



**BUILDING A SYSTEM OF SUPPORT TO SPARK EARLY
LEARNING FOR CONNECTICUT'S CHILDREN
A YEAR OF PROGRESS
OCTOBER 2023**





SYNOPSIS

IT HAS BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE SPARKLER LAUNCHED STATEWIDE IN CONNECTICUT. THIS PROGRESS REPORT DRAWS ON DATA COLLECTED BY SPARKLER LEARNING AND 211 CHILD DEVELOPMENT, AS WELL AS OBSERVATIONS FROM THE TEAM AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS INVOLVED IN THE WORK. IT REVIEWS KEY FINDINGS FROM THE PAST YEAR AND CONCLUDES WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER PROGRESS.

Building A System of Support to Spark Early Learning for Connecticut's Children: A Year of Progress.

By Julia C. Levy, Sparkler Learning

October 24, 2023

Special thanks to our partners at 211 Child Development, the CT Office of Early Childhood, and many more across the State of Connecticut.



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1. INTRODUCTION & KEY FACTS

The State of Connecticut has a history of innovating in early childhood: in the 1990s, it was an early adopter of the Ages & Stages Questionnaires® and the birthplace of Help Me Grow, a system model for early childhood. In 2002, Connecticut launched a central telephone line where parents of young children could call to access screening, support, and referrals.

By 2021, the world had changed in many ways:

- **People accessed information in new ways:** More than 95% of Americans aged 18-49 now had smartphones; using smartphones and mobile apps became the primary way that people were accessing information and communicating. ([Pew: Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2021](#))
- **Research and policy on early childhood had evolved:** A Lancet literature review found that early childhood programs and policies had advanced “substantially” since 2020, and there was new neuroscientific evidence around early adversity and risks and the positive effects of nurturing care. ([Maureen M Black, PhD, et. al.: Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale 1, Lancet, 2017](#))
- **The global pandemic had increased families’ need for support:** There was early evidence that young children, their parents, and the systems built to serve them were facing unprecedented challenges. Referrals for early intervention were up in Connecticut and nationally, and evidence was emerging that the pandemic had been “disastrous” for young children. ([Emily Tate Sullivan, EdSurge, 2021](#))

It was, once again, time for Connecticut to innovate.

In order to adapt to the times and meet families’ urgent need, the CT Office of Early Childhood Commissioner Beth Bye, Lieutenant Governor Susan Bysiewicz, and Connecticut United Way President and CEO Lisa Tepper Bates joined with state and local officials in October 2021 to announce a new statewide initiative to support the State’s youngest citizens and their families. The State of Connecticut, through the Office of Early Childhood, began offering Sparkler — a mobile app for parents and caregivers — to all families with children from birth through age 5. It also began offering Sparkler’s powerful web-based dashboard tool to all State programs serving young families.

Connecticut became the first state in the nation to offer families with children ages birth to 5 comprehensive mobile developmental screening, promotion, and connections.



In the past two years, Sparkler has rapidly taken hold throughout the State, becoming the primary way families are accessing screening, promotion, and support in early childhood.

This progress report looks at how Sparkler has helped the State support and engage programs and families across the State. Here are some of the key findings from the past year (Oct. 1, 2022 - Sept. 30, 2023):

- **The Sparkler Connecticut community of families has grown by 70% in the past year.** 7,232 new adults and 8,475 new children registered for Sparkler CT from October 2022 through September 2023. As of this week, there are more than 21,000 Connecticut children whose families are using Sparkler.
- **Sparkler families live in 157 of Connecticut's 169 municipalities.** According to Sparkler analysis of ZIP code data shared by families at registration, Sparkler users now live in more than 90% of Connecticut's municipalities and about 7% of eligible children are now using the app with their families. Sparkler is working hand-in-hand with more than 740 local programs across the State of Connecticut in more than 100 different communities to provide local support and engagement to families with young children. Sparkler has trained more than 1,700 individual educators and administrators to use Sparkler to support and engage with the families they serve.
- **The vast majority — 94.5% — of new children whose families signed up for screening centrally in Connecticut came through Sparkler's mobile app rather than through requests for paper or web-based screenings.** This represents an enormous shift in how Connecticut families are accessing and completing developmental screening. Families are overwhelmingly opting for mobile screening when they have a choice.



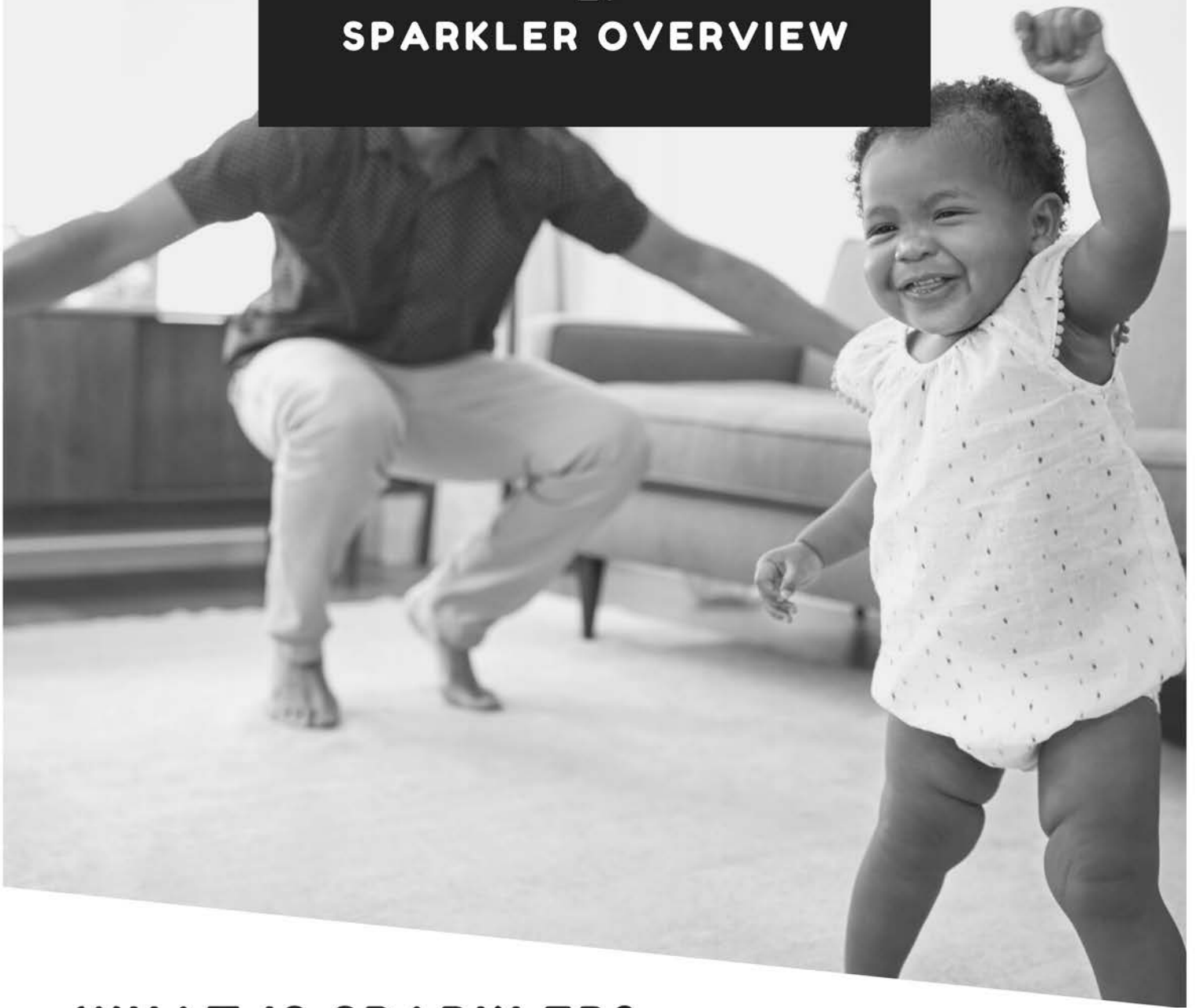


- **Sparkler has helped Connecticut to increase developmental screening by offering the mobile Ages & Stages Questionnaires® (ASQs), which is available to families on Sparkler’s mobile app.** Connecticut families completed 7,993 ASQ-3s and 5,448 ASQ:SE-2s using Sparkler from Oct. 1, 2022 to Sept. 30, 2023. In the year that ended Sept. 30, 2023, more than 80% of centrally tracked screenings happened on Sparkler’s mobile apps, rather than on paper or on the web.
- **Among those who complete an ASQ on Sparkler, 69% complete more than one, a pattern that has remained constant over the past two years.** That is, on Sparkler, the percentage of families who completed 2+ screenings was actually higher than the percentage of families who completed only one screening — which is vitally important because repeat screening helps families to learn about their children’s development over time and to access support or early intervention if it is indicated.
- **All of the families who accessed screening also accessed support — and vital help for their children.** Of the families who completed developmental screenings using Sparkler, 56% were on track in all domains measured (communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving and personal-social), while 23% scored at “monitor” and 20% scored at “refer,” indicating that they might benefit from additional support or intervention.
- **Screening is just the beginning: Across the State, Sparkler promoted ongoing learning and healthy early development over the year.** Sparkler counted more than 202,000 app touches by Connecticut families related to play, parent tips, and coaching, with families completing more than 14,000 play-based learning activities using Sparkler.

With state and local partners, Sparkler has helped OEC to transform screening and support for families and early childhood programs in the last three years. There remains a lot of work ahead to ensure that the state responds to the record need and helps both families with young children and programs that are serving them. In the coming year, Sparkler aims to continue building local partnerships and collaborating with local partners; find new ways to use data to guide positive change; and continue to improve the technology in response to CT family and programs’ needs.

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2. SPARKLER OVERVIEW



WHAT IS SPARKLER? MOBILE. LOCAL. CONNECTED.

Sparkler is a tool built to empower parents and caregivers and help the programs and organizations serve families better, together. For families, Sparkler is a free mobile app – available for iOS and Android, smartphones and tablets, in English, Spanish, and Chinese.



SPARKLER'S APP HELPS PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

Know

Parents can access the mobile Ages & Stages Questionnaires® via Sparkler to understand their child's development and celebrate their growth. The ASQ has been offered in Connecticut since it was first published in 1995, but using Sparkler, families can now access it via their smartphones and tablets. The ASQ-3 covers five domains of development — communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem-solving, and personal-social — while the ASQ:SE-2 focuses on social and emotional learning. The questionnaires are parent-friendly tools that help parents/caregivers of children 2 months through 5.5 years old to understand what their children know and can do.

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Play, Learn, and Grow

Through Sparkler, families can tap into 2,000+ fun, developmentally appropriate off-screen activities developed by early childhood educators to help parents learn through play with their baby, toddler, or young child. Parents can also browse through science-based tips to help them understand and promote child development. Sparkler enables families to track what they accomplish to see their progress — and offers them support along the way in the form of useful push notifications with parenting support and activity ideas.

Connect

Sparkler allows Connecticut families to tap into a network of custom advice and support that can help them to spark their children's early learning. If parents' answers to the ASQ indicate they might need support, 211 Child Development Care Coordinators or families' early childhood providers will reach out and help parents access evaluation or other support.





Families can download Sparkler's mobile app for free from wherever they are onto any smartphone or tablet (iOS or Android) and access (in English, Spanish, or Chinese):

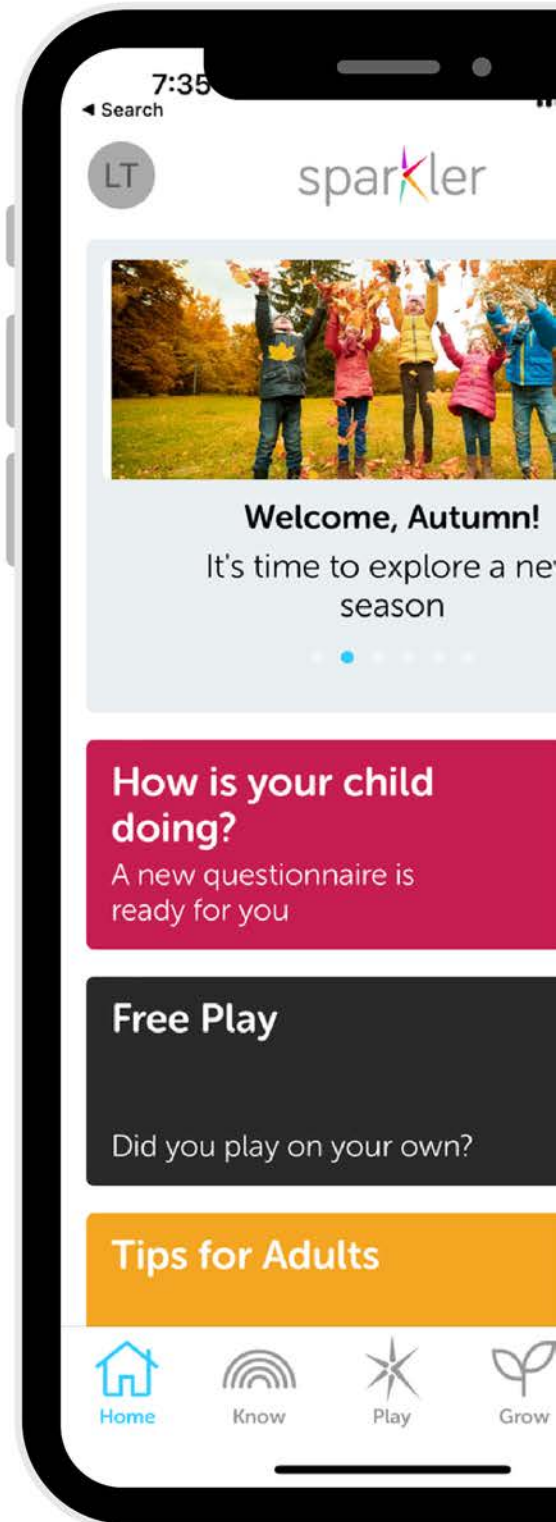
- The Ages & Stages Questionnaires to check on their child's development;
- Parenting tips to learn about child development;
- Play activity prompts to promote positive engagement with children and prompt ongoing healthy development, growing children's "heart," "minds," "words," and "bodies."
- Tracking tools to visualize progress and look back on accomplishments.
- Connection — either with their school/doctor/home visitor or other local provider or with care coordinators at 211 Child Development who can offer support and answers.

Sparkler is like a new door families can walk through to access all the early childhood support services that Connecticut offers.

Through Sparkler, families can access needed support. When a family signs up, they link with their local program/provider or with 211 Child Development's Care Coordinators using a central code. (Families can also use Sparkler to link with multiple programs supporting their family.) Then, as families use Sparkler, they can access tips within the app — and they can tap into all of the many services and resources available to families in the State. For example, depending on parents' concerns and children's needs, families might be referred to Birth to Three early intervention services, preschool special education, Children and Youth with Special Healthcare Needs (CYSHN), home visiting, family support and advocacy, or mental health services for an evaluation or other support. As children grow, new screenings and new play and learn content become available in the app.

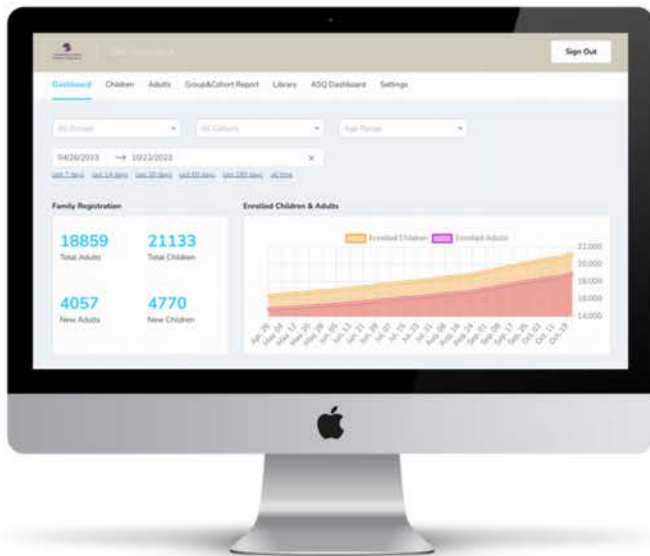
Over the past year, based on feedback from Connecticut families and programs, Sparkler has worked with OEC to add new features and functions to the app and roll out a friendlier user interface. Updates include:

- New deep linking to play activities, making it easier for programs to recommend activities to families;
- New search and filter tools to help families easily identify activities to play with children;
- New word search to identify parent tips;
- New automated messages, responsive to parents' needs;
- New ability for families to request screening reports; and
- Streamlined design of home screen, know, play, grow, and connect.





SPARKLER HELPS PROGRAMS/PROVIDERS:



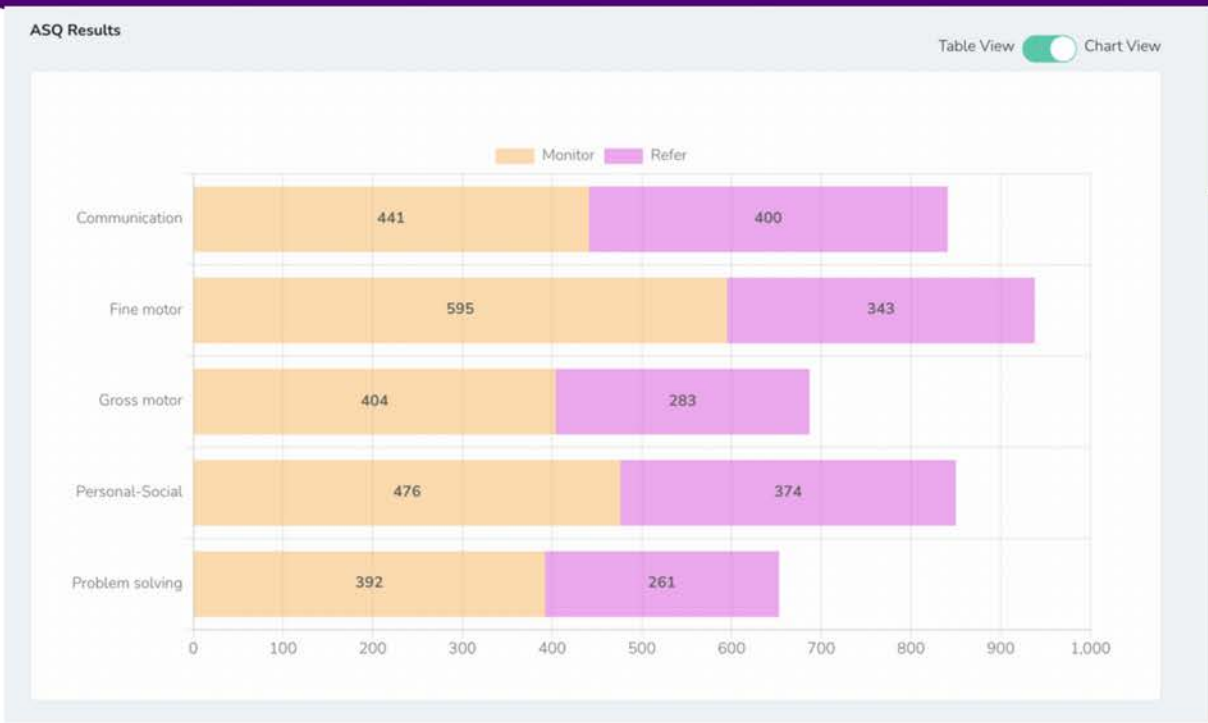
For programs, Sparkler is a web-based dashboard, which enables authorized educators, family resource centers, home visitors, health care providers, and other family-facing programs to monitor and engage with families and download data and reports in order to engage with and support families, spot trends, and target services and professional development.

Starting in October 2021, when the CT Office of Early Childhood began offering Sparkler for free to all Connecticut families with young children, it also began providing the dashboard to all programs serving children in that age range.

There are currently more than 740 individual schools, daycares, family resource centers, home visiting agencies, healthcare clinics, early intervention programs, and other providers in the State that are using Sparkler, and more than 1,700 professionals who have been trained and set up to use Sparkler to support and engage with families using Sparkler’s dashboard.

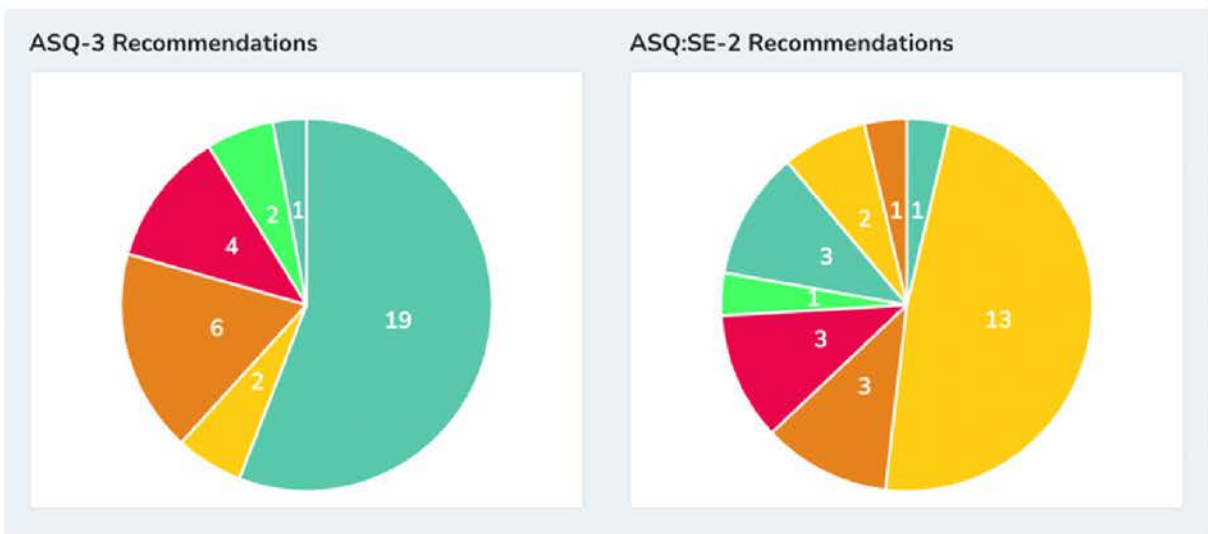
Using Sparkler’s dashboard, providers can access:

- Data downloads on developmental screening, completed play and browsing;
- Data visualizations to spot and analyze trends;
- Reports that can be sent electronically or printed and shared with families;
- Powerful two-way communication to engage families through content that is responsive to family need;
- Provider screenings, which can be completed on the Dashboard either alone or as a comparison with parent-completed screenings; and
- Sparkler’s library of play activities and parent tips, which can be sorted and shared with families — either as PDFs or push notifications.



Over the past year, Sparkler has worked with OEC, the United Way of Connecticut, and local partners across the State to roll out new Sparkler Dashboard features and functions, which make it easier for programs to access the information they need to identify trends and emerging needs and efficiently and effectively offer support to individual families. Updates include:

- New automated messages to providers, informing them immediately when a child in their program has completed screening;
- New filtering and date range filtering;
- A new Dashboard-based follow-up form, enabling providers to track their follow-up recommendations to families;
- New graphic visualizations and downloads of follow-up recommendations;
- New visualizations to show the screening areas that have the most scores of “refer” and “monitor,” sortable by date range or period; and
- Optimization to speed up the system for all providers with Dashboard access.

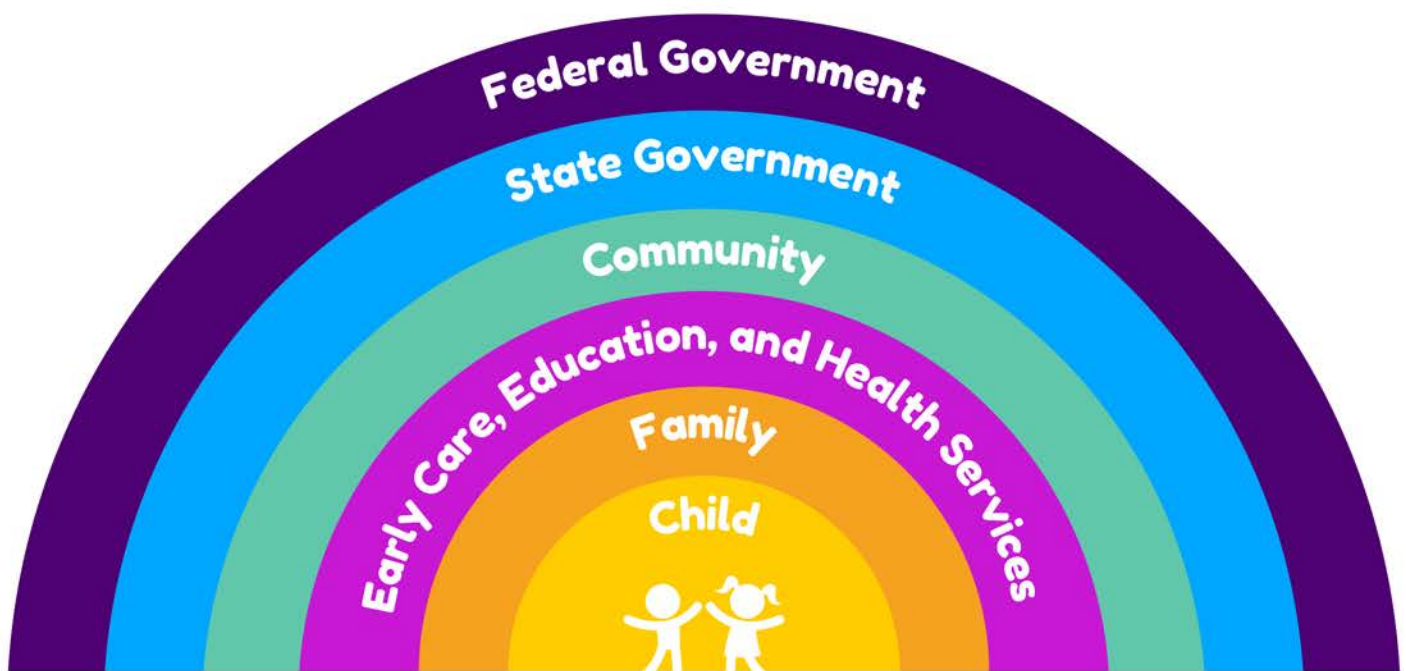


3. HISTORY AND CT SYSTEM SNAPSHOT

Connecticut leaders have been working to build a statewide system of early childhood support for more than twenty years. In 1997, Help Me Grow (originally called ChildServ), a model for a comprehensive system of early childhood, launched in Connecticut as a pilot in Hartford. In 2002, Help Me Grow CT became a statewide program, part of the Children’s Trust Fund. And a centralized access point for parents, 211 (now called 211 Child Development), was first established. Fast-forward to 2013: Governor Malloy signed Public Act 14-39, establishing the Office of Early Childhood to create a cohesive, high quality early childhood system. By 2016, the state’s Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems work led to the creation of its Help Me Grow CT Advisory Committee.

In July 2021, Governor Lamont signed Public Act No. 21-46, supporting the use of Sparkler in Connecticut. The new law says if a child is ineligible for participation in preschool programs under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), they should receive a “referral to register for a mobile application” designated by the Commissioner of Early Childhood for the purpose of continued screening for developmental and social and emotional delays.

When the State of Connecticut decided to launch Sparkler statewide, it wasn’t as a stand-alone tool — it was woven into the existing system — meeting families and programs where they are in an increasingly mobile, interconnected, digital world.



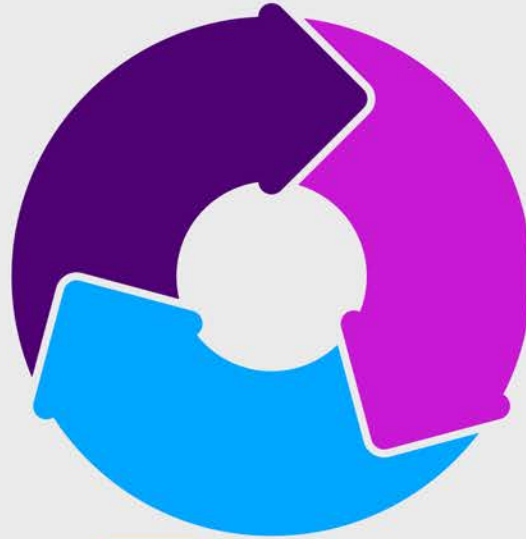
“Sparkler is using modern technology to help the State of Connecticut to realize the four core components of the Help Me Grow model — family and community outreach, child health provider outreach, the centralized access point, and data collection and analysis. I’d like to commend the CT Office of Early Childhood and Sparkler teams on innovating and collaborating to build early childhood systems that engage and support families and promote children's optimal health, development, and wellbeing.”

— Dr. Paul Dworkin, Executive Vice President for Community Child Health at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center and Founding Director of Help Me Grow



REFERRALS IF NEEDED/WANTED:

- Birth to Three
- Children & Youth with Special Health Care Needs
- Preschool Special Education
- Home Visiting
- Family Support & Advocacy
- Mental Health



sparkler

- Developmental Screening
- Play-based learning
- Coaching/connection
- Ongoing developmental monitoring



SUPPORT FROM 211 CARE COORDINATORS & LOCAL PROVIDERS

The new system allows families to use Sparkler to access an expanding network of available supports. It is a decentralized system in that families can access and connect with local programs, providers, and supports. But it provides the benefits of a centralized, coordinated system. For example, by linking with a local program on Sparkler, families can more efficiently access Birth to Three early intervention.

In this way, Sparkler has helped OEC and the State to reimagine its early childhood systems work (Help Me Grow) as a comprehensive, technology-enabled system for early childhood, built for a modern world. The effort has helped the state to modernize and reaffirm its commitment to all four core components of the Help Me Grow Model:



EXPANDING CENTRAL ACCESS POINT



WORKING WITH AND FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES



ENGAGING HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS – AND BUILDING BRIDGES



USING DATA TO DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES FOR KIDS



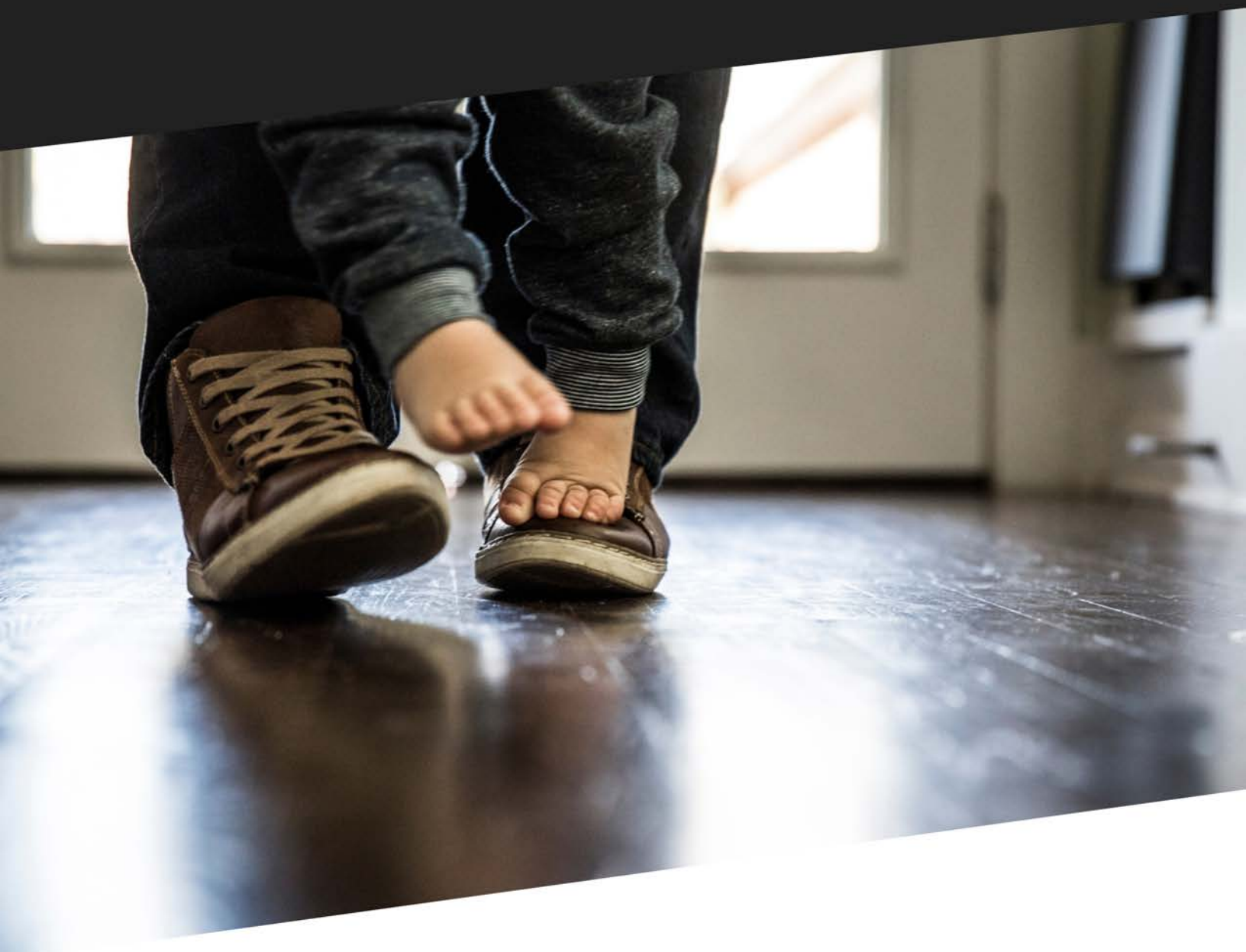
4. PROGRESS REPORT

LEARNING FROM 2 YEARS OF SPARKLER STATEWIDE

The CT Office of Early Childhood started piloting Sparkler in five community programs in 2018, and it launched statewide in October 2021 to all families with children from birth through age 5 and to all Connecticut-based programs serving families with children in that age range. As the second year of the statewide implementation drew to a close, we looked at the data from Sparkler and 211 Child Development and talked to families and providers across the state to learn about the impact of Sparkler in Connecticut. The following are the findings of that analysis.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?
HOW CAN WE IMPROVE?

**FINDING 1:
SPARKLER'S FOOTPRINT HAS
CONTINUED TO EXPAND
ACROSS CONNECTICUT**



**SPARKING EARLY LEARNING
IN 100+ COMMUNITIES**

100 COMMUNITIES AND COUNTING

After launching with targeted pilots in five select communities in 2018, Sparkler is now directly partnering with programs in more than 100 cities across the State, as well as all OEC-funded home visiting programs, and an increasing number of early intervention and healthcare providers.

Current Sparkler families live in 157 of Connecticut's 169 municipalities.

According to Sparkler analysis of ZIP code data voluntarily shared by families at registration, Sparkler users now live in more than 90% of Connecticut's municipalities (current CT Sparkler families with children 5 and under live in 157 of Connecticut's 169 municipalities).

This growth from small pilot to statewide implementation is the product of extensive local outreach and collaboration.

Sparkler is now supporting preschools, home visitors, family child care providers, health care providers, school readiness organizations, family resource centers, and community-based organizations. Birthing hospitals in the state of Connecticut are sharing Sparkler with new parents and Sparkler has been added to the Educating Practices Modules for Pediatricians in CT. It is also doing pilots with public libraries, WIC centers, Birth to Three providers, and the Department of Children and Families.

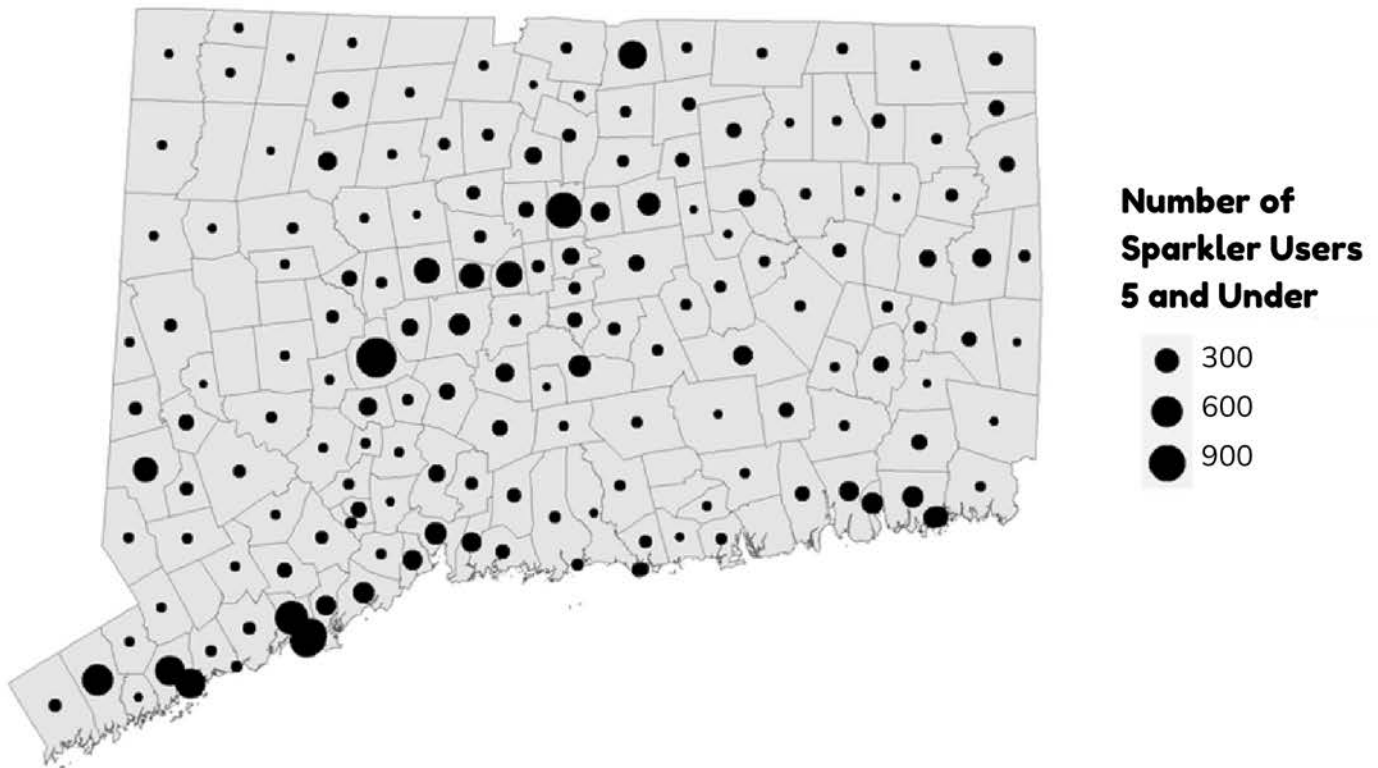
Each local organization that is partnering with Sparkler receives a Sparkler "access code" (or codes) to share with local families. When adults sign up using a local code, they are linking with their local program and consenting to share their family's information with that program. As families sign up using these local access codes, programs can monitor and engage with their families in the Sparkler dashboard.



CT SPARKLER COMMUNITIES

“A child’s brain grows rapidly in the first years of life. It’s making a million connections every second, powered by interactions between children and their grown-ups. That’s why it is so critical to give every child between the ages of 0 and 5 the best opportunity to harness the science of early child and brain development to make the most of their early years. Sparkler has opened the way to provide easy access for parents to better understand and support early learning and development, with the added benefit of connecting caregivers to resources, including United Way of Connecticut 211 Child Development Care Coordinators.”

— Lisa Tepper Bates, United Way of Connecticut President & CEO



Local leadership is fueling Sparkler’s growth.

Different communities are at different stages of the work. In some, the local government, education, health care, and non-profit sectors are working collaboratively to understand local use and trends and target services based on results. For example, in Waterbury, the Early Care & Education Collective Action Network looks quarterly at a range of data coming out of Sparkler and is taking action as a result.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Other communities are earlier in their work with Sparkler. Administrators have been trained and they have code/codes to share with families, but they are using Sparkler in individual programs, not as part of a community-wide effort built around collaboration, learning, and data-driven decision making.

In 2023, OEC enabled Sparkler CT to bring on a small team of Family & Community Engagement Specialists with a goal of more deeply engaging both providers and families across the State to promote healthy early childhood development and support for CT families with young children. Over their first five months, the Specialists — who have backgrounds in early childhood education, intervention, and community support/advocacy — have worked with more than three dozen different communities across the State to offer training and support with the goal of boosting developmental screening, play, and family engagement.



In 2023, Sparkler and OEC also rolled out the second year of the Sparkler CT Community Engagement Support Grants, a competitive program that helped fuel local implementation across the state.

The selection committee picked 17 community organizations and cities to receive grants totaling \$400,000 over six months.

Through this grant program, funded by federal Preschool Development Grant funds, OEC and Sparkler hope to deepen community learning, engagement, and innovation. The program is focused on parent leadership, local collaboration, universal access to developmental screening, equity, cross-sector collaboration, goal setting, and collaborative learning.

The 17 communities selected through the competitive process to receive the grants included: AHM Family Resource Center; City of Hartford; Collaborative for Colchester's Children; Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center; CT Family Support Network; Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington; Enfield KITE; KidsPlay Children's Museum; Milford; Northeast Early Childhood Council; Norwalk ACTS; Riverfront Children's Center; Read to Grow; Stamford Cradle to Career; Thames Valley Council for Community Action; United Way of Western CT (Danbury); and Waterbury Bridge to Success.

**FINDING 2:
LOCAL COMMUNITIES ARE
LEADING THE WAY IN
SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING
FAMILIES**



**STRENGTHENING LOCAL
CONNECTIONS IN CT**

ALL ABOUT LOCAL

Central support from OEC and collaboration with 211 Child Development (at the United Way of Connecticut) makes this work possible. Collaboration with local communities that are leading the way in supporting and engaging families across the State of Connecticut.



HOW IS YOUR CHILD DOING?
Check in and help spark healthy early growth and learning with
sparkler

KNOW
Understand your child's development by using the app to monitor the 18 milestones of the CDC's *Checklist for Communication & Symbolic Use of Language*.

PLAY
Get inspired to learn together through play.

GROW
Follow your child's progress.

CONNECT
Get tips and answers from 211 Child Development, Help Me Grow, and experts in early childhood development.

Sparkler is a FREE mobile app for CT families that helps parents support their children's growth from 0-5! Sparkler is safe and secure, and available in English and Spanish.

To download, use QR code or playsparkler.org/CT.
REGISTER WITH CODE:



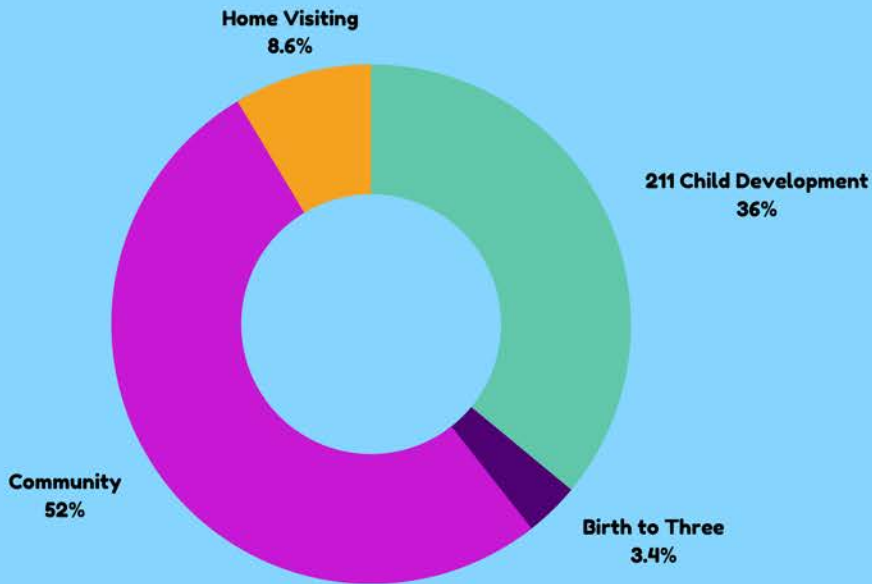
Connecticut Office of Early Childhood | 2-1-1 | Help Me Grow Connecticut

211 Child Development — a specialized unit of the United Way of Connecticut created in 1997 to be a central access point for families in the State — is a core partner with Sparkler. Through Sparkler's mobile app, families can connect directly with 211 Child Development care coordinators, who are there on the other end of "Connect" in Sparkler to coach and connect families with needed services. Care Coordinators are also trained to help programs locally as they work to support families.

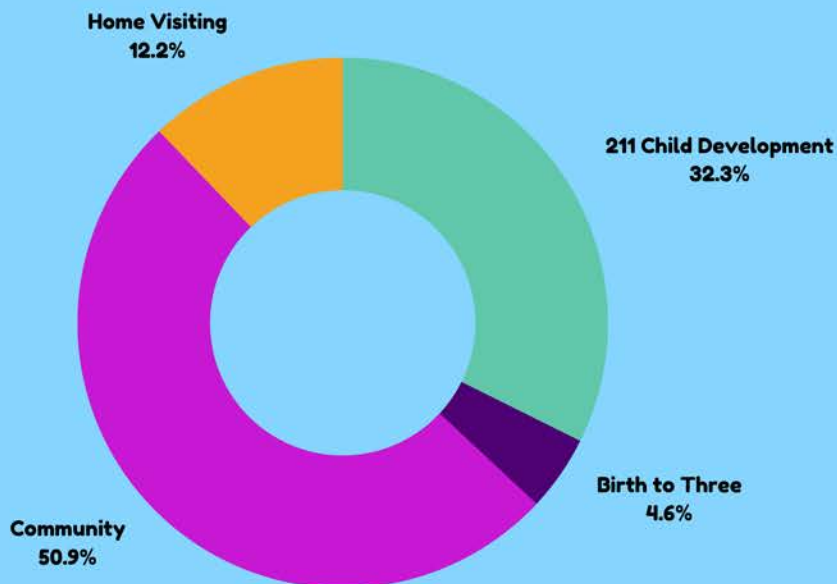
All families can download Sparkler from the App Store or Google Play Store and sign up with a central access code (CT) to connect and receive support from 211 Child Development care coordinators. This central support is essential in ensuring that children do not fall through the cracks. About a third of families have accessed this central support from 211.

211 serves as a vital, central connector and safety net. 211's presence enables local programs and providers to be effective Sparkler ambassadors, introducing Sparkler's app to families and using it as a tool to engage families locally, in their communities. More than half of the families are using Sparkler to connect with and receive support from their local providers.

Over Time ALL Sparkler Sign Ups By Program Type



Oct. 1, 2022 - Sept. 30, 2023 Sparkler Sign Ups By Program Type



Since Sparkler started in Connecticut, 52% of families using the app have opted to link up with their local community providers to receive direct support. In the past year (Oct. 1, 2022 to Sept. 30, 2023), the percent of new users to link with community programs using their codes was just over half (50.9%).

In the past year, Sparkler observed a jump in sign-ups as part of OEC-funded home visiting programs. Over all time, 8.6% of families who joined Sparkler linked with a home visitor; in the last year, 12.2% of families connected with their home visitor.

There was also an increase in families who were self-affiliating with Birth to Three. Birth to Three and CT School Districts offer Sparkler to families who are ineligible for — or who age out of — Birth to Three services. Some Birth to Three interventionists also use Sparkler with the families they serve to engage and suggest activities. In the last year, 4.6% of new CT families linked up with Birth to Three, compared to 3.4% over the history of Sparkler in Connecticut.

Of the more than 8,000 children whose parents signed up for Sparkler in the last year, 81.4% answered optional on-boarding questions about their behaviors, knowledge of early childhood, services received, and race/ethnicity. Of those, 48.8% said they found out about Sparkler from their school/program, and an additional 13.4% said they learned about Sparkler from a community organization or local library. Eight and a half percent said they found out about Sparkler through home visiting, 6.6% said they learned about it through Birth to Three, and 4% said they learned of Sparkler from their pediatrician.



FINDING 3: SPARKLER HAS BROADENED ACCESS, HELPING MORE FAMILIES GET SUPPORT

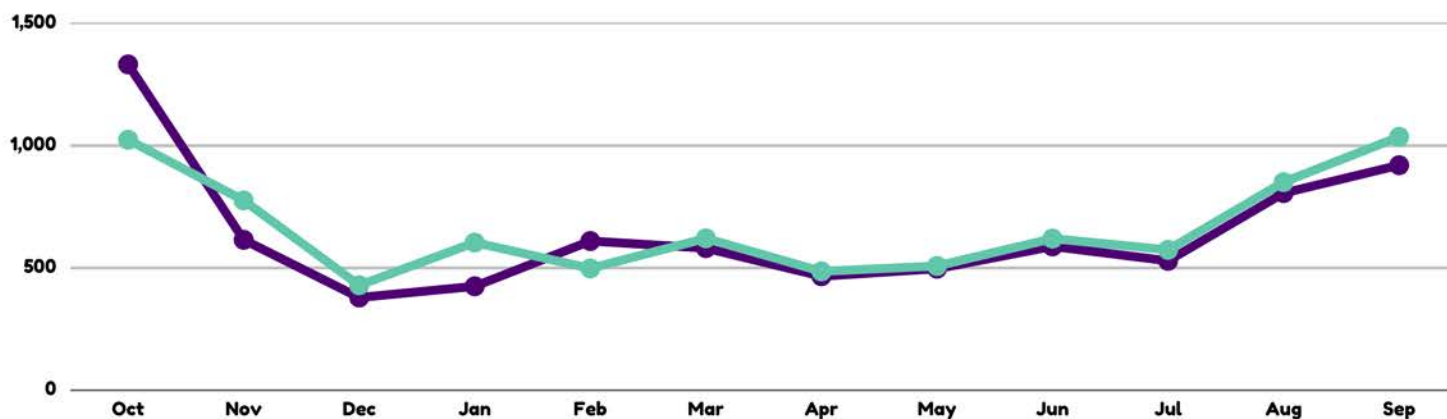
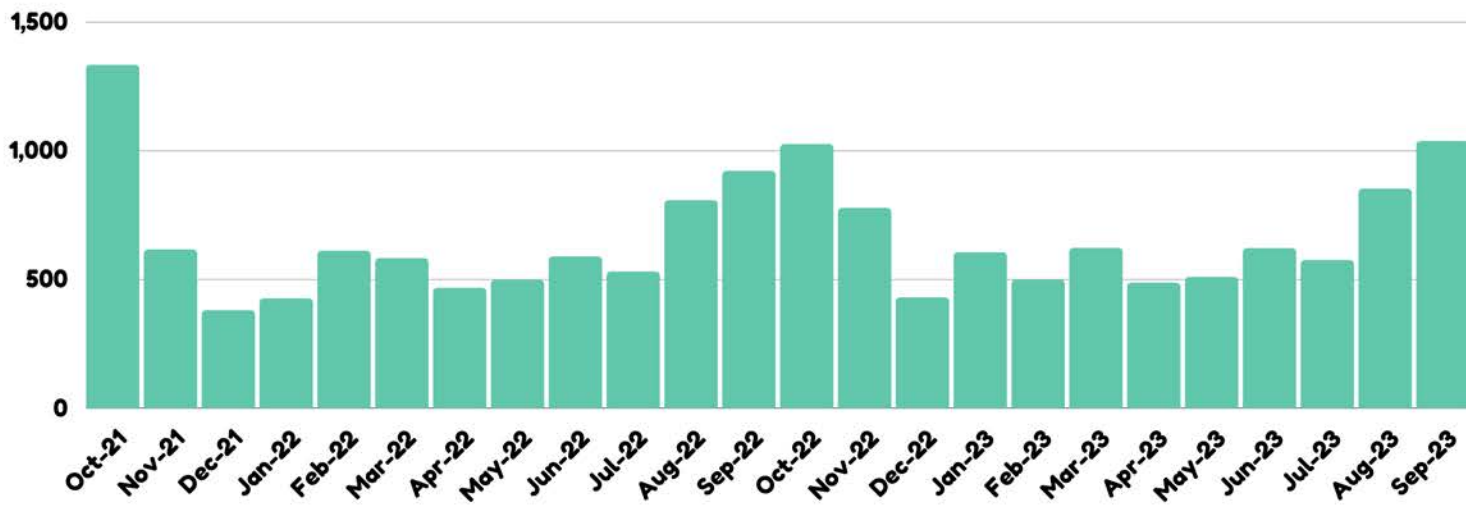
From October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023, 7,231 adults with 8,470 children signed up for Sparkler in Connecticut.

At the time of publication in October 2023, there are more than 21,000 children whose families are using Sparkler in the State of Connecticut.

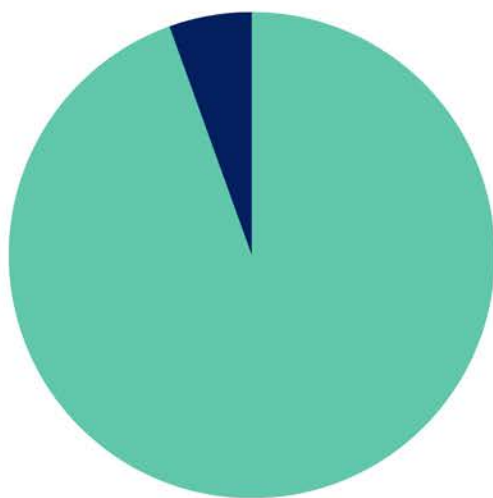
After an initial spike in sign ups the month of the statewide launch, growth has been steady — the team has welcomed hundreds of new families each month to the growing community of Sparkler users in the State of Connecticut.

There's been steady growth in new sign-ups to the Sparkler community.

While the largest number of monthly sign-ups for Sparkler CT was in October of 2021, when the launch announcement attracted media attention, we have seen steady growth. In recent months (since May 2023), sign-ups have been outpacing last year's Sparkler sign-ups, as shown in the two following graphs.



Paper and Online
5.5%



Mobile
94.5%

Connecticut families are showing their preference for mobile with their actions.

Over the past year, according to 211 Child Development data, 94.5% of new families signing up for screening signed up for Sparkler's mobile program, as opposed to 5.5% — combined — who signed up for the legacy screening options (paper and online). This has increased since the first year of statewide implementation when 92.6% of families who newly signed up for screening services signed up via Sparkler, compared to 7.4% who signed up to receive paper or online screening.

Parents always have the choice of whether to complete screening on paper, online, or on Sparkler's mobile application, but they are overwhelmingly choosing the mobile option when it is available to them, rapidly changing the way developmental screening has operated for decades in Connecticut.

DIVERSITY

Sparkler’s growing community is more diverse than the as a whole.

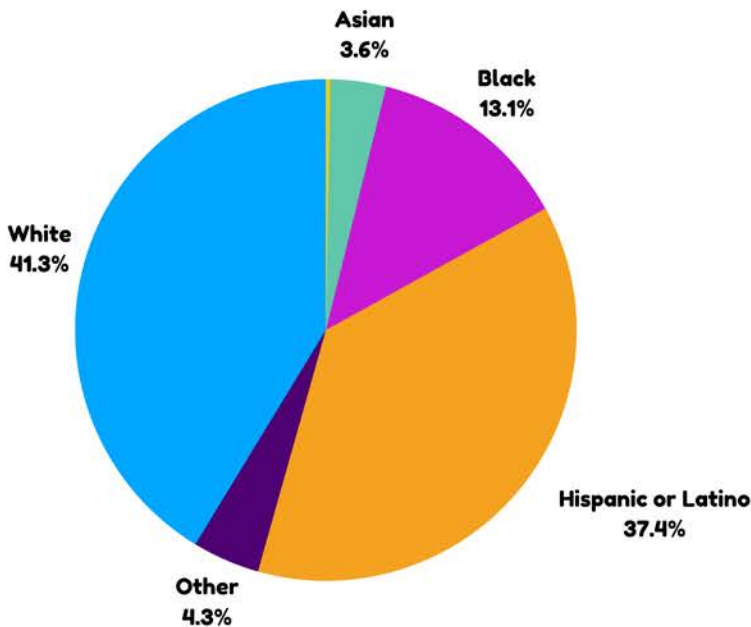
From Oct. 1 of 2022 through Sept. 30 of 2023, 41.3% of Sparkler families said their children are white at the time of registration, compared to 65.7% in the State as a whole. In Sparkler, 13.1% of parents reported their children are Black or African-American, compared to 10.4% in the State as a whole. More than a third of Sparkler parents reported that their children are Hispanic or Latino, compared to 18% in the state as a whole.

Sparkler’s user population in Connecticut has become somewhat more racially and ethnically diverse over time as the team has worked with more communities serving diverse families.

New Sparkler Children

5 and under

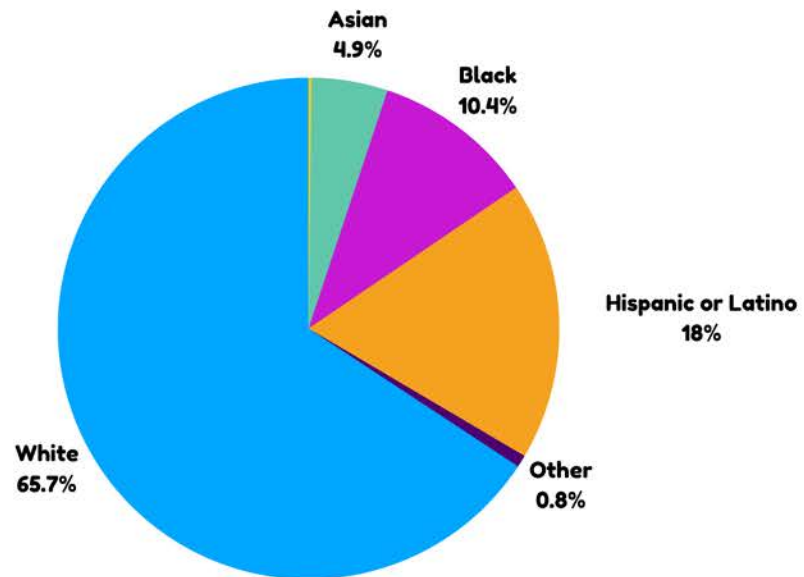
(self reported by parents at registration)



Connecticut Children

5 and under

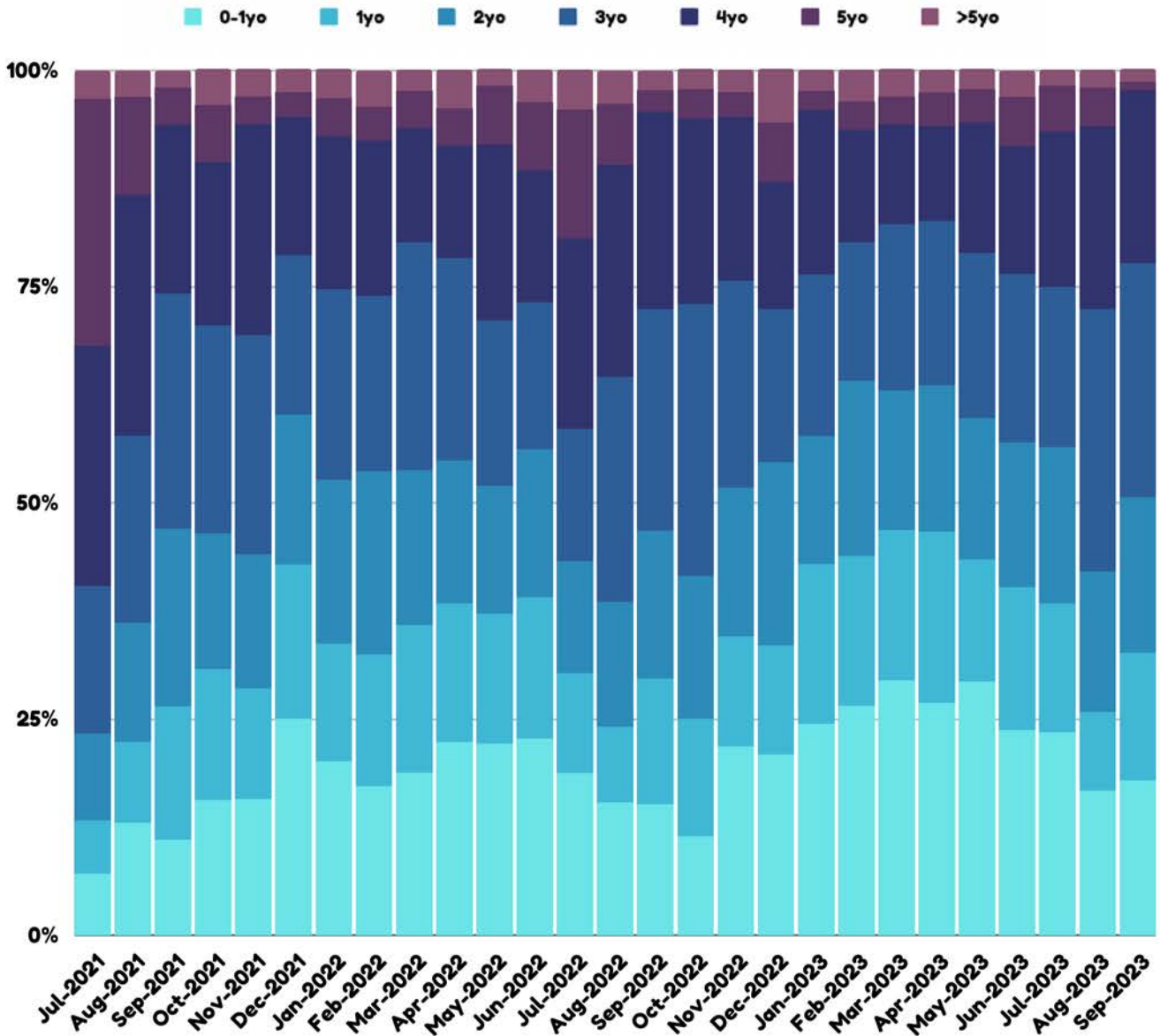
(Census Bureau)



Sparkler is serving a mix of children of different ages from across the State.

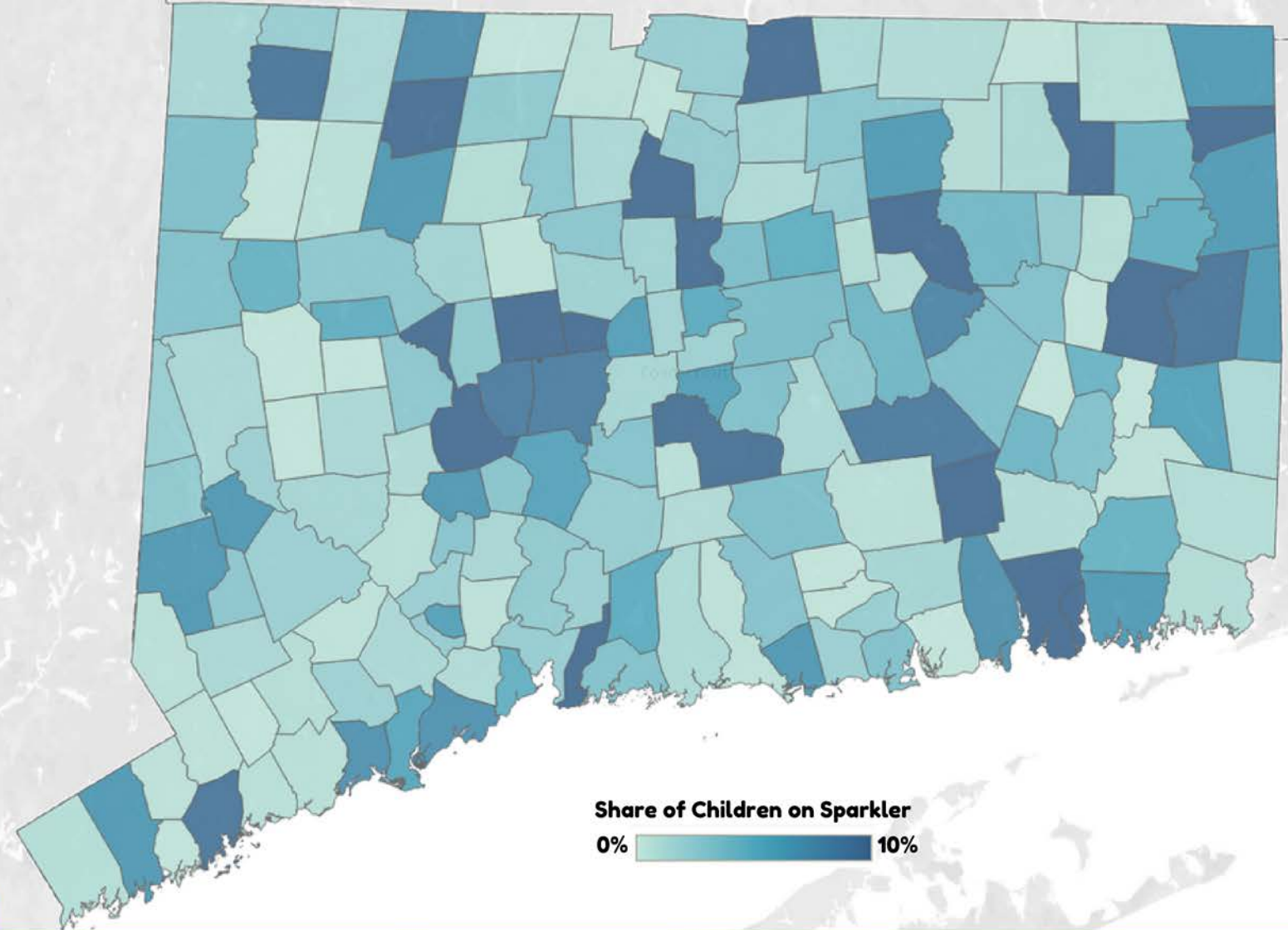
In addition to serving a racially and ethnically diverse group of families, Sparkler is also serving a group of families that is diverse both in terms of geography and age. Families with babies, toddlers, and rising kindergarteners are signing up to use Sparkler for the first time. There are relatively more preschool aged children whose families are signing up at the end of summer and the beginning of the school year than at other times of year. For example, in August and September this year, three- and four-year-old children made up half of the new children, as shown in the graph at the top of the following page.

User Ages by Sign Up Month



Sparkler has expanded across the State with a 60% year-over-year penetration growth rate for 2023. It has helped families, regardless of ZIP code, access ongoing screening, support, and referral.

As of October 2023, 7% of five-and-under population are using Sparkler. This is an increase since October 2022, when approximately 4.4% of the State's children had signed up for Sparkler. Today, Sparkler users live in 157 of Connecticut's 169 municipalities. Market penetration varies by municipality. For example, in Bridgeport, approximately 7% of the population is using Sparkler, compared to Waterbury, where 12.7% of the population is using Sparkler. In some smaller cities that have built strong local efforts to share Sparkler, market penetration is higher. For example, in Enfield, which has about 3,000 children 5 and under, more than 15% of the 5 and under population is using Sparkler, and in Plainville, where there are about 700 children 5 and under, 45.5% of the population is using Sparkler.



**FINDING 4:
SPARKLER HAS MOTIVATED
FAMILIES TO LEARN THROUGH
PLAY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN**



**GROWING HEARTS, MINDS, BODIES
& WORDS THROUGH PLAY**

Sparkler prompted play-based learning across Connecticut: Families completed about 14,000 plays in the last year on the Sparkler app using Sparkler's 2,000+ off-screen play learning activities and by tracking their own playful learning. Sparkler also recorded more than 202,000 app touches by Connecticut families related to play, parent tips, and coaching.



Some of the most played activities in the year include:

Activity	Ages	Skills Built
How Much Do I Love You?	Baby, Toddler, Little	Big Muscle, Perception
Cheek to Cheek	Baby, Toddler, Little	Empathy, Perception
Kiss Kiss	Baby	Counting & Number, Trust
Stop, Drop, and Roll	Baby	Big Muscle, Perception
Heart Yoga	Baby, Toddler, Little	Big Muscle, Self-Regulation
My Dream for YOU	Baby, Toddler, Little	Persistence, Trust
Fall Walk	Baby	Curiosity, Perception
Read Together	Baby, Toddler, Little	Sounds & Letters, Stories
Paint Your Pumpkin	Toddler, Little	Connection Making, Focus
Appreciate the Earth	Baby	Comprehension, Curiosity
Fall Songs	Baby	Empathy, Sounds & Letters
Pumpkin Spice Dough	Toddler, Little	Perception, Small Muscle
Tummy Time	Baby	Big Muscle, Focus, Persistence
The First Fire: A Cherokee Folktale	Baby, Toddler, Little	Comprehension, Stories
Stop and Smell	Baby, Toddler, Little	Expression, Perception
Let Me Count the Ways	Baby, Toddler, Little	Feelings, Trust
Playground Fun	Toddler, Little	Big Muscle, Perception
The Wheels on the Bus	Baby	Self-regulation, Sounds & Letters
I Spy Friends	Toddler, Littles	Empathy, Trust
Spa Day	Baby	Comprehension, Connection-making



LEARNING & PLAYING

As families play, they have the option of adding a photo to their play and rating the activity. This helps families keep track of their children’s learning and growth, and it is valuable information that enables Sparkler to improve play activities based on parents’ feedback.

Over time, parents said children enjoyed 96% of the activities completed. In the past year (October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023), we saw the same percent of children enjoying their completed play activities. Over time, parents said 69% of the activities were “just right” for their children, compared to 25% that were too easy, and 6% that were too hard. In the past year, parents said 72% of the play activities were “just right,” compared to 22% that were too easy and 6% that were too hard.



A camper completing the activity “T is for Turnip” from Camp Sparkler Week 4.

This feedback is information that Sparkler uses on a regular basis to adjust and improve the play experience within the app to encourage more and more fulfilling play-based learning.

To motivate families to engage with play, Sparkler created a virtual summer experience called “Once Upon A Time.” The 2023 virtual summer camp initiative was available to all families with children 0-5 years old across the State. The program included a lineup of play activities, all centered on a weekly folktale. Each story was told by a storyteller with roots in a different country/culture. Each week, Sparkler offered age-appropriate play packs coordinated with the stories and designed to help children explore across all Sparkler domains and skills.

More than 800 Connecticut families completed at least one Camp Sparkler activity by tapping “We Did It” with or without attaching a photo. This was more than 4.5 times the 179 CT families who completed at least one play activity during the inaugural year of Camp Sparkler in 2022.

FINDING 5: SPARKLER HAS HELPED FAMILIES ACCESS DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING AND GROW THEIR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DEVELOPMENT

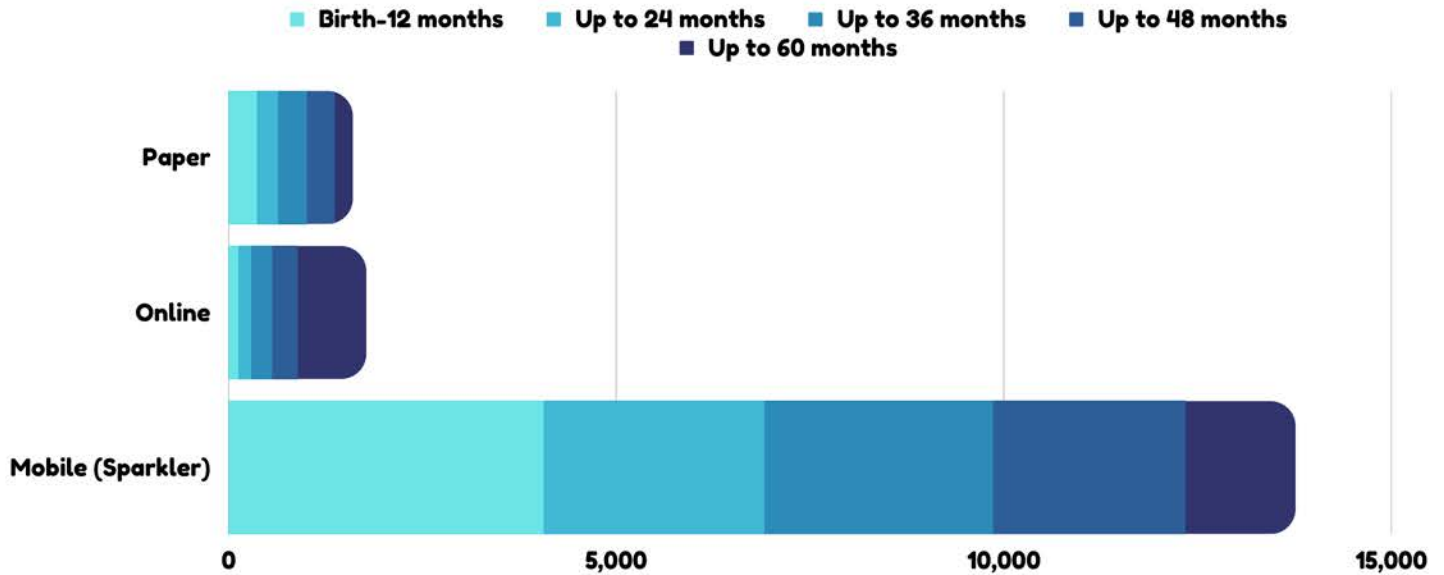


The State of Connecticut has used the Ages & Stages Questionnaires® (ASQs) since the developmental screening tool was first published by Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. in the 1990s. Now, in addition to inviting families to complete the ASQ by filling out printed forms or getting a unique link for each ASQ to complete it online, families can sign up one time for Sparkler’s mobile app and access all available ASQs (from 2 months through 5.5 years old) via mobile. **Families completed more than 8,000 ASQ-3s and 5,450 ASQ:SE-2s using Sparkler from Oct. 1, 2022 to Sept. 30, 2023.**

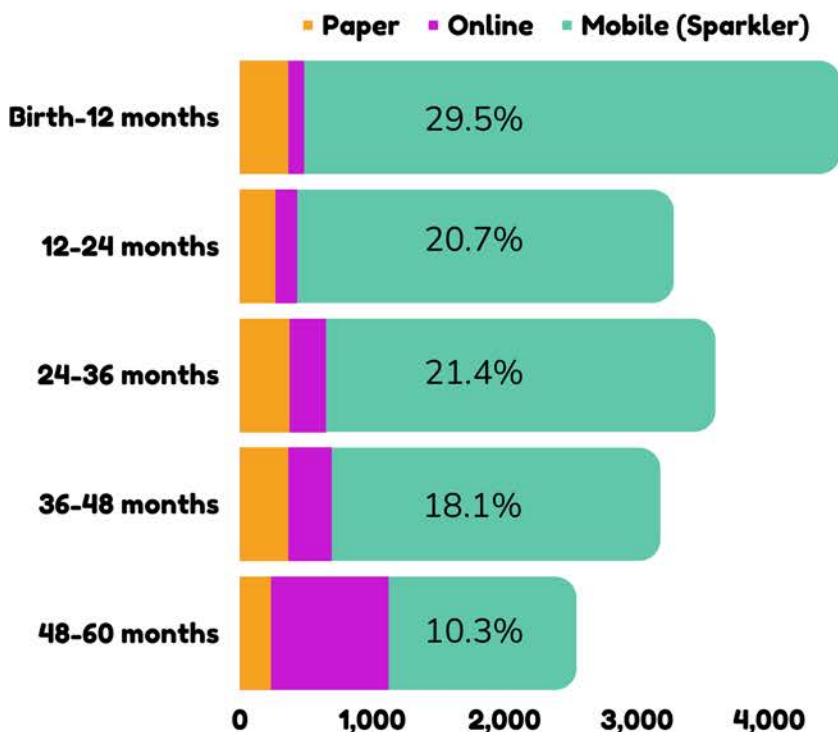
“Connecticut is to be commended for its ongoing recognition of the importance of developmental screening with the Ages & Stages Questionnaires for its communities’ children and their families. At Brookes, we are proud to collaborate with Sparkler Learning to support Connecticut and Sparkler Learning’s initiatives that are engaging families, supporting development, and helping to give all kids the best start in life.”

— Melissa Behm, Executive Vice President of Brookes Publishing Co.,
the company that publishes the Ages & Stages Questionnaires

Screenings Completed on Different Platforms, by Different Age Groups on 3 Platforms

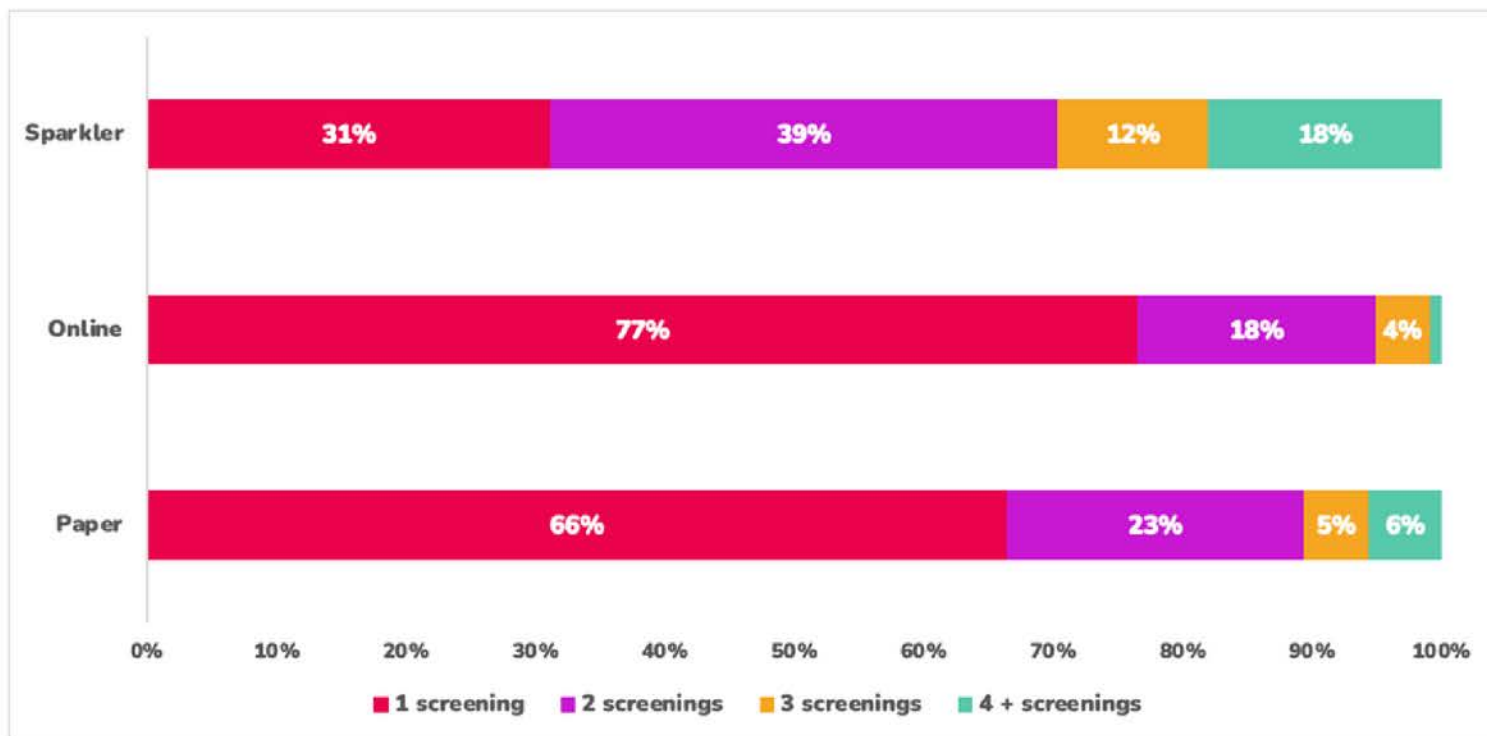


According to 211 Child Development, which centrally tracks ASQs completed across the State, 17,121 ASQs were completed in all in the year October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023, and more than 8 in 10 of them were completed via mobile rather than by traditional methods. From Oct. 1, 2021 - Sept. 30, 2022, 71.3% of screenings recorded by 211 were completed via Sparkler, which was up 9 percentage points to 80.3% in the year that ended on September 30, 2023. Families with younger children were more likely to complete mobile screening. According to Sparkler analysis, 40% of new Sparkler users completed one or more ASQ for their child last year. This year, 48% of new users completed one or more ASQs.



Almost 30% of Sparkler screenings completed in the year were completed by parents of children up to 12 months, compared to 22.6% of paper screenings for this age group and 6.8% of online screenings. This means families with younger children are even more likely to make use of mobile screening options. Conversely, parents of older children were relatively more likely to use the legacy platforms: 50% of online screenings completed in the year were completed for children in the oldest age group, compared to 14.5% from this group of the paper screenings and 10.3% of the mobile Sparkler screenings.

Percent of Families who Completed 1, 2, 3, and 4+ ASQs, On the Three Platforms



Among those who complete an ASQ on Sparkler, 69% complete *more than one*, a pattern that has remained constant over the past two years.

That is, through Sparkler, the percentage of families who completed 2+ screenings for a single child was actually higher than the percentage of families who completed only one screening per child. It appears that the mobile option helped families complete more repeat screenings, which is important in light of the fact that regular screening helps families understand their children’s development and makes early identification of delays or other needs more likely.

10/1/22 to 9/30/23	Paper	Online	Mobile (Sparkler)
1 screening	681	1,043	1,771
2 screenings	236	250	2,227
3 screenings	51	57	662
4+ screenings	58	13	1,024



“It makes life a lot easier, and it really gives parents autonomy to be their child’s first teacher, for parents to understand what developmental milestones are, how they work, where they can support their children — it really is an invaluable tool that helps to make parenting a lot easier.”

— **Chelsey Harris, mother of three and Director of Early Care & Education at Waterbury Bridge to Success**



20%

**with at least one
“refer” score**



23%

**with at least one
“monitor” score**



56%

**“on track”
in all domains**

Sparkler enables individual programs — and the State — to access regular snapshots of data, which can help to inform policy, services, and professional development. In the year ending on Sept. 30, 56% of ASQ-3s completed on Sparkler were on track in all five domains (communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem-solving, and personal social); 23% had at least one score of monitor; and 20% had at a score of refer in at least one domain. The biggest area of concern for parents completing questionnaires on Sparkler was fine motor in Year 2 (it as communication in the first year of statewide implementation). This information can help to spot emerging trends in the State and help it to target services, professional development, and more.

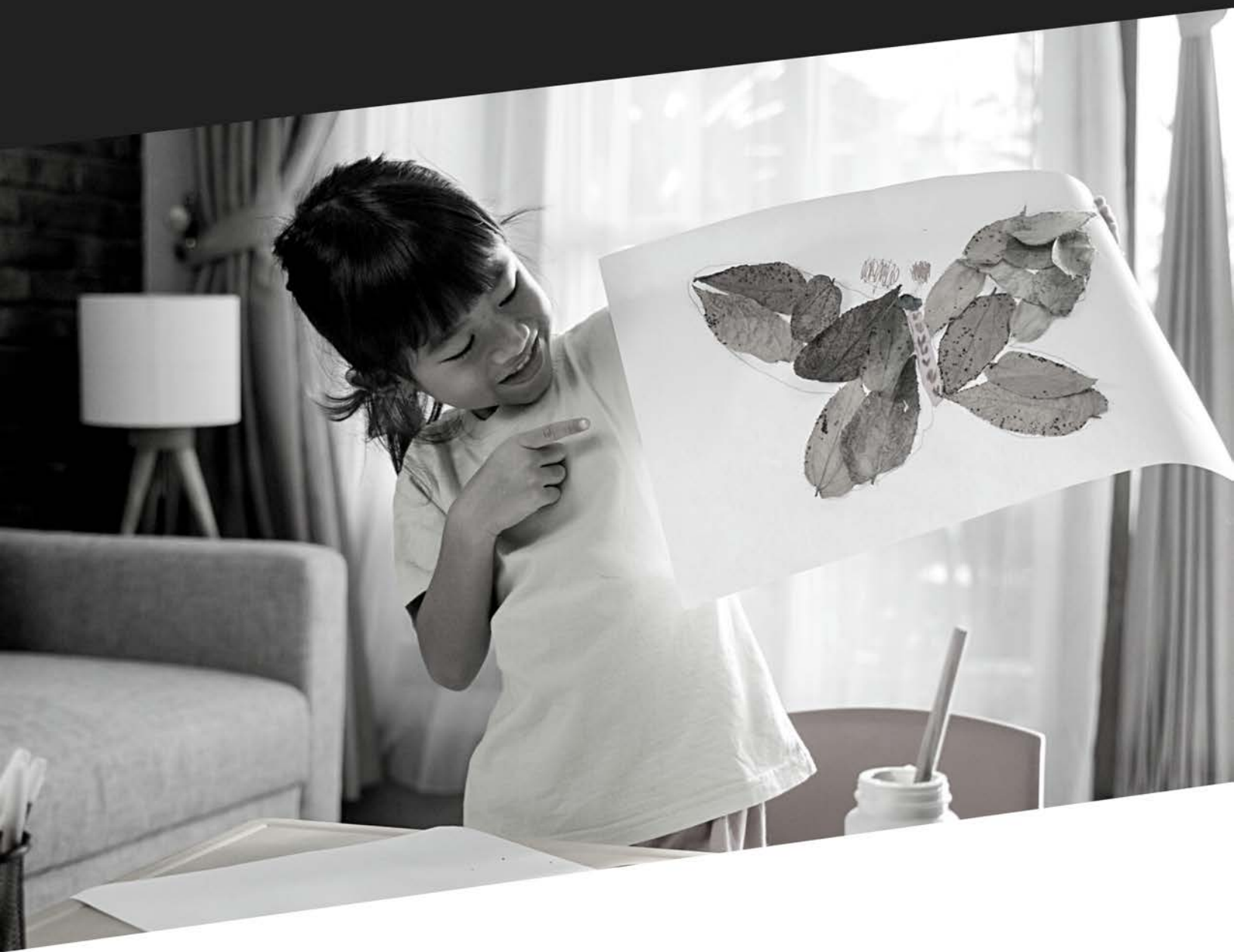
On the ASQ:SE-2, which measures social and emotional learning, 72% of Sparkler-completed screenings were “on schedule,” while 15% scored at monitor and 13% scored at refer.

ASQ-3 Results for Year Ending Sept. 30, 2023

Monitor Refer



**FINDING 6:
SPARKLER HAS HELPED
FAMILIES ACCESS ANSWERS
AND SUPPORT**



CONNECT. UNDERSTAND. SUPPORT.

Sparkler Demo
Ages and Stages Summary Report
sparkler

Noa L
Age 1 year 11 months

The Ages and Stages Questionnaire® is a widely used and trusted screening tool for infants and young children's development, assessing child and brain development in five domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving and personal social.

ASQ-3; 24 Month Questionnaire Completed: 02/17/2021

Communication What Noa understands and how Noa communicates

State Monitor On Track

Gross Motor How Noa uses his arms and legs and other large muscles for sitting, crawling, walking, running and other activities.

State Monitor On Track

Fine Motor Her hand and finger movement and control.

State Monitor On Track

Problem-Solving How Noa plays with toys and solves problems.

State Monitor On Track

Personal Social Her ability to help herself and how Noa interacts with others.

State Monitor On Track

If you have questions, please contact your child's teacher or coach. Ages & Stages Questionnaire® is a trademark of Paul H. Brooking Publishing Co., Inc. Powered by sparkler

Sparkler Demo
Ages and Stages Summary Report
sparkler

Noa L
Age 1 year 11 months

Suggested Activities:
Small moments are important in Noa's development. When parents or other caring adults interact with Noa in a warm and responsive way, her heart, mind, and body grow.

Communication

Rhymes and songs with actions are popular at this age. "Itsy Bitsy Spider," "I'm a Little Teardrop," and "Where is the Rubber?" are usual favorites. Make up your own using Noa's name in the song.

Gross Motor

Make Noa an outdoor "paint" set by using a large wide paint brush and a bowl or bucket of water. Noa will have fun "painting" the side of the house, a fence, or the front porch.

Fine Motor

Cut a rectangle, let hole in the top of a shoebox. Let Noa insert an old deck of playing cards or used envelopes. The box is easy storage for Noa's "mail."

Problem-Solving

Clean plastic containers with push or screw-on lids are great places to "hide" a favorite object or treat. Toddlers will practice pulling and twisting them to solve the "problem" of getting the object. Watch to see if Noa asks you to help.

Personal-Social

Stay nearby to help Noa learn about taking turns during play with friends. It is early to know how to share. Talking about turns will help her learn.

Upcoming Milestones:
With your support and encouragement, your child will begin to make progress toward the following milestones over the next 6 months:

- When looking at a picture book, does your child tell you what is happening or what action is taking place in the picture? You may ask, "What is the dog (or boy) doing?"
- Does your child stand on one foot for about 1 second without holding onto anything?
- Does your child turn pages in a book, one page at a time?
- After your child draws a "picture," even a simple scribble, does she tell you what she drew?
- When your child is looking in a mirror and you ask, "Who is in the mirror?" does she say either "me" or her own name?

If you have questions, please contact your child's teacher or coach. Ages & Stages Questionnaire® is a trademark of Paul H. Brooking Publishing Co., Inc. Powered by sparkler

All families who completed an ASQ received outreach from 211 or a local program, whichever was designated "in the lead" with the program. Families can receive print-outs of their ASQ reports, or they can be sent via Sparkler by secure link to the email address the family used to sign up for Sparkler.

The official who reaches out to the family shares a family-facing score report, as well as context and suggestions, based on what the results show. For example, the family might be invited to play particular Sparkler play activities based on their concerns or areas of need to support their child's ongoing development in that area.

Depending on need, the family might also be directed to the following services:

- Birth to Three
- Home visiting
- Preschool special education offered by their local school district
- Mental health evaluation
- Family support
- Advocacy
- Children and Youth with Special Healthcare Needs (CYSHN)

5. CONCLUSION

In the second year of the statewide rollout, Connecticut expanded access to screening, helped more families conduct repeat screenings, and encouraged play-based learning activities that support children's early development.

There is a lot left to do to ensure that the the State of Connecticut responds to the record need and helps both families with young children and programs that are serving them.

As Sparkler enters Year 3 in Connecticut, it aims to work with the Office of Early Childhood and state and local partners to grow the positive impact on children and families. Core goals include:

- **Building awareness:** Sparkler is universally available in Connecticut but state and local partners must work together to build awareness so that all parents and caregivers in Connecticut know that this tool is available to help them access ongoing play and parenting tips, developmental monitoring, developmental screening, and linkage to appropriate services.
- **Building local partnerships as part of a system of support:** Continue to work locally and across sectors (education, health care, nonprofit, and social service) to make universal screening, promotion, linkage, and support via Sparkler a way of life across the State.
- **Using information to guide positive change:** Sparkler is revealing information that could inform local and state-level decisions, helping to direct resources and support for families, professional development for staff, and more.
- **Improving the technology:** Sparkler aims to make the app both personalized and engaging for families. It is working to improve the app experience and to improve its tracking and analytics capabilities so that Sparkler can help to better understand the pathway of families, and help to connect Connecticut's data and human systems in a more meaningful way.

We know that the challenges young children face require all our collective and immediate attention, and we look forward to working together with partners across the State of Connecticut to expand Sparkler's positive impact in the coming years.

ABOUT SPARKLER LEARNING

Sparkler is a mobile family engagement and support tool, which OEC funds through the federal Preschool Development Grant and the American Rescue Plan Act. Sparkler is available for families in English, Spanish, and Chinese for iOS and Android. For providers, Sparkler offers a web-based dashboard, which helps local providers monitor, connect with, and support families. CT families can learn more about Sparkler at playsparkler.org/CT.



ABOUT 211 CHILD DEVELOPMENT

211 Child Development is powered by United Way of Connecticut and serves as the access point for the Connecticut Birth to Three System, the Help Me Grow program, Preschool Special Education Services, and Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs program. The team provides information about early intervention services, developmental concerns, managing challenging behaviors, parent education/family support, special education, disability and health related issues.



ABOUT 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. To contact the Office of Early Childhood, please visit our website: www.ctoec.org

