Department of Children & Youth

PARENT & YOUTH AMBASSADORS

Parent & Youth Ambassadors (PYAs) provide a single, in-person resource that will allow families to have their questions answered and access the support needed quickly. PYAs all have lived experience in social systems and will respond to inquiries (phone, chat, in person) by providing assistance for concrete supports, service referrals, and benefit navigation.

Each PYA represents a different service delivery area (SDA) in the state, with DCY aiming to grow the program over the next year in order for each SDA to have their own dedicated PYA.



Resource & Referral Agencies by SDA:

YWCA, Toledo	SDA 1-Defiance, Fulton, Henry, Lucas, Ottawa, Paulding, Williams, Wood
CCRC Inc.	SDA 2-Erie, Huron, Lorain, Sandusky, Seneca
Starting Point Inc.	SDA 3-Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga Lake
ECRC	SDA 4-Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull
COAD	SDA 5-Ashland, Carroll, Columbiana, Coshocton, Harrison, Holmes, Jefferson, Knox, Tuscarawas, Wayne
4C for Children	SDA 6–Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Hamilton, Warren
YWCA, Lima	SDA 7–Allen, Auglaize, Hancock, Hardin, Mercer, Putnam, Van Wert, Wyandot
4C for Children	SDA 8–Champaign, Clark, Darke, Fayette, Greene, Logan, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, Shelby
Action 4 Children	SDA 9–Delaware, Fairfield, Franklin, Licking, Pickaway, Madison, Union
COAD	SDA 10–Athens, Belmont, Guernsey, Hocking, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Washington
COAD	SDA 11–Adams, Brown, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Meigs, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Vinton
YWCA, Mansfield	SDA 12–Crawford, Marion, Morrow, Richland

Contact: To reach a DCY Parent& Youth ambassador, call 844-234-KIDS (5437) or email Ambassadors@childrenandyouth.ohio.gov

Website: Parent and Youth Ambassadors | Department of Children and Youth

Department of Children & Youth

FOSTER FORWARD

What Foster Parents Need:

Voices and Priorities to Improve Retention and Care

The Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY) has a long-term goal of reducing the rate of children entering foster care to 2 per 1,000 children or lower by June 2027 by strengthening and stabilizing families. At the same time, as part of Ohio's A Home for Every Child commitment, DCY has a short-term goal to increase licensed foster homes so children who cannot safely remain at home have appropriate placement options.

In the spring of 2026, DCY conducted listening sessions in 12 Ohio counties, with 186 foster parents and caregivers in attendance.

This issue brief summarizes what parents and caregivers shared about their needs, concerns, and priorities as foster parents.

Questions for Foster Parents

What motivated you to become a foster parent, and has that motivation changed over time?

What experiences have made fostering rewarding enough for you to continue?

What challenges have you experienced while fostering that made you consider stopping?

What additional support (either for you or youth placed in your home) would help you continue fostering long-term?

What changes to the foster care system would most improve foster parent retention?

What types of training or resources have been the most helpful in supporting you as a foster parent?

Key Motivations to *Become* a Foster Parent

- **Family Planning:** Wanting to grow or start a family, including taking in siblings so they could stay together.
- **Previous Exposure to Foster Care:** Through friends, family, personal experience, or community events involving foster families.
- **Impact:** Wanting to make a positive impact and/or feeling like they had the resources to do so.

Key Motivations to *Continue* as a Foster Parent

- **Witnessing Developmental Progress:** Seeing a child grow, achieve academic success.
- **Forming Relationships and Connections:** With foster children, biological families, or other foster families.
- **Positive System Experience:** Supportive casework, helpful agency interactions, and access to needed resources.
- **Impact:** Making a positive impact on the world.

Key *Challenges* Faced by Foster Parents

Behavioral Health

Attendees described experiencing challenges with children's **behavior and emotional regulation**, both trauma-related and not, and noted that some children **showed changes in behavior or emotional regulation** following family visitations.

Systemic Issues

Individuals described **communication and coordination challenges** with counties, private agencies, caseworkers, and other service providers; **limited training and support**; placement or reunification delays; and system inconsistencies.

Fairness & Safety Concerns

Foster parents noted safety concerns raised during investigations and described navigating **allegations** involving foster children or biological families, often **without adequate support**. They emphasized the need for reports to be handled with **care and credibility**.

Care & Financial Resources

Foster parents expressed that existing **financial resources** and supports **did not fully meet the range of needs** involved in placement. Many emphasized the need for **more accessible healthcare, child care, and respite care**.

> *"We are bringing trauma children into a structured home with strangers… More trauma. Sometimes it's hard balancing out time with other children in the house because of behaviors of the children in care."*
>
> — Current Ohio Foster Parent

> *"The stipends could be more, for sure, as the prices have increased and the cost of living has increased as well. Child care is extremely expensive, so the need for additional support is considerable."*
>
> — Current Ohio Foster Parent

CALL TO ACTION

What State and Local Government Can Do

Support-Based Improvements

- **Training:** Offer more individualized training for foster parents, tailored to specific situations or needs.
- **Support Groups:** Increase opportunities for foster parent community connection and peer support.
- **Autonomy:** Explore opportunities to support foster parents' involvement in daily and long-term decision-making within existing policy guidelines.
- **Transportation/Care:** Offer transportation and child care for training workshops.
- **Respite Care:** Expand access to reliable respite options and improve clarity around availability and processes.

Operational-Based Improvements

- **Policies:** Update visitation and reunification policies.
- **System Consistency:** Increase consistency in regulations, training, and expectations statewide.
- **Resources:** Provide greater resources to help foster parents navigate the foster care system (centralized 'Resource Hub').
- **Communication:** Strengthen coordination and information-sharing between agencies and foster parents.
- **Prioritize Caseworker Retention:** Strengthen supports for caseworkers, including workload relief and professional development opportunities.

Department of Children & Youth

What Caregivers Need Around Kindergarten Readiness



DCY's Long-Term Goals

Support Children & Youth
Help more children thrive in safe, healthy environments to reach their first birthday and beyond.

Empower Families
Empower families with needed resources and supports before, during, and after a need.

Uplift Communities
Invest in community resources to enable support along the continuum of ages, stages, and services to help children and youth succeed.

Outcome Area: Increase Kindergarten Readiness
Increase the **percent of children demonstrating readiness** on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment from 36.6% to **48.0%**

What does it mean to be ready for kindergarten?

Children are considered ready for kindergarten when they are **prepared to fully participate in school**. Children will be able to get the most out of kindergarten when they…

- **Demonstrate self-control**
  - Share, take turns, and play well with others
  - Keep their hands to themselves
- **Cooperate with adults**
  - Follow directions
  - Communicate their needs effectively
- **Demonstrate self-help skills**
  - Put on their own coat
  - Use the restroom on their own
- **Use classroom tools and toys efficiently**
  - Can hold and use a pencil and scissors
  - Can build with blocks
- **Express self-awareness**
  - Know their first and last name
  - Name the letters in their first name
  - Write their first name
- **Show an interest in books**

But these skills are **NOT REQUIRED** to enter kindergarten!

In Ohio a child's eligibility for kindergarten entry is based **ONLY** on their **AGE** and **LOCATION**

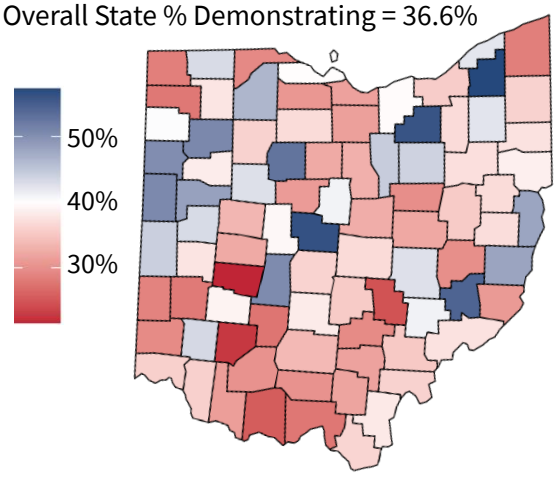
What is the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA)?

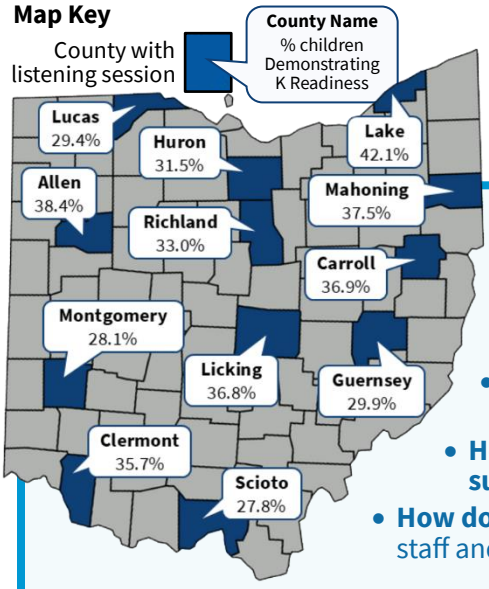
The KRA is a tool used by kindergarten teachers statewide to learn about where each child is in terms of their skills, abilities, and knowledge within the first few weeks of school. It has 27 items that cover language & literacy, math, social & emotional skills, and physical well-being & development.

Teachers gather most of the information for a child's KRA through observing them during their normal classroom routine; there is no sit-down paper test!

KRA results are reported as (from lowest to highest levels) Emerging, Approaching, or Demonstrating Readiness. This gives both teachers and families information about how to best support a child's continued development. The KRA is NOT used to rank or compare children or to identify disabilities or gifted children.

% of Children Demonstrating Kindergarten Readiness, Fall 2024
Overall State % Demonstrating = 36.6%





In Fall 2025, the Departments of Children & Youth and Education & Workforce held listening sessions in twelve Ohio counties to learn more about what parents and other caregivers say they need to help their children be ready for kindergarten.

Common questions about K readiness

- **How can my child be supported in developing social-emotional skills**, such as managing emotions, paying attention, following directions, and interacting with peers?
- **What is expected of children when they enter kindergarten?** What skills or behaviors should they have, and how can families help prepare them?
- **How do I know whether my child's developmental needs require additional support**, and how do I access those services?
- **How do schools support children with IEPs or 504 plans**, and will there be enough staff and follow-through to meet children's needs once they enter kindergarten?
- **How will practical barriers affect my child's readiness and participation**, including transportation and bus safety, access to after-school care, and the cost of supplies or uniforms?
- **How do I navigate enrollment, registration, and screening processes**, especially when information is spread across systems or difficult to find?

Key needs identified across listening sessions

INFORMATION

Clear, early, and accessible information about kindergarten readiness and KRA provided through trusted and familiar channels.

GUIDANCE

Explanation of expectations beyond academics, including social-emotional development and daily routines.

SUPPORT

Help accessing and navigating enrollment, registration, transportation, after-school care, and cost burdens.

ACCESS

Expanded availability of resources for children with developmental differences or special needs.

Opportunities to connect with other families.

What can _____ do?

Local Communities

- **Host regular, welcoming gatherings** where families can learn and connect.
- **Share kindergarten readiness information** through trusted local channels such as libraries, preschools, community centers, and events.
- **Provide clear guidance** on enrollment timelines, screenings, and where families can go for help in their area.
- **Support parents** in understanding social-emotional development and daily routines that support readiness.
- **Create opportunities for families to connect** with services supporting developmental, behavioral, or special needs.
- **Help address practical barriers** by connecting families to transportation supports, after-school options, and supply resources.

State & Local Government

- **Provide clear, consistent, plain-language guidance** on K readiness aligned with the KRA.
- **Ensure readiness information is shared** early and through multiple access points outside enrollment.
- **Improve coordination across early childhood** programs, schools, and agencies to reduce fragmentation.
- **Support capacity for children with special needs**, including access to evaluations, services, and paraprofessional staffing.
- **Strengthen communication** between schools and families, especially around expectations, safety, and available supports.
- **Address system-level barriers** such as transportation, after-school access, and affordability that affect readiness.
- **Support outreach strategies** that meet families where they are and increase visibility of resources.

Parent and Youth Ambassadors (PYAs)

October 29, 2026

Melissa Palmer, DCY Project Manager
Brooke Price, COAD PYA
Kim Rosa, Starting Point PYA
Hunter Teske, 4C PYA

Department of Children & Youth

MIKE DEWINE
GOVERNOR OF OHIO

Ohio THE HEART OF IT ALL™

DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS!

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

What's your why?



AGENDA

- Parent and Youth Ambassador Overview
- The Power of Relationship
- Family Connections
- Successes

Department of Children & Youth

DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS

DCY SHORT & LONG TERM GOALS

Ohio aims to be the best place in the country to start and raise a family and DCY has outlined the following goals to become a leading state (e.g., top 10 in the country across 3 program areas):

Goal #1:

Maternal & Infant Wellness

Reduce the Rate of Infant Mortality (per 1000)

BASELINE (CY22)	MOST RECENT DATA (released March 2026)	SHORT-TERM GOAL (SFY 2027)	LONG-TERM GOAL (SFY 2029)
7.1	6.4* preliminary	6.0	4.4

Goal #2:

Early Care & Education

Increase the Percentage of Children Demonstrating Readiness on the KRA

BASELINE (Autumn 2022)	MOST RECENT DATA (released March 2026)	SHORT-TERM GOAL (SFY 2027)	LONG-TERM GOAL (SFY 2029)
35.4%	44.9%* preliminary	48%	60%

Goal #3:

Children Services, Kinship, Foster & Adoption

Reduce the Rate of Children Entering Foster Care (per 1000)

BASELINE (FFY22)	MOST RECENT DATA (released March 2026)	SHORT-TERM GOAL (SFY 2027)	LONG-TERM GOAL (SFY 2029)
3.3	3.52	2.0	2.0

PARENT AND YOUTH AMBASSADORS (PYAS)

- Direct response to what families said in Listening Sessions
- PYAs provide a resource that will allow families to have their questions answered and access the support needed at a local level.
- PYAs have lived experience in social systems and will respond to inquiries by assisting with concrete support, service referrals, and benefit navigation.
- PYAs offer localized support and connection in 12 Service Delivery Areas (SDA) statewide.

WHERE ARE PYA'S LOCATED?



Resource & Referral Agencies by SDA:

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YWCA, Mansfield	SDA 12-Crawford, Marion, Morrow, Richland

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- Responding to questions and needs from individuals and families
  - Requests from Mothers, Fathers, Kinship Caregivers, and Community Providers
  - Researching resources and supports for specific requests/needs
  - Community networking and resource gathering
  - Access to state resources/support
  - Following up with families to ensure needs are met
- Identify gaps and report back to DCY
- Intentional connection with fellow local peer supports
- Trauma-Informed Approach

LIVED EXPERIENCE MATTERS

Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence	Substance Use Disorder	Depression Self and Child(ren)	Loss of Child(ren)
Homelessness	Single Parent	Anxiety Self and Child(ren)	Bridges Program
IEP Navigation and 504 Plans	Foster Parent	ADHD Child(ren)	Developmental Disability Navigation
Post Partum Depression	Adoptive Parent	Eviction, Section 8, Public Housing	School System Navigation
WIC	Kinship Caregiver	Child Care Navigation	Home Health Care
SNAP Benefits, Food Pantries	Survivors of Sexual and Physical Abuse	Help Me Grow	CMH - Children with Medical Handicaps
Medicaid and Public Benefits	Child(ren) with Medical Care Needs	Early Intervention	Unemployment – Job Loss

PYA DATA AND COMMON REQUESTS

- **April 2024-September 2026 = 3663**
- **Most common requests:**
  - Housing (unsheltered/unhoused, eviction)
  - Financial Assistance (rent, utilities)
  - Food Insecurity
  - Child Care (special needs, affordability)
  - Kinship Supports
- **Partnership with Ohio 211**



THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP

- Shows families that they are heard and valued
    - Families come to us from all situations and backgrounds, each one with their own story and history.
- Help build and bring together communities
    - By working with families and community agencies we continue to build long term community supports and connections.
- Strengthen families
    - By listening to families, you can empower them to self-sufficiency especially when they feel like they have nowhere to turn.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES & BUILDING COMMUNITY: PARENT CAFÉS

- Build supportive parent connections
- Strengthen resilience and protective factors
- Share experiences in a safe, judgment-free space
- Reflect on parenting strengths and challenges
- Connect to community and resources
- Reduce isolation and feel more supported



PROVIDING ACCESS: VIRTUAL SUPPORT

- Based on community need(s)
- Sessions themed on a specific topic
- Examples of Virtual Café:
  - Sharing Struggles and Showing Support
  - Creating Our Own Village
  - Indoor Activities to Do With Your Children
  - Family Play and Parent Support Group
  - Millennial Parenting









FAMILY LISTENING SESSIONS

- **Fall 2024**: Infant Vitality
- **Spring 2025**: Infant Vitality and Community Connections
- **Fall 2025**: Kindergarten Readiness
- **Spring 2026**: Foster/Adoptive Parent Retention
- **Fall 2026:**
  A Home For Every Child:
  Fostering Future Success

PYA SUCCESSES










Parent & Youth Ambassadors
Department of Children & Youth
Parent and Youth Ambassadors
Need help finding resources for your family?


Department of Children & Youth



HOW TO CONTACT A PYA

- Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (CCR&R)
- DCY Website: Parent and Youth Ambassadors
- DCY Family and Customer Support Call Center: 844-234-KIDS (5437) *Option 5
- DCY Email Box: ambassadors@childrenandyouth.ohio.gov


QUESTIONS?

CONTACT INFORMATION

Melissa Palmer, DCY Project Manager, MSW, LISW-S

Melissa.Palmer@childrenandyouth.ohio.gov

B**rooke Price, Parent and Youth Ambassador, COAD 4 Kids**

Bprice@coadinc.org

Kim Rosa, Parent and Youth Ambassador, Starting Point

Kim.rosa@starting-point.org

Hunter Teske, Parent and Youth Ambassador, 4C for Children

hteske@4cforchildren.org



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