

**LIVINGSTON COUNTY FAMILY  
FOCUS EVEN START  
YEAR ONE EVALUATION**

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June, 2000



*Research to drive informed decisions.  
Expertise to create effective solutions.*

# LIVINGSTON COUNTY FAMILY FOCUS EVEN START YEAR ONE EVALUATION

Prepared for:

**Livingston Family Focus Even Start**

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# LIVINGSTON COUNTY FAMILY FOCUS

## EVEN START

### YEAR ONE EVALUATION

June, 2000

#### SUMMARY

The Livingston County Family Focus Even Start program received funding in September of 1999 from the New York State Department of Education. The program began to enroll families as of January 2000. This report provides an overview of the program, a description of staffing and staff development in this first year, a description of the planned local evaluation of the program over the next four years, and preliminary evaluation results.

The Evaluation of Even Start has two primary components: a longitudinal assessment of the impact of the program on its participants, and a process assessment that monitors the program's implementation and how well the program is meeting its goals and objectives.

All Family Visitors were interviewed as part of this evaluation along with Board of Directors members, Advisory Board members, referral persons, the Program Coordinator, and two enrolled families. In addition, surveys were conducted with the Family Visitors and all enrolled families. As a result of this process, we found that the Livingston County Family Focus Even Start program is off to a successful and positive start.

While the program appears to be well-run and successful at reaching those in need, we offer a variety of recommendations in the spirit of continuous improvement. As a compilation of the diverse input we received from the evaluation process as well as

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our own observations, we offer the following selected recommendations in the areas of operational issues, Boards, communication, and Family Visitor issues. A full list of recommendations can be found in the full report.

### *Operational Issues*

**Recommendation:** Continue revision of the Index of Need tool. Consider a separate tool for teen parents, who are likely to face very different challenges.

**Recommendation:** Consider what will happen when the program reaches its 60-family capacity.

**Recommendation:** Conduct more public relations work to gain more acceptance in the community and with local officials, particularly in the Geneseo school district, which to date has sent no referrals to the program.

### *Advisory Board and Board of Directors Issues*

**Recommendation:** Consider adding parents to the Advisory Board.

**Recommendation:** Evaluate the need to change the structure of the Board of Directors. It may be time to elect officers, and encourage the Directors to take more ownership of the program.

### *Communication with Families*

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors should ensure that the families understand what it means to have specific, identified goals, and should encourage families to think about their goals more clearly.

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors should remind all families of the services available to them on a regular basis, and monitor family awareness of services more directly than is apparently occurring at this time.

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*Family Visitor Issues*

**Recommendation:** Ensure that training occurs in a timely, regular manner, and that it is adequate for staff needs. Encourage staff to communicate their needs to the Coordinator.

**Recommendation:** Evaluate the types of barriers that exist with families, school representatives, and agency personnel, and identify approaches to overcome barriers in each case.

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A tremendous thank you is due to the staff at the Livingston County Family Focus Even Start. All staff persons from the Coordinator, to the administrative staff, to the family visitors were contagiously energetic, positive, and thoughtful in their comments about the Even Start program. They diligently helped in the collection of data, gave of their time for interviews and surveys, and even allowed us to tag along on selected family visits. The two families who invited CGR staff into their homes are thanked for their openness and dedicated participation in the evaluation process. The many members of the Board of Directors, Advisory Board, and the referral persons who also gave of their time for this evaluation are much appreciated.

### Staff Team

Sarah Boyce Fasick conducted the interviews and surveys, and was the primary data analyst and author of this report.

## INTRODUCTION

The Livingston County Family Focus Even Start program received initial funding in September of 1999 from the New York State Department of Education. The program began to enroll families as of January 2000. Funding is anticipated for at least four years. This report provides an overview of the program, a description of staffing and staff development in this first year, a description of the planned local evaluation of the program over the next four years, and preliminary evaluation results. CGR (Center for Governmental Research Inc.), was enlisted to conduct the evaluation for the Livingston County Even Start program.

The Even Start program functions as a partnership on a local level intended to provide family-centered education and intervention to improve literacy among parents and their children. The partnerships aim to intervene in the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving access to and opportunities for education in low-income families. Literacy is defined as more than just the ability to read and understand; family literacy includes services that help a family to make sustainable changes in literacy activities between parents and their children, help for parents to become teachers for their own children, parental literacy that leads to economic self-sufficiency, and education to help prepare children for success in school and in life. The Even Start partners share the responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the Even Start Family Literacy Project.

The Livingston County Even Start program serves six school districts: Dansville, Geneseo, Keshequa, Livonia, Mt. Morris, and York. In addition to the six school districts, other formal partners in this effort include Cornell Cooperative Extension, Western New York Child Care Council, and the Even Start Help Desk, located in the Noyes Memorial Hospital. Other agencies provide in-kind services ranging from administrative support to supplies, to computer support.

The Livingston County Even Start philosophy centers around the family as the target unit. Focus is on early intervention and literacy promotion. In this rural county, many disadvantaged



families are isolated with few social contacts. The social isolation is compounded by a lack of transportation. The Family Focus Even Start program aims to demystify welfare reform for the families, and encourages them to take advantage of the many resources available within their communities.

## STAFFING AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

As an important step in the first year start-up process, grant-funded staff were hired and trained comprehensively in appropriate areas. Current staff include six full-time personnel. In addition to the Coordinator, the staff include four Family Visitors, and one Administrative Assistant.

**Coordinator**—The Coordinator oversees all day-to-day operations of program, and implemented the start-up process. She meets regularly with both her Advisory Board and her Board of Directors for input, advice, and guidance. She hired the remaining staff and participated fully in their training process.

**Family Visitors**—The Family Visitors serve as the liaison between the families and the Even Start program. They visit families every week, checking in on their progress and planning the next week's activities. In addition, the Visitors refer families to various services to help with their individual needs.

**Administrative Assistant**—The Administrative Assistant is responsible for day-to-day administrative duties around the office. She maintains data on the families enrolled in the program, and provides general support to the Coordinator and the Family Visitors.

Between September 1999 and June 2000, the Family Visitors underwent intensive training from a variety of sources:

*Family Development Training and Credential Program (FDC)* — All staff attended 120 hours of classes and field advisement presented by Cornell Cooperative Extension.

*Asset Development*—Staff attended a Cornell Cooperative Extension program on the importance of youth assets needed for success. Family Visitors learned to build on and strengthen assets in the children of enrolled families.

*Agency Visits*—Staff visited a number of local agencies to introduce themselves and become aware of the resources available for the families they will serve. Agencies included the Department of Social Services Child Preventive and Protective unit, Take Pride, BOCES Adult education, Noyes First Steps (baby care), Literacy Volunteers, and Catholic Charities, among others.

*School Visits*—The Coordinator met with all participating Superintendents and Principals to introduce the Even Start program and obtain input on the schools' goals for the program. Staff met with counselors and teachers in their respective school districts.

*Alcohol and Substance Abuse training*—Attended a presentation by the Livingston County Council on Alcohol and Substance Abuse.

*Food Stamps and Nutrition*—Attended a Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNEP) and More Power in Your Pantry and Pocket (PPP) programs presented by Cornell Cooperative Extension.

*Regional Networking*—All staff attended “Crosswalking the Curriculum,” a regional networking meeting.

*Domestic Violence*—All staff attended an overview of a local domestic violence program entitled “Chances and Changes.”

*Mentor Program*—Staff were visited by the Family Educators from a nearby Even Start program that serves as a mentor to the new Livingston County program. The mentor program staff discussed how to start the process with new families, what to expect from a home visit, essential supplies and materials, and the types of forms they use.

*Child Abuse Recognition*—Staff attended a seminar on how to recognize child abuse sponsored by the Genesee Valley BOCES.

*Other training*—Staff have attended a variety of other training sessions that address issues such as home schooling, life management, literacy, death and dying, and a caregiver’s workshop day.

In addition to extensive training, staff were also involved in developing policies and procedures, and setting up a variety of other operations in the early stages of this program. An outline of the operations-related activities the program staff completed in Year One are as follows:

- Created Mission statement;
- Discussed purpose of Even Start, how best to plan;
- Created Staff Policies and Procedures;
- Developed approach for using ESPIRS database;
- Developed all necessary client paperwork including intake forms, weekly updates, progress towards goals;
- Developed packets for use by staff regarding parenting, child development, adult education, and life transitions;
- Compiled a catalog of literacy and reference materials; and
- The Coordinator attended a variety of conferences and regional coordinator meetings.

The Family Visitors have been heavily involved in the development of all materials currently in use at Even Start. The staff have been well trained and receive ongoing training as needs arise.

## PROGRAM OPERATION

The program planned to fill its maximum capacity of 60 families by the end of Year One, which is defined as September 1, 1999 through August 31, 2000. Family Visitors began to see families in

December 1999, and began formally enrolling families in January 2000. As of June 2000, the program served 38 families, and it is unlikely the program will meet the 60 families goal by August 31, 2000. However, the rate of growth appears to be manageable for the Family Visitors as they are “learning the ropes,” and continuously preparing material packets for their assigned families. As time goes on, prepared materials will make a larger caseload much easier. Further, the low caseload is not due to families being turned away for reasons other than failure to meet criteria. Rather, the flow of incoming families may not be as high as anticipated.

Criteria for admission are straightforward, and while no set of criteria are perfect, we found general agreement that these criteria capture the most appropriate families for the time being, and they are being consistently applied. To qualify for the Family Focus Even Start program, families must meet the following criteria:

- Family income must not exceed 185% of the federal poverty level;
- Family must have a child between the ages of birth to seven;
- Adults in the family must have one or more of the following indicators of low literacy levels:
  - No high school diploma,
  - Below a ninth grade reading level,
  - Limited English proficiency, or
  - Teen parent.

The above criteria are assessed using an Index of Need assessment form. The Index of Need also helps the Family Visitor identify other needs the family may have. A variety of indicators are scored including family income, educational history, and special needs. Out of a total of 60 points, most family members score in the 20-25 point range. (See Appendix A for a copy of all forms discussed in this section.)

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If the family is eligible for Even Start based on the above criteria, the Intake Form is then administered. The Intake Form is straightforward and collects information about the family members, their phone number and address, income and education levels, and any health concerns they might have. It also addresses the family's short and long-range goals, and the initial steps the family must take to reach these goals.

Once the family is admitted and services are provided regularly, staff use a weekly "What's Been Happening" form to record the family's weekly activities. This form prompts the Family Visitor to ask the family about activities since the last visit including library visits, computer use, reading with the children, community activities, home activities, interaction with children's teachers and schools, and time spent on adult education goals. This information is entered monthly into a computer database maintained at the Even Start office for tracking purposes.

A second form used on a weekly basis is the "Even Start Family Literacy Plan--Home Visit." This form is used to plan the activities for the family for the coming week. Items on this form include the long range family goal, which remains the same from week to week, steps to reach each goal and concerns (in the family's own words), activities the family will do and when, activities the Family Visitor will do and when, materials left in the home by the Family Visitor for the week, and progress and obstacles. The form also categorizes goals into four areas: parenting education, interactive, early childhood, and adult education, and records the outcomes over time in each area.

Finally, a set of forms are available to record transitions for the target adult and target child in each family. These forms have not been used extensively yet because such transitions take time to occur. Transitions of interest for children include entry into preschool/daycare, entry into school, and exit as the family target child. The form prompts the Family Visitor to discuss with the family any critical issues involved in the given transition, what type of action might be needed, steps to take to implement the action, and when to start and finish such steps. Similarly, a transition form for adults records upcoming transitions in or out of vocational training, educational instruction, and employment.

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Critical issues might include childcare, transportation, housekeeping, financial issues, family environment, food/meal preparation, laundry, medical issues, program preparation, self-preparation, recreation or social needs, and others.

## YEAR ONE EVALUATION RESULTS

Even Start programs nationwide will be evaluated on a national scale to help determine whether they impact National Education Goals. In addition, each individual Even Start program is to conduct a local evaluation, based on the needs and interests of the local partners. The Livingston County Even Start local evaluation is based on the following parameters:

- Evaluation is ongoing, not isolated;
- Evaluation must involve all stakeholders, including program participants;
- Building capacity to conduct self-evaluation is an important long-term goal;
- Evaluation should form the cornerstone of future planning;
- Evaluation should account for successes as well as problems;
- Evaluative results should be reported and shared;
- Evaluation should be seen in context of community, policy, and collaboration;
- Short-term indicators of long-term impacts must be a part of understanding evaluation;
- Evaluation should spark continuous improvement;

- Evaluation must minimally examine issues of access, availability, and quality of service;
- Evaluation will be conducted annually, and will take both formal analytical and anecdotal forms.

Each of the above components is incorporated into the evaluation of the Livingston County Even Start program. The Evaluation is underway for the first year of a four-year process. As described in the proposal submitted to the State Education Department, the evaluation has two primary components: a longitudinal assessment of the impact of the program on its participants, and a process assessment that monitors the program's implementation and how well the program is meeting its goals and objectives. Each of these components has been implemented and will continue through the tenure of the four-year grant period.

Since this is the first year of operation, and families have only been in the program six months or less, only baseline information has been collected. It is impossible to begin to see substantial effects from Even Start in the longitudinal assessment this early in the process. The outcomes will be addressed in more detail in the Year Two evaluation. Therefore, the Process Evaluation is the most substantive component of the Year One Evaluation.

### **Longitudinal Assessment of Program Impact**

In order to assess the impact of the Family Focus Even Start program, it is necessary to track participating parents and children over time. Ideally, we would like to compare progress made by participants to progress made by persons not exposed to the program. CGR and the Family Focus staff and Boards worked to develop some type of comparison group for this purpose, but ultimately decided that the approach was not consistent with Family Focus goals. To exclude eligible persons from Family Focus in order to place them in a control group was unacceptable, and to identify ineligible persons for a comparison group would not yield a valid comparison. Therefore, on the basis of input from a variety of sources as well as Family Focus program staff and our own professional judgment, no comparison group is included for this portion of the study. We recognize that this limits our ability to attribute participant success to the program,

with the lack of control for extraneous factors. However, we still believe the evaluation has merit in identifying process issues and strategies that might be more successful in Family Focus Even Start in the future.

### *Surveys*

Three surveys were developed to collect data anonymously from the four Family Visitors, and from the 38 families enrolled in Even Start as of May 2000. Family Visitors were asked to fill out two sets of surveys. The first survey asked Visitors about their own perceptions of the Family Focus program, its start-up process, and its impact, and is discussed in the Process Assessment section. The second and third surveys asked the families and Family Visitors to address the progress made by each family, and is discussed in this section. Copies of the survey instruments can be found in Appendix B.

Each actively enrolled Even Start family was asked to complete a survey regarding their experience thus far with the program. Of the 38 enrolled families, 21 completed the survey. Similarly, the Family Visitors were asked to complete a separate survey for each family they serve. The two surveys were nearly identical in the questions they posed. The goal of these surveys was to determine whether the families and Visitors have similar perceptions of the progress the families are making. While the surveys were anonymous, a unique identifying number was assigned to each survey so that the family survey and the Visitor survey for that family could be matched in the analysis process.

All questions were answered on a scale of 1 to 5. In these two surveys, a score of 5 is the most desirable response for each question, while a score of 1 is least desirable. Please see Appendix C for the tabulated survey results. This report discusses the results of the two related surveys below. Areas of concern are those in which the family or the Family Visitor indicate a “below average” score of 1 or 2. In addition, questions in which a family and the corresponding Visitor provided answers that differed by more than one point will be highlighted (e.g., the family answers a 5, while the Visitor scores the same family as a 3 on the same question, or vice versa).



Families indicated that they have a very good understanding of what Even Start is about, and their Visitors agree. Only one family indicated that they “understand somewhat” (score of 3) what the program is about; the remaining families indicated a more thorough understanding of the program (4 or 5). In addition, all families except one indicated that they participate regularly and enthusiastically (4 or 5) in the program. One family rated themselves a 3 (participates somewhat), and that family’s Visitor gave them a 2 on this question, which shows consistency between the family and the Visitor. One family didn’t respond to this question.

When asked about their goals in the Even Start program, 15 out of 19 families who answered indicated that they have identified specific goals (score of 4 or 5). Four families indicated that they have begun to identify such goals (score of 3).

When asked whether the families know what their goals are, 18 families said they know what their goals are (4 or 5), while only one family indicated that they “sort of know” what their goals are (3). Of some concern are three inconsistencies in the family versus Family Visitor responses to this question. In one case, a family responded with a 4, indicating that they feel they have moved beyond beginning to identify goals, whereas the Visitor assigned a value of 2, indicating that the family has not yet begun to identify goals. Similarly, of the eleven families that rated themselves a 5 on this question, in two cases their Visitors gave them a 3. The implications of these three inconsistencies are that the families may feel they are farther along than they really are in identifying their goals. *Family Visitors should ensure that the families understand what it means to have specific, identified goals, and encourage families to think about their goals more clearly.*

When asked whether things have gotten worse, stayed the same, or gotten better since starting Even Start, all families answered a 4 or 5, indicating that things have gotten better. The Visitors appear to agree, with only one Visitor giving one family a 3 (stayed the same), and the remainder assigning 4s and 5s. All responses were consistent between the Visitors and families within one point.

We asked the families about their level of awareness of services in their community, whether they know how to access services, and whether their level of awareness has changed since they began Even Start. While most families indicated that they are aware that services are available to them, four families responded with a value of 3, indicating that they know of some services (as opposed to many), but for three of these four families their Visitors responded with a value of 5. Similarly, when asked if they know how to access services, one family responded with only a 2, while its Visitor responded with a value of 5 (knows how to access many services). This is of concern because if the Visitors believe their families know of many services and know how to access them, but the families really do not, then there is some level of a lack of communication occurring. It is possible that the families are not telling their Visitors that they are unaware of some services. *The Visitors should remind all families of the services available to them on a regular basis, and monitor family awareness of services more directly than is apparently occurring at this time.*

When asked how the family's level of awareness of services available has changed since they entered Even Start, all families responded with a 4 or 5 (more aware). Visitors indicated that six families have remained about the same in their level of awareness (3), but that the remainder have increased awareness (4 or 5). This difference in responses is not as worrisome, because this is an entirely subjective question. If the families feel they have been helped, the Visitors may simply be responding conservatively. When pushed further on this question, and asked specifically whether Even Start has directly helped the families to understand how to access services, the responses were somewhat mixed. Sixteen of 17 families said yes (4 or 5), while family visitors were much more conservative with only eight answering with a 4 or 5, eight answering somewhat (3), and one answering 2 (has not helped). In one case a family responded with a 2 (has not helped), while the Visitor responded with a 5 (has helped greatly). On the other hand, in six cases the family responded with a 5 while their Visitors assigned them a 3 (has helped somewhat). Again, the concerns lie more with the family that assigned themselves a low score, while the Visitor rated them high. *The concern is that the Visitor may not recognize problems the family is experiencing in accessing services.*

Finally, the survey addressed two questions related to school. The families were asked if they are less or more comfortable with their children's teachers, and whether they are less or more involved in their children's schoolwork than they were when they first enrolled in Even Start. In six cases, either the family or the Family Visitor did not respond due to either no school-aged children in the family, or because the children are being home-schooled. As with the previous survey results, the answers are primarily encouraging. While three families indicated that they are at the same comfort level with their children's teacher, the remaining families answered that they are more comfortable than before. The Visitors are more conservative about the families' comfort levels with teachers. Visitors feel that seven families are at the same comfort level, while the remaining six are more comfortable. As far as discrepancies between the family and Visitor responses, one family that rated itself about the same in comfort level was given a 5 by its Visitor (more comfortable). Conversely, five of the families that said they were more comfortable now were given a 3 by their Visitor. It is the first discrepancy that is of most concern. The Visitor may feel that the family is comfortable with their child's teacher, when the family is truly not particularly comfortable. It is possible that the family is not sharing these concerns with the Visitor for some reason. While there is only one discrepancy in this particular question, it is a good reminder that *Visitors should consistently and persistently try to ascertain whether families are having trouble communicating with their children's school teachers.*

When asked whether they are more involved with their child's schoolwork than before joining Even Start, three families indicated that they are at the same level of involvement, while the remaining families indicated that they are more involved. The Visitors appear to agree. For two of the families who indicated they are more involved (5), their Visitors indicated that they believe the family is involved at about the same level (3). Again, this discrepancy is of less concern than the reverse would be. If the family feels they have made some progress in this arena, it's possible that the Visitor simply has not recognized the progress.

Overall, the survey responses provide very positive results. First, the vast majority of both families and Family Visitors feel that the families are progressing nicely on the issues addressed in the

survey including an understanding of Even Start, goal-setting, access to services, and communication with schools. Second, the perceptions of the families and their assigned Visitors match quite well in most cases. Nonetheless, a few discrepancies exist, and serve as a reminder that *Visitors must remain consistent in their attempts to communicate information to the families, and to elicit concerns from the families, in order to find solutions to various problems.*

### Case Studies

While we plan to analyze a variety of data from the interviews, surveys, and quantitative data collected during the first four years of Even Start, we also believe it is useful to conduct more in-depth case studies with a selected number of families participating in the program. The case studies will give us a more thorough understanding of the program and the families' perceptions of the process. Working with Family Visitors, we selected two families to meet with in June 2000. Additional families may be added early in Year Two of the program, particularly if the Visitors see a change in the level of need of incoming families at that time, or if the two families selected in Year One complete or drop out of the program in the meantime.

The first family includes a mother, her live-in boyfriend, and her three children, ages 6 and younger. This mom is clearly pleased with the Even Start program. She elaborated on the program with little prodding from the interviewer. She first heard about the program from her oldest child's school. At first the mom was a bit apprehensive about having someone in her house because of the bad experiences she had with DSS social workers in the past. However, the mom agreed to at least try this new program. By her account, she was thrilled with her Family Visitor from the moment she first walked in the door. The mom indicated that the Visitor has taught her a tremendous amount about how to use her home as a learning tool, and gives the mom the specific steps necessary to make a difference. The Visitor brings new ideas and suggestions each week, and gives the mom useful examples about how to use items around the house and turn them into learning activities. The mom is pleased with the interaction the Visitor has with her children, and the focus of the program on the family, not the parents or children in isolation.

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This mom has set the attainment of her GED as her primary long-term goal, and plans to take the exam in July of 2000. She said that the Visitor was extremely helpful in providing a phone number to the mom for signing up for a GED class. The mom is very excited to complete her GED and looks forward to finding employment thereafter.

In the short-term, this family is focused on behavior modification. One daughter is on medication for behavioral problems. The mom has learned from the Visitor how to handle the children when they have temper tantrums or don't listen to instructions. The mom has learned to use an egg timer for time-out periods so that the children can listen for themselves when their time is up instead of asking mom every minute.

The mom is impressed with the Visitor's attitude. The Visitor talks to the mom parent to parent, instead of with a condescending tone and attitude. This mom thinks the world of Even Start and is trying to convince friends in similar circumstances to give it a try.

The second family includes a mother and her two children, one school-aged and one infant. This mother also has a child whose grandmother has been awarded legal custody. This mom was not as talkative about the program, but was very willing to meet with us. She heard about Even Start from a friend, and also saw information about it at a parenting workshop she was required to attend on the recommendation of her DSS caseworker.

This mom feels that the Visitor is her friend, and always has a positive attitude. The Visitor always brings activities for the mom to do with her kids, and also activities for the mom to do on her own. This mom indicated that she does not always follow through on the activities left for her by the Visitor.

In the long-term, the mom is working on her GED. While she would like to finish it this year, she does not seem to know how long it will take. She would like to ultimately attend college and take computer courses. In the short term she is working on behavior modification with her older child.

## Process Assessment

This component of the evaluation focuses on the program's implementation, its evolution over time, and how well it does in meeting and remaining true to its stated goals and objectives. Information gathered in this process is shared with the Family Focus staff so they may consider the information as part of a continuous improvement process. A process evaluation can help managers assess the start-up of a new program, and assess both ongoing program strengths and problem areas that develop over time. In a program like Even Start, program managers are interested in whether they are getting the right type of referrals, whether schools understand what is expected of them, whether the Family Visitors are comfortable with their role, and other indicators. CGR conducted surveys and interviews to elicit this information.

### *Family Visitor Surveys*

The four Family Visitors, and the Administrative Assistant who is integrally involved with the program, each filled out a survey regarding their perceptions of Even Start. Overall, the Visitors and Administrative staff appear quite pleased with the start-up phase of the project, and with their roles as Family Visitors (Table 1). Four of the five respondents felt that the start-up process was very well organized or well organized, while one respondent did not answer the question. Similarly, one of the five indicated that the program is functioning extremely smoothly overall, and the remaining four indicated that it is functioning very smoothly. All five gave the value or impact of the program above average ratings, and all felt that many or most of the referred families match the Even Start criteria appropriately.

**Table 1: Family Visitor and Administrative Staff Perceptions of Even Start**

How well was start-up process organized?	
Not well organized	0
Fair organization	0
Somewhat organized	0
Well organized	2
Very well organized	2
No answer	1
How smoothly does program seem to be functioning overall?	
Not very smoothly	0
Less than somewhat smoothly	0
Somewhat smoothly	0
Very smoothly	4
Extremely smoothly	1
What is your perception of overall value/impact of program?	
No value or impact	0
Small amount of value or impact	0
Some value or impact	0
High Value or impact	3
Much value or impact	2
How well do the referred families match the Even Start program criteria?	
Very few match well	0
Some match well	0
About half match well	0
Many match well	3
Most match well	2

The four Family Visitors were also asked questions regarding their training sessions. Family Visitors feel that the individuals who present during training sessions have adequate knowledge and experience (Table 2). While all four Visitors feel that the training activities build on their individual knowledge and skills, one feels the training is only somewhat adequate to meet staff needs. Further, three of the four Visitors feel that the training only occurs in a somewhat timely fashion.

**Table 2: Family Visitor Perceptions of Training**

Do individuals who present during training have adequate knowledge and experience?	
No knowledge	0
Little knowledge	0
Average knowledge	0
More than average knowledge	1
Much knowledge	3
Do staff development training activities build on your knowledge and skills?	
Do not build on skills	0
Build a little bit	0
Build somewhat	0
Build a good amount	1
Build greatly	3
Do you feel staff development is adequate for your needs?	
Not adequate	0
Slightly adequate	0
Somewhat adequate	1
More than somewhat adequate	0
Very adequate	3
Do you feel that staff development is timely? (Occurs regularly, when you need it)	
Not at all timely	0
Slightly timely	0
Somewhat timely	3
Quite timely	0
Very timely	1

The timing and substance of the training sessions might be an area for further examination in dealing with the variety of parties involved with Even Start (Table 3). All four family visitors report occasional barriers or problems working with their assigned families. This is not surprising, considering that the families are low-income, and face numerous challenges on a daily basis. Two of the visitors reported occasional barriers or problems with school representatives, and two visitors reported occasional barriers with social service agency representatives. *Perhaps the visitors would benefit from training on strategies for dealing with barriers when they arise with families, schools, and service agencies.*



**Table 3: Family Visitor Perceptions of Barriers or Problems**

Do you experience barriers/problems in working with assigned families?	
No barriers or problems	0
Few barriers or problems	0
Occasional barriers or problems	4
Some barriers or problems	0
Frequent barriers or problems	0
Do you experience barriers/problems in working with school representatives?	
No barriers or problems	0
Few barriers or problems	2
Occasional barriers or problems	2
Some barriers or problems	0
Frequent barriers or problems	0
Do you experience barriers/problems in working with service agency reps.?	
No barriers or problems	0
Few barriers or problems	2
Occasional barriers or problems	2
Some barriers or problems	0
Frequent barriers or problems	0

## Interviews

CGR completed interviews with all four family visitors, a selected number of Advisory Board members, a number of Board of Directors members, and some referral persons.

### Family Visitors

We asked the Family Visitors about their perceptions of the startup process and whether the program is meeting its objectives. We also asked the Family Visitors about their specific roles and tasks, and how they perceive their impact on families. We tried to determine whether the Visitors experience any problems or barriers to performing their jobs, and whether they have any suggestions for changes to the program.

The Family Visitors seem to have a very solid and consistent sense of what the Even Start program is about, including its objectives and goals. They were pleased overall with the start-up process for the program. While one Visitor indicated that the process was a bit slow, one remarked that it went very fast and they were all very busy with it.

The Visitors feel well-trained, and enjoy the periodic ongoing training sessions. However, they did identify areas for future training, including infant and early child development, more on adult education and activities to teach literacy to parents, and more teleconferences on any variety of issues. While one Visitor felt that her workload overall was light, the remainder indicated that the growth of families has kept pace with their ability to monitor them.

Several barriers to services were described by the Visitors. Some families have an instant apprehension of the program, and mistrust of schools and strangers. Transportation is always a chronic problem in these rural areas. Scheduling appointments between visitors and families becomes difficult once the families are working. Late afternoon appointments become the most preferred time slot. A barrier the Visitors encounter is the single phone line in the Even Start office. However, with cell phones ordered, this problem should alleviate itself soon.

Preparation for home visits during this first year takes a substantial amount of time, which is to be expected. The Visitors spend about 1 ½ hours per visit in the client's homes, and an additional 1 to 1 ½ hours preparing for each visit. The Visitors try to work math skills and other issues into the focus on literacy for both the children and adults. The Visitors have faced a steep learning curve on preparing materials for children of different age levels and for adults. Prepared materials will help substantially with time constraints.

The Visitors described how their role can vary substantially from one day to the next. Sometimes they function more as a friend, other days as an educator or a moderator in a chaotic household. One visitor saw herself providing accountability to the parents, i.e., while the parent might have worked for years on a GED, the regular visits from a Family Visitor encourage the parents to make regular progress.

Visitors may take on different roles because each family expects or needs something different. In many cases the families who enter Even Start were once children who received little nurturing, love, or respect. As a result, as adults they face a variety of self-esteem

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and other problems, and unintentionally pass similar characteristics on to their own children. Nonetheless, many parents are very focused on their children's education, and are more reluctant to work on their own education. The mix of personal challenges and personal and family goals leads to a variety of needs from week to week and from family to family.

The families who are looking for an education focus from Even Start are the families that are most likely to buy-in to the program. For example, those moms already involved in BOCES adult education are more interested and active. In addition, older moms are much more eager to participate in Even Start. The younger moms must be approached much more carefully—they tend to be more reluctant and defensive.

Referrals come from a variety of sources, including teachers, counselors, DSS, self-referral, and others. Visitors perceive that some referral persons may not be referring the neediest families, but others are. One Visitor perceived that the Help Desk located at Noyes Memorial Hospital, which serves as an intake point for referrals, is not used as often as it could be. One Visitor felt that school districts may have a hard time understanding what Even Start is really all about. The Visitors in general were very positive about the referral persons. They refer appropriate families and inform the families that they will receive a phone call from Even Start, and what the program will be about.

Self-referred families tend to be less needy than the others. These families also may be likely to transition out of Even Start more quickly in the future. One self-referred parent told the Visitor that Even Start staff were the first people who ever really listened to her. Once a family has met its goals, Even Start will phase out by first reducing the Family Visitor visits to twice a month, then once a month, then not at all. However, this procedure is flexible and will likely develop over time as families begin to meet their goals.

The Visitors perceive the schools to be actively involved with Even Start. While the schools initially agreed to provide desk space for Family Visitors, the Visitors do not mind that these desks are not yet arranged. For now the Visitors appear to enjoy

their interaction at the Even Start office as they learn from one another and brainstorm ideas for particular situations.

Visitors dislike the Index of Need used immediately following referral for three reasons. First, it focuses on needs instead of strengths, which may start families on the wrong foot. Second, it seems to let a number of families fall just under the eligibility guidelines. Third, the index does not capture the special challenges faced by teen moms. *The Visitors wish an alternative tool were available, but at the same time they acknowledge that the Index serves its purpose for the time being*<sup>1</sup>

One Family Visitor indicated that she hears many complaints from her families regarding DSS, but overall the Visitors reported that they have no personal conflicts with DSS caseworkers. One Visitor stated that she recognizes that the caseworkers have an expertise that she does not have.

### **Suggestions:**

- Continue with revisions of Index of Need.
- Develop additional ideas for approaching families initially.
- Ensure that schools and referral persons fully understand Even Start. Consider reporting back to the referral persons on the number of families referred for each referral person and the number of referred families admitted to Even Start so that referral persons can see where they fall.
- Once the laptops arrive, Visitors might consider using them to train parents in basic computer skills.

Advisory Board

Six Advisory Board members were interviewed; some also serve as referral persons. The Advisory Board members all have connections with schools or social services targeted towards children in some way.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the time of these interviews, the Index of Need has undergone review and is currently in the editing process.

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Advisory Board members saw the start-up process move quite smoothly and with a lot of excitement. Several described the cooperation from the schools and other participants. Advisory Board members are quite pleased with both the Program Coordinator and with the Family Visitors' performance.

All new Even Start programs, including the Livingston County Even Start, are assigned a "mentor" Even Start program in a nearby county for advice and suggestions. One member of the Advisory Board pointed out that Livingston County Even Start's mentor program was very important and useful to the program Coordinator during this start-up phase.

Board members feel that the program is meeting an important need in the community. Board members are pleased that Even Start goes directly into the homes to work with parents and their children together. It is important to teach parents that learning goes on at home. There are a number of single parents in these towns who need help with family and life skills. Parents who have face-to-face contact are more likely to succeed and are more open to learning. In addition, since Even Start is not part of the school system or DSS, parents are somewhat more receptive to them.

One member who is also an Even Start referral person and a school counselor pointed out that she is able to share information with the Family Visitor assigned to her district regarding particular children. They can then work together to put together the best approach for an individual child's needs. All referral persons we met with felt that they understood the criteria necessary to refer families to Even Start.

Board members feel that the Advisory Board meetings are used appropriately, although one member indicated that the schools should send more representatives. Several members indicated that the Board has a good cross-section of the community represented.

**Suggestions:**

- A potentially missed population is the 16 to 17 year old parents age group.

- The program needs to consider what will happen once it enrolls 60 families. One Advisory Board member is concerned that they will fill up quickly and then will not have the staff or dollars to expand.
- Perhaps consider adding parents to the Advisory Board.
- Encourage schools to send more representatives.

#### Board of Directors

Three members of the Board of Directors were interviewed. Again, comments were all positive and encouraging. The members all felt that Even Start fills an existing gap in services in the community.

One member indicated that while some schools seem to be very vested in the process, others are more skeptical. One member who is affiliated with a school district stated that as an educational institution, they see Even Start as helping them to prepare children for education. This person sees Even Start as one more resource for the school to use to get help to children and families who need it. This person indicated that he/she knows Even Start will be successful in this community. One school-related Board member pointed out that the Family Visitors may need training on home-schooling regulations, because many families who are home-schooling are not capable of doing so.<sup>2</sup>

One Board member pointed out that families who enroll in Even Start are not the type of families who are sophisticated at dealing with authorities in schools or other service organizations. The hope is that Even Start will help these families learn strategies to communicate with schools and other personnel. While Family Visitors exist to help families with communication and other skills, one Board member pointed out that Visitors should be careful not to become enablers. Change can be slow and difficult to see over time, but ultimately change only comes from the individual.

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<sup>2</sup> Staff subsequently attended an educational session on home-schooling regulations.

More than one person interviewed indicated a concern about the lack of referrals from Geneseo. That could be an area that requires special attention. One Board member suggested that the program may need to do more public relations work to gain acceptance in the communities and trust with local officials. Perhaps Geneseo is a community to focus on for such an effort.

Another population segment of concern is the Hispanic population and the need for a Spanish-speaking Family Visitor. While one Visitor who speaks Spanish translated all printed materials into Spanish, she is leaving the program and her replacement is not bilingual.

Finally, one Board member suggested that the Even Start coordinator may want to change the structure of the Board in the near future. Currently the Board does not have elected officers, and should perhaps consider doing so. To formalize the Board would encourage members to take more ownership of the Even Start program.

**Suggestions:**

- May need to change structure of the Board eventually. May need to elect officers, and encourage Board members to take more ownership.
- Consider doing more public relations work to gain more acceptance in the community and with local officials.
- Family Visitors should be careful not to become enablers for these families. Progress can be slow and difficult to identify.
- It is critical that the Even Start staff maintain a Spanish-speaking person who understands the culture as well as the language.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By all accounts, the Livingston County Family Focus Even Start program is off to a successful and positive start. The first year start-up process went extremely well, on-going training and other processes are running smoothly, and enrolled families appear to be satisfied with the services they receive from the program.

A thorough evaluation of the program included surveys, interviews, case studies, and data analysis. All components of the analysis proved positive overall and set the stage for a successful four-year run for Even Start.

While the program appears to be well-run and successful at reaching those in need, there are nonetheless areas for continuous improvement. In the spirit of continuous improvement and as a compilation of the diverse input we received from the evaluation process as well as our own observations, we offer the following recommendations in the areas of operational issues, Boards, communication, and Family Visitor issues.

### *Operational Issues*

**Recommendation:** Continue revision of the Index of Need tool. Consider a separate tool for teen parents, who are likely to face very different challenges.

**Recommendation:** Explore whether the 16 and 17 year old parent age group is being missed in the referral process.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that schools and referral persons fully understand Even Start's goals and objectives.

**Recommendation:** Report to referral persons the number of families referred from each source, and the number of referred families that are ultimately admitted.

**Recommendation:** Consider what will happen when the program reaches its 60 family capacity.



*Advisory Board and  
Board of Directors  
Issues*

**Recommendation:** Conduct more public relations work to gain more acceptance in the community and with local officials, particularly in the Geneseo school district which has sent no referrals.

**Recommendation:** It is critical that Even Start staff maintain a Spanish-speaking person, or maintain access to a bilingual person, who understands the Latino culture as well as the language.

**Recommendation:** Consider adding parents to the Advisory Board.

**Recommendation:** Encourage the schools to send more representatives to Advisory Board meetings on a more regular basis.

**Recommendation:** Evaluate the need to change the structure of the Board of Directors. It may be time to elect officers, and encourage the Directors to take more ownership of the program.

*Communication with  
Families*

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors should ensure that the families understand what it means to have specific, identified goals, and should encourage families to think about their goals more clearly.

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors should remind all families of the services available to them on a regular basis, and monitor family awareness of services more directly than is apparently occurring at this time.

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors should be sure to look for and recognize problems the families may experience in accessing services.

**Recommendation:** Visitors should consistently and persistently try to ascertain whether families are having trouble communicating with their children's school teachers.

*Family Visitor Issues*

**Recommendation:** Family Visitors must remain consistent in their attempts to communicate information to the families, and to elicit concerns from the families in order to find solutions to various problems.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that training occurs in a timely, regular manner, and that it is adequate for staff needs. Encourage staff to communicate their needs to the Coordinator.

**Recommendation:** Evaluate the types of barriers that exist with families, school representatives, and agency personnel, and identify approaches to overcome barriers in each case.

**Recommendation:** Encourage Family Visitors to voice the barriers they face in various settings. Encourage them to brainstorm solutions to barriers with each other and the Coordinator.

**Recommendation:** Develop new ideas for approaching families for the first time.

**Recommendation:** Visitors should be careful not to become enablers for their families. Progress may be slow, but must occur at each family's own pace.

**Recommendation:** Consider using recently purchased laptops to teach families basic computer skills.

## **APPENDIX A: LIVINGSTON COUNTY EVEN START FORMS**

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## APPENDIX B: SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
ESPIRS # \_\_\_\_\_

### Even Start Family Survey: Year One

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#### 1. Do you understand what the Even Start program is about?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Do not understand                      Understand somewhat                      Understand well

---

#### 2. Does your family participate regularly and enthusiastically in Even Start?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Does not participate                      Participates somewhat                      Participates regularly and enthusiastically

---

#### 3. Has your family identified specific goals?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Has not identified goals                      Has begun to identify goals                      Has identified specific goals

---

#### 4. Do you know what your goals are under the Even Start program?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Do not know goals                      Sort of know                      Know exactly

---

#### 5. Do you feel things have gotten worse for you, stayed the same, or gotten better since you started in Even Start?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Gotten worse                      Stayed the same                      Have gotten better

---

**6. Are you aware that there are services available to you in the community?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Unaware that services exist                      Know of some services                      Know of many services

---

**7. Do you know how to access services that exist in your community?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Do not know how to access services                      Know how to access some                      Know how to access many services

---

**8. How has your level of awareness of services changed since you started working with Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Less aware                      About the same level of awareness                      Much more aware of services

---

**9. Do you think Even Start has helped you understand how to access services available to you?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Has not helped                      Helped somewhat                      Helped greatly

---

**10. Are you less or more comfortable interacting with your child's teacher than you were when you started at Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Less comfortable                      About the same                      More comfortable

---

**11. Are you less or more involved in your children's schoolwork than when you started at Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Less involved                      About the same                      More involved

**THANK YOU!!!**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Family Visitors Survey: Perceptions of Program: Year One

### 1. How well was the start up process organized?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Not well organized                      Somewhat organized                      Very well organized

### 2. How smoothly does the program seem to be functioning overall now?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Not very smoothly                      Somewhat smoothly                      Runs extremely smoothly

### 3. What is your perception of the overall value or impact of the program?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 No value or impact                      Some value or impact                      Much value or impact

### 4. Do you experience barriers or problems in working with your assigned families?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 No barriers/problems                      Occasional barriers/problems                      Frequent barriers/problems

### 5. Do you experience barriers or problems in working with school representatives?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 No barriers/problems                      Occasional barriers/problems                      Frequent barriers/problems

### 6. Do you experience barriers or problems in working with service agency representatives?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 No barriers/problems                      Occasional barriers/problems                      Frequent barriers/problems

### 7. How well do the referred families match the Even Start program criteria?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 Very few match well                      About ½ match well                      Most match well

### 9. Do the individuals who present during training sessions have adequate knowledge and experience in content areas?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 No knowledge                      Average knowledge                      Much knowledge

**10. Do staff development training activities build on your knowledge and skills?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Do not build                      Build somewhat                      Build greatly

**11. Do you feel that staff development is adequate for your needs?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Not adequate                      Somewhat adequate                      Very adequate

**12. Do you feel that staff development is timely (i.e., occurs regularly, when you need it)?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Not at all timely                      Somewhat timely                      Very timely

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 ESPIRS # \_\_\_\_\_

## Family Visitors Survey: Perceptions of Family Progress: Year One

[Note: Family Visitors should fill out a separate survey for each family]

### 1. Does this family understand what the Even Start program is about?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Does not understand                      Understands somewhat                      Understands well

### 2. Does this family participate regularly and enthusiastically in Even Start?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Does not participate                      Participates somewhat                      Participates fully and enthusiastically

### 3. Has this family identified specific goals?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Has not identified goals                      Has begun to identify goals                      Has identified specific goals

### 4. Does the family know what its goals are under the Even Start program?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Does not know goals                      Sort of knows                      Knows exactly

### 5. Do you feel things have gotten worse for the family, stayed the same, or gotten better since the family started in Even Start?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Gotten worse                      Stayed the same                      Have gotten better

### 6. Is this family aware that there are services available to them in the community?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Unaware that services exist                      Know of some services                      Know of many services

### 7. Does this family know how to access services that exist in their community?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Do not know how to access                      Know how to access some                      Know how to access many services



---

**8. How has this family's level of awareness of services changed since it started working with Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Less aware                      About the same level of awareness                      Much more aware of services

**9. Do you think Even Start has helped this family understand how to access services available to them?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Has not helped                      Helped somewhat                      Helped greatly

**10. Is this family less or more comfortable interacting with their children's teachers than it was when it started in Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Less comfortable                      About the same                      More comfortable

**11. Is this family less or more involved in the children's schoolwork than it was when it started in Even Start?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
Less involved                      About the same                      More involved

## APPENDIX C: SURVEY RESULTS