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STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD



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CONNECTICUT LAUNCHES NEW STATEWIDE TOOLS TO HELP PARENTS CHECK IN ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT, ACCESS EXPERT TIPS AND ANSWERS, AND SUPPORT HEALTHY EARLY DEVELOPMENT

WATERBURY, CT, October 21, 2021 – Office of Early Childhood Commissioner Beth Bye, Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, and Connecticut United Way President and CEO Lisa Tepper Bates today announced a new statewide initiative to support the state's youngest citizens: children from birth through age 5. The State of Connecticut, through the Office of Early Childhood, is offering Sparkler — a mobile app for parents and caregivers — to all parents with young children and to programs serving those families. Connecticut is the first state in the nation to offer families with children ages birth to 5 comprehensive mobile developmental screening, promotion, and linkage to supports. This initiative is made possible through funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) and the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER).

Children's brains grow rapidly in their earliest years, laying the foundation for the rest of life, with learning fueled by play and interactions between children and their parents and caregivers. COVID-19 interrupted life for most citizens, including the nearly 200,000 Connecticut children who are not yet old enough for kindergarten. Today, parents have questions and need support. The state is committed to answering those questions, providing ideas to spark learning, and offering connections to a network of supports to help parents and children thrive.

"Families have been through a lot," OEC Commissioner Beth Bye said. "This is the moment to help families connect about and get in tune with their child's development. Sparkler helps parents to check in on how their child is doing against key milestones and provides activities to spark their early learning. Supporting our youngest citizens is important for individual families and for our entire state. Given the challenges of COVID, connecting families to information and supports is incredibly important."

"COVID has proved to be an incredibly challenging time for the parents and children of our state," said Lt. Governor Susan Bysiewicz. "The Sparkler app will provide much needed support to families by helping them learn through play with their children, all while promoting their child's development and growth in an interactive way. I want to thank the Office of Early Childhood and partners for providing this wonderful resource to Connecticut residents."

"COVID disrupted the natural ability for children to play in their usual environments. Play powers early child and brain development, and developmental screening gives children early access to proven interventions that can help them thrive," DPH Commissioner Dr. Manisha Juthani said. "It's exciting that our state is the first to offer parents of young children comprehensive mobile developmental screening, promotion, and linkage to supports. With this type of novel intervention, we can help to get children reengaged."

Starting today, all Connecticut families with children from birth through kindergarten can access Sparkler for free to support their children’s early development. Connecticut families can download Sparkler from the [App Store](#) or [Google Play Store](#) in English or Spanish on smartphones or tablets and **register with the code CT** to access CT content and connect with local experts and services.

Sparkler helps parents:

- **Know:** Parents can access the mobile Ages & Stages Questionnaires® via Sparkler to understand their child’s development and celebrate their growth. Both the ASQ-3, which covers 5 domains — communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social — and the ASQ:SE-2, which covers social and emotional learning, are parent-friendly questionnaires available on Sparkler. These questionnaires help parents/caregivers of children 2 months through 5.5 years old understand what their children know and can do in the early years.
- **Play and Learn:** Access thousands of fun, developmentally appropriate off-screen activities developed by early childhood educators to help parents learn through play with their baby, toddler, or young child, as well as science-based tips for parents.
- **Connect:** Get tips and answers from Connecticut early childhood providers and care coordinators at 211 Child Development (part of the United Way of Connecticut). Sparkler allows Connecticut families to tap into a network of custom advice and support that can help families spark their children’s early learning. If parents’ answers to the ASQ indicate they might need support, 211 or families’ early childhood providers will reach out and help parents access evaluation or other support.

Officials gathered at the Greater Waterbury YMCA to make this announcement. Sparkler has been piloted in Connecticut communities, including Waterbury, where it allows families to access local support by entering local Sparkler access codes. It is being shared collaboratively via many channels including: Waterbury Bridge to Success; the local WIC office; the Family Resource Center; The Greater Waterbury YMCA; The Center for Early Childhood Education laboratory school at Naugatuck Valley Community College; and 17 public elementary schools that are part of the Waterbury public school system.

“We want to do everything we can to support parents and children so that the children of Waterbury are ready to succeed in school and life and eventually grow into engaged citizens. Sparkler is a wonderful tool to help Waterbury organizations supporting families work better, together to support our children and families,” said Waterbury Mayor Neil O’Leary.

Sparkler is a tool for parents and providers that is part of a network of supports that Connecticut's OEC and its partner agencies and nonprofit partners provide to young families, including Help Me Grow; Birth to Three; Home Visiting; Preschool Special Education; and Early Childhood Education programs.

“Connecticut has been a leader and innovator in early childhood for many decades” said Lisa Tepper Bates, president and CEO of United Way of Connecticut/211. “Since 1993, 211 Child Development has been helping parents and supporting their children by connecting them to needed services including Birth to Three and Help Me Grow. We are proud to build on this history of innovation and our partnership with the Office of Early Childhood through this new effort with Sparkler — providing all

Connecticut families faster and easier access to developmental screening and connections to services to support and promote their children’s healthy growth and development.”

“Connecticut has long recognized the importance of developmental screening with ASQ for its communities’ children and their families, and we’re excited to work with Connecticut and Sparkler Learning to help engage families, support development, and give all kids the best start in life,” said Melissa Behm, Executive Vice President of Brookes Publishing Co., the company that publishes the Ages & Stages Questionnaires.

Connecticut has been using the Ages & Stages Questionnaires® — which provide reliable, accurate developmental and social-emotional screening for children between birth and age 6 — since 1995. Sparkler is the first to offer ASQ on-the-go to families via a mobile application. The ASQ draws on parents’ expert knowledge about their own children, and was specifically designed to pinpoint developmental progress and catch delays in young children — paving the way for meaningful next steps in learning, intervention, or monitoring.

“The Connecticut State Department of Education supports this innovative effort because we know the importance of early identification and early intervention for our youngest learners,” Education Commissioner Charlene Russell-Tucker said. “When we are able to provide families with tools to support their child’s development we are helping children to thrive before and when they enter school. This will facilitate the building of a strong foundation for their educational journey and their lives.”

The CT State Department of Education has been partnering with OEC and other state agencies to share Sparkler with Local Education Agencies across the State. Starting this year, all CT school districts are offering Sparkler to families as part of Child Find. Some districts are also opting to integrate Sparkler more extensively into programs and services provided to young families.

“Empowering and lifting up families with the youngest children in our communities will result in positive outcomes for decades. We are appreciative of our partnerships with the Office of Early Childhood on this and many other initiatives. Through training offered to our Hartford Regional Office staff, we are now assisting parents to utilize the Sparkler app and gain access to support and services,” said CT Department of Children and Families Commissioner Vanessa Dorantes.

“We are thrilled to be working with the Office of Early Childhood and partners across the State of Connecticut to spark children’s early growth and development,” said Sparkler Executive Director Julia Levy. “Working together, we’re helping all Connecticut children get off to a strong start.”

How parents can sign up for Sparkler (as shown in this [video](#)):

1. Download the app from the [App Store](#) or [Google Play Store](#).
2. On the first step, enter the code **CT** to get connected with CT content and supports.
3. Create your account and a profile for your 0-5.5 year old child or children.
4. Get Started! You’ll see the first ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE as soon as you sign in. If you complete an ASQ, you’ll get results from expert care coordinators at 211 Child Development (or from your local providers if you link with them, too).

CT families can learn more about Sparkler at playsparkler.org/CT.

All Connecticut local providers serving young families (including child care centers; family child care providers; home visitors; family resource centers; and others) can also now access Sparkler’s dashboard

to engage directly with their families. If Connecticut educators, pediatricians, school readiness officials, or other providers want to connect with their families via Sparkler, they can reach out to Sparkler at support@playsparkler.org to get started.

Connecticut's Office of Early Childhood piloted Sparkler in targeted communities starting three years ago, and found that screening rates increased when developmental screening was available via mobile app. During focus groups, parents reported preferring developmental screening on their smartphones because it is more convenient, mobile, and provided quicker answers. More than three-quarters of parents who participated in a survey of pilot participants strongly agreed or agreed that "the Sparkler app benefits my family."

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About the CT Office of Early Childhood:

The Connecticut Office of Early Childhood advances a family-centered approach to support young children and families. Integrating early childhood programs formerly administered by five separate state agencies, the OEC serves children each year through child care, pre-K, home visiting, child and youth camp licensing, early intervention, and parenting supports. Through this integrated approach and collaboration with other state agencies, the OEC works to advance better coordinated, more cost-effective services that yield measurable results for Connecticut's children and families. To contact the Office of Early Childhood, please visit our website: www.ctoec.org