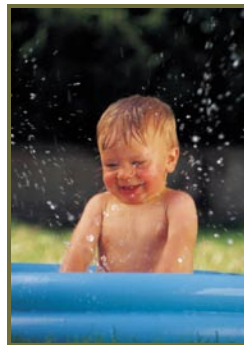
Making the most of shared playful moments with your child involves getting on your child's level, imitating your child, interpreting what is happening, taking turns, commenting on things you observe and asking your child questions then waiting for responses (whether a babble or words). Remember, the way you play and interact with your child is what makes a difference in his or her world!

Child's Play

Water Play at Home!

BY SUSAN PHILLIPS

A fun and easy summer activity you can do with your child is to simply fill an empty plastic tub with water and toys and have water play at home! Children will enjoy cooling off on a hot day by splashing around in the cold water during this sensory experience. To engage your child in water play, gather the plastic tub of water and a variety of items including cups, scoops, plastic fish or frogs, rubber duckies, and/or funnels. To enhance the learning experience, make conversation with your child about different concepts including whether the water is hot or cold, whether the tub is full or empty, and count the toys in the tub. Help your child fill the cups with water and pour the water into the funnel. Also talk to your child about the plastic animals; which ones live in water; what size, shape, and color they are; and what kind of animal sounds they make. The children will love to feel around in the water and pretend they are fishing! Be sure to encourage your child to count the number of fish he or she catches.



There are several activities you can do during water play. To make the activity extra fun, add different shades of food coloring to the water and talk to your



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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Child's Play (continued from page 9)

child about how colors mix together. You can also add dishwashing liquid to the water to make bubbles! If the tub is large enough, encourage your child to sit in it and kick the water around to make waves. Just remember to always be present when your child is playing in or near water. Also please remember to use lots of sunscreen and reapply throughout the day!

No matter how simple the activity, remember that you can always make playing with your child a fun and easy learning experience. Be sure to engage your child in conversation throughout the activity and remember to have fun!

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability Studies



The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) is Mississippi's Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service. Housed at The University of Southern Mississippi, IDS strives to meet its federal mission to enhance the quality of life across the life span for citizens with disabilities and their families, regardless of culture, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. Quality of life is enhanced through leadership activities that promote policies of inclusion at home, school, work, and recreational settings. Through supportive efforts to facilitate the availability of an array of individual and family supports that are community-based and culturally competent, IDS promotes the independence, productivity, and community integration and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

There are several projects at IDS relating to early intervention and early childhood development. The Mississippi Infant/Toddler Technical Support (MITTS) project provides training and technical assistance to early intervention service providers throughout the state. The MITTS for Parents newsletter is one of the services



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Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA



Document is sized for print.

MITTS for Parents

[Previous issues](#)

[Text only](#)

MITTS for Parents

Volume 2, No. 3, Summer 2006

Special Note

About MITTS

Feature Story

Mississippi Gulf Coast
Transition Initiative

Parent Perspectives

Meet District IV Parent
Advisor Leslie Junkin

Quality Monitor Update

Focused Monitoring
of Early Intervention
Services in Mississippi

Therapy Corner

Pool Fun in the Sun

Literacy Connections

ABCs and D of Play

Child's Play

Water Play at Home

Web site Spotlight

Institute for Disability
Studies

Web site Spotlight (continued from page 10)

provided by this project. To access the MITTS Web site, please visit
<http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts>.

Another early childhood project at IDS is Project PREPARE. This project provides training and technical assistance to childcare centers throughout the state. This project aims to improve the quality of care to children in childcare settings, to increase professional development opportunities, and encourage best practices for inclusion. To learn more about Project PREPARE, please visit
<http://www.usm.edu/ids/prepare>.

IDS also provides a statewide model of early childhood inclusion through the services provided at Families First Children's Center, an inclusive childcare center for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. The center serves children with a variety of special needs, and therapists conduct on-site developmental assessments as well as provide early intervention services at the center. To learn more about Families First Children's Center, please visit
<http://www.usm.edu/ids/ffcc>.

The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) strives to provide the best training and technical assistance to providers in order to ensure children with special needs receive the services they deserve. Please visit the IDS Web site at
<http://www.usm.edu/ids>

to review each of the projects provided by the Institute and be sure to check back as new projects develop.

Previous Issues

[Fall 2005](#)

[Winter 2005](#)

[Spring 2006 V2,N1](#)

[Spring 2006 V2,N2](#)

11



Institute for Disability Studies
Mississippi's University Center for Excellence in Developmental
Disabilities Education, Research and Service located at
The University of Southern Mississippi

Director: Jane.Siders@usm.edu Web master: Richard.Baker@usm.edu

Page URL <http://www.usm.edu/ids/mitts/newsletter/index.html>

Last Modified: June 22, 2006. AA/EOE/ADA

