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# Closing the achievement gap by ‘Listening to Babies’

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Representatives of agencies that work with young children in Pinellas County will gather Friday, March 1, at the University Student Center to learn groundbreaking techniques to engage infants and toddlers to promote brain development and early learning.

Called “Listening to Babies,” the free training will provide proven, practical advice for 125 administrators and frontline professionals from nationally recognized experts. It is sponsored by USF St. Petersburg and the [Concerned Organizations for Quality Education for Black Students \(COQEBS\)](#), with support from the [Tampa Bay Times Fund](#). It runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

A half-day of training on Saturday, March 2, will provide more intensive instruction for family home and child-care providers in Pinellas County, particularly those serving African-Americans in St. Petersburg.

“The goal of the first day is to have everyone there who serves infants and toddlers in Pinellas County to learn what it is that infants need in their first years,” said James McHale, Ph.D., chairman of the USFSP Psychology Department and director of the USFSP [Family Study Center](#). “Every child’s readiness to learn is shaped during the first two years of life. The principles addressed in the workshops are for all infants and toddlers, not just at-risk kids.”



**James McHale, Psychology Department chair**

The title, “Listening to Babies,” is based on research that suggests the best way to help babies gain the social and emotional readiness to learn is to listen and pick up the cues they send that many people, including professional caregivers, may be missing, said McHale, past president of the [Florida Association for Infant Mental Health](#).

“Nurturing a readiness to learn must begin during a child’s first three years of life,” McHale said. “That is when the social and emotional elements that are needed for a child to succeed in pre-

school and beyond – trust, empathy, compassion and capacity to regulate emotions – are laid in place,” McHale said.

The sessions come at a time of increased attention to early childhood education and growing recognition that brain development in the youngest babies affects their readiness for pre-school.

“This is another great example of the civic engagement that distinguishes USF St. Petersburg,” said Norine Noonan, Ph.D., USFSP vice chancellor for academic affairs. “We believe the research Dr. McHale and his team are conducting on early childhood development will improve our community and make a real difference in the lives of children.”

The principles taught during the two days of training have been the focus of St. Petersburg’s annual Baby Talk sessions for parents, organized by McHale and COQEBS the past three years.

COQEBS is a coalition of community organizations and individuals working to ensure that the Pinellas County School District fulfills its commitment to provide quality education for black students.

“Listening to Babies is an important event in the ongoing collaboration between USFSP, COQEBS, and other partners,” said COQEBS Chairman Ric Davis. “It is recognition that early intervention in the cognitive development of infants and toddlers, particularly in our African-American community, is a critical step in ensuring that our children are school -ready.”

Among the agencies expected to participate at the March 1 session are the Pinellas County Health Department, [Early Steps at All Children’s Hospital](#), the [Early Learning Coalition](#), the Pinellas County Licensing Board and [Eckerd Community Alternatives](#).

[Get here for more information about the training](#) or the Family Study Center at USF St. Petersburg or call Liz Jack at (727) 515-5891 or email [emjack@usfsp.edu](mailto:emjack@usfsp.edu).

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