



FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT



July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

October 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

First 5 Santa Cruz County's Strategic Framework

When Proposition 10 passed in 1998, California made a definitive and enduring commitment to promote the health and well-being of young children (prenatal through age five) and their families. Since then, First 5 Santa Cruz County has had the great privilege and responsibility to serve as the steward of Prop 10 revenue, ensuring these public funds benefit young children and their families throughout Santa Cruz County.

First 5 is dedicated to giving children ages 0-5 the opportunities they need to be healthy, able to learn, emotionally well developed, and ultimately reach their full potential. Since its inception, First 5 Santa Cruz County has invested in many innovative, effective programs and initiatives that help:

- Ensure all children prenatal - age 5 have access to health insurance and preventive care
- Increase protective factors and decrease child abuse and neglect
- Improve access to affordable, quality early care and education
- Build early language and literacy skills that are the foundation for future learning

To continue realizing this vision, First 5 Santa Cruz County established four priorities for the current 2020 – 2025 strategic plan:



First 5 Santa Cruz County's Vision of Success

*Healthy, happy, and well-prepared children.
Thriving Families.
Connected communities.
Equitable systems.*



First 5 Santa Cruz County's Mission

To ensure early childhood systems and supports foster equitable health, development, and well-being for all young children and their families in Santa Cruz County.



Healthy Children

- Increased access to affordable quality health care for children 0-5
- Increased use of preventive health care
- Improved maternal, infant, and child health



Thriving Families

- Increased resilience of young children and their families
- Improved parenting practices and parent-child relationships
- Increased "social capital" (relationships and connections) of young children and their families
- Decreased child abuse and neglect



- Increased access to affordable, high quality early care and education
- Increased early learning and school readiness skills (developmental, social-emotional, cognitive)
- Increased stability and sustainability of the early care and education system



- Increased coordination and integration among organizations and sectors serving young children and families
- Increase in local, state, and federal policies and legislation that prioritize prevention, early intervention, and equity for young children and their families
- Increase in local, state, and federal funding to sustain and institutionalize investments in the early childhood system of care

This annual report summarizes findings of the First 5 Santa Cruz County evaluation from **July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025**, which is the last year of the 2020 – 2025 strategic plan. Many programs are multi-year investments, and therefore some information presented reflects multiple years of data.

Summary

The following is an Executive Summary of this *2024-25 Annual Evaluation Report*, providing a review of key County indicators of child and family well-being, a description of the population served by First 5-funded programs, and highlights of the activities and achievements in each of the four goal areas of the 2020-2025 First 5 Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan.

Overall Well-Being of Children in the County

First 5 Santa Cruz County invests in efforts that support its vision of Healthy, Happy, and Well-Prepared Children, Thriving Families, Access to Affordable, Quality Early Care and Education, and Connected and Equitable Community Systems. To help guide its investments and partnerships, First 5 monitors county-wide trends that affect child well-being. The fiscal year 2024-25 marks the final year of the 2020-2025 strategic plan, and the following data reflect the status of young children and their families in the County (the most recent data available are reported).

- **Santa Cruz County has a diverse population of young children which is decreasing in number.** In 2025, there were approximately 13,300 children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, continuing a decreasing trend since a high of almost 19,600 in 2012. The majority of these children were either Hispanic or Latine¹ (50%) or White (41%). This diversity is also evident in kindergarten, where in 2025 almost 33% of children had a primary language other than English.
- **Unemployment varies greatly across the County.** In 2025, the average unemployment rate in the County was 6.0%, similar to the previous year. Within the County, the percent of unemployed residents differs greatly by area; the average unemployment rate ranges from 2.6% in Scotts Valley to 11.5% in Watsonville.
- **Many families are living in poverty.** The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2024, almost 12% of the general population of Santa Cruz County earned below the poverty level. However, the “Real Cost Measure” (RCM) published by the United Ways of California suggests that the actual percentage of County residents in poverty is likely to be much higher. In 2023, the RCM estimated that in Santa Cruz County, for a family of four (with 2 adults, 1 infant, and 1 preschooler), 37% of these families lived in poverty.
- **Household incomes are not high enough to meet basic needs for many families.** Further, the RCM estimated that in 2023 the median household income for a family of four (with 2

“Poverty can impede children’s ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health.

Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children’s well-being.”

- National Center for Children in Poverty
<http://www.nccp.org>

¹ “Latine” (pronounced lah-teen) is a gender-neutral term used when referring to people of Latin American heritage without assuming their gender identity. See *Hispanic Executive* for more information about the use of this term (<http://hispanicexecutive.com/latinx-latine-explainer/>).

adults, 1 infant, and 1 preschooler) was approximately \$119,500. This median income is lower than the minimum income needed to meet basic needs in Santa Cruz County, as estimated by both the RCM (\$142,000), and the Self-Sufficiency Standard (\$186,800).

- **There is varying enrollment in public assistance programs.** Enrollment in CalWORKs, CalFresh, and the Women, Infants, & Children program has been rising over the past five years, whereas the number of students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals have been decreasing during this same time period.
- **Children have health insurance.** In 2023 (using 5-year averages), the vast majority of County children ages 0-5 had health insurance (98%). First 5 Santa Cruz County continues to provide assistance to families to enroll in public health insurance programs, to help every child aged 0-5 get insured.
- **Children have access to a provider for routine preventive care.** In 2024, 80% of infants with Medi-Cal insurance (ages 0-15 months) received at least six Well-Child check-ups within the first 15 months of life, following an increasing trend over the previous five years. Approximately 83% of toddlers with Medi-Cal insurance (ages 15-30 months) received at least two Well-Child visits in 2024.
- **The percentage of young children getting dental care is increasing.** Data indicate that the percentage of children enrolled in Medi-Cal who had been to a dentist in the past year has been increasing over time. In 2023, 56% of children ages 1-2 saw a dentist in the last year, which is an increase of almost 9 percentage points over the past five years. Approximately 64% of children ages 3-5 saw a dentist in the last year, with a smaller but steady increase over the past five years.
- **The number of mothers receiving prenatal care in the first trimester is fluctuating.** Data regarding early prenatal care in 2023 show some improvements over the past five years.
 - In 2023, 88% of all mothers received prenatal care in their first trimester, which exceeds the Healthy People 2030² target rate of 80.5% for a related objective (*“Increase the proportion of pregnant women who receive early and adequate prenatal care”*).
 - Among younger mothers (ages 24 and younger), a lower percentage received first trimester care (76%), with trends showing a decreasing percentage receiving this early prenatal care over the past five years.
 - Additionally, there were differences in receipt of early prenatal care based upon the mother’s source of payment for the care. In 2023, 80% of mothers with Medi-Cal insurance began receiving prenatal care during the first trimester, compared to 97% of mothers with private insurance.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Healthy People 2030 portal, 2023.

- **The percentage of preterm births and babies with low birthweights is staying relatively level.** In 2023, 7.8% of all mothers had preterm births, showing little change over the past five years. The same year, 5.8% of all mothers had babies with low birthweights, which is a slight decrease in just the past year.
- **The percentage of births to teen mothers in the County is staying low.** In 2023, the percentage of births to teen mothers represented 3.0% of all births in Santa Cruz County, and there was a teen birth rate of 5.5 per 1,000 (ages 15-19). Both of these measures have stayed relatively level over the past five years.
- **Over half of the births in the County were paid for by Medi-Cal.** In 2025, 56% of births, across all age groups, were paid for by Medi-Cal.
- **Not all income-eligible children are enrolled in subsidized child care.** In 2023, only 15% of income-eligible infants and toddlers ages 0-2 were enrolled in subsidized child care. A higher percentage of income-eligible preschool children ages 3-4 were enrolled (59%), and has been increasing over the previous five years.
- **Young children with developmental challenges are getting support.** In 2025, 7% of children ages 3-5 in Santa Cruz County were receiving special education services, demonstrating the importance of having services available to address the developmental issues of these young children.
- **Third graders are struggling with their reading skills.** One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child's reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade.
 - In 2024, only 38% of all Santa Cruz County 3rd grade students met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy, and there were significant disparities by students' English-language fluency, race/ethnicity, and economic status.
 - When English language learners in 3rd grade were evaluated with an assessment specifically designed to measure English language proficiency (the *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California*), results showed that almost 10% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having "well-developed" English skills, and another 30% were assessed as having "moderately-developed" English skills.
- **Foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates are staying relatively level.** In 2024, the foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates were highest for infants under age 1 (6.3 per 1,000), compared to the foster care rates for toddlers ages 1-2 (2.9 per 1,000) and preschoolers ages 3-5 (2.0 per 1,000).

- **There are decreasing rates of child maltreatment.** In Santa Cruz County, the rates of child maltreatment have been decreasing.
 - Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2011 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have generally stayed below since).
 - Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County moved from being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have stayed below since).
 - However, data are revealing that infants still have substantially higher rates of abuse than toddlers and preschoolers. In 2024, the rate of substantiated allegations of child maltreatment was highest for infants under age 1 (**8.0** per 1,000), compared to children ages 1-2 (**3.3** per 1,000), and children ages 3-5 (**2.7** per 1,000).
- **Many adults report having experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).** The extreme stress and adversities that children experience can have lifelong impacts on health, well-being, and economic opportunities. Results from the 2023 *California Health Interview Survey* showed that approximately 63% of adults reported having experienced two or more adverse experiences as a child.

A Profile of First 5 Participants

First 5 Santa Cruz County reaches children who can make great gains with early and smart investments

First 5's goal is to serve children ages 0-5 and their families who have the most challenges in Santa Cruz County, including English language learners, and families with fewer resources.

- **First 5-supported programs are wide-reaching.** In 2024-25, First 5 partners served **5,356** unique children ages 0-5, representing 40% of all children these ages in Santa Cruz County. **An additional 4,180 services** were provided to children who participated in programs where no client ID was available to track their participation, or who were indirectly supported by a First 5 funded program.
- **First 5 serves a high number of dual language learners.** Of the children served by First 5, 69% were Hispanic or Latine, and approximately 56% of children lived in households that primarily spoke a language other than English (Spanish, bilingual Spanish/English, a Mesoamerican language, or another non-English language). Of all Hispanic or Latine children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, it's estimated that at least 51% participated in services funded by First 5.
- **First 5 is serving children in the highest risk zones of the County.** The new "California Strong Start Index" uses information collected at birth to understand the conditions under which California's babies are born at a very local level, and measures resources that are tied to good outcomes and resilience throughout a person's lifespan, such as healthy birth weight,

timely prenatal care, parental education level, and parents' ability to afford and access health care. Of the children served by First 5 in 2024-25 who had known ZIP codes, the vast majority (85%) lived in the areas of the County with the fewest Strong Start assets (the Live Oak area of Santa Cruz, the city of Santa Cruz, Freedom, and Watsonville), showing that First 5 partners are reaching children and families who typically experience the greatest barriers to good health and well-being.

First 5 strengthens systems by enhancing the capacity of service providers

In addition to supporting direct services to children and families, First 5 aims to boost the capacity of local systems in order to extend the reach of critical early education, family support, and health services to a larger number of children and families. Systems enhancements help ensure better services for years to come. Examples of First 5's capacity-building work in 2024-25 include:

- **Skill development and coaching for early childhood educators.** In 2024-25, approximately **491** early childhood educators received professional development training from funded programs.
 - This includes **68** early childhood educators from state and federally-subsidized preschools, licensed private and non-profit child care centers, public Transitional Kindergarten classrooms, and licensed family child care homes, who took a SEEDS of Learning™ course; **10** SEEDS Quality Coaches who provided literacy coaching to early educators receiving SEEDS of Learning™ instruction during the year; and providers who participated in Quality Counts Santa Cruz County, including **312** teachers in child care center sites, **110** providers in family child care sites, and **7** Family, Friend, and Neighbor providers.
- **Development of a population-based system of parent education.** In 2024-25, **30** new parent education practitioners received training to deliver the Triple P –Positive Parenting Program, an evidence-based curriculum shown to improve parental efficacy, parent-child interaction, and child behaviors.

Healthy Children

For the past several years, First 5 Santa Cruz County has invested in strategies to help ensure that all children have health insurance and access to care.

First 5 Santa Cruz County insures children

- **Santa Cruz County's newborns are getting connected to medical care.** During 2024-25, the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program provided essentially all mothers with a newborn visit while in the hospital (or via phone), and 98% of these mothers received a First 5 California *Kit for New Parents*. Of all mothers with births paid by Medi-Cal, 99.9% (all but one) were assisted to complete a Medi-Cal Newborn Referral application for their new

baby, and 100% of these mothers identified a preferred primary care provider (PCP) or clinic for their child before discharge from the hospital.

- **Children are receiving routine preventive care.** Central California Alliance for Health (the Alliance) discusses the importance of infants getting all of their well-child visits during the first several months of their life, in order to be able to assess their growth and development. Results provided by the Alliance show that in 2024, approximately 80% of all infants with Medi-Cal insurance in Santa Cruz County had received at least six well-child visits with a provider within the first 15 months of life. This success was likely assisted by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program's efforts to connect all newborns with a primary care provider.
- **Newborns are getting connected with County programs.** First 5 has continued assisting with two programs that were implemented in Santa Cruz County, which the Newborn Enrollment Coordinators have incorporated into their newborn visits:
 - The **State-wide Student Identification number (SSID)** is created for newborns by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and is used to support the social, emotional, and academic development of children from birth through 12th grade.
 - The Ventures³ **Semillitas college savings account program** for newborns creates a savings account for college or vocational education after high school for every child born in Santa Cruz County. With county partners like Dientes, Salud Para La Gente, Triple P, and the Central California Alliance for Health, the program also incentivizes healthy behaviors by making additional payments into these savings accounts for accomplishing important health milestones (such as a baby going to the dentist by the emergence of their first tooth or their first birthday, receiving baby immunizations and wellness checks, etc.).
- **Newborns and their families have access to food.** The Newborn Enrollment Coordinators (NECs) also provide families at hospitals with resources to apply for the CalFresh program and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.
- **Fewer children are using the emergency department (ED).** Ideally, children and their families who have insurance and who have a medical home will be more likely to access their

Uninsured children are:

- *Over 13 times more likely to lack a usual source of care;*
- *Nearly 5 times more likely to have delayed or unmet medical needs;*
- *Over 3 times more likely to have unmet mental health service needs;*
- *5 times more likely to have unmet dental and vision care needs;*
- *Nearly 4 times more likely to have an unmet need for prescription drugs.*

- Children Now

<<http://www.childrennow.org>>

³ Ventures was formerly known as Santa Cruz Community Ventures.

provider for routine preventive care, and will be less likely to use the emergency department (ED) for non-urgent medical care.

- The services provided by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program may have had an effect on the use of the ED for very young infants, and particularly those who were covered by Medi-Cal. Since the launch of this program at Watsonville Community Hospital in 2009, the number of infants (under age 1) on Medi-Cal who visited the Emergency Department dropped 59% by 2024.
- There were two major shifts in this trend that may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) A dramatic decrease in ED visits between 2019 and 2020 that may have been due to parents choosing not to use the hospital ED during the COVID-19 pandemic for low risk symptoms, and 2) A sharp increase in ED visits between 2021 and 2022 that suggests that these numbers are returning to pre-pandemic values.
- **Children are getting vision screening.** The VisionFirst program provides children as young as 6 months old with a simple instrument-based vision screening right in their child care and transitional kindergarten settings.
 - In 2024-25, **472** children were screened, and **74** had possible vision problems identified (16% of all children screened).
 - At the time of this report, **57** of those children were able to get an appointment and receive a full vision exam at an optometrist.
 - Of these 57 children, **43** have been prescribed eyeglasses, **5** are being monitored, and **9** children did not need eyeglasses.

Due to the success of the VisionFirst program, some local partners have purchased their own Spot Vision Screeners to provide on-going screening.

- **Children are getting support to reach developmental milestones.** Foster children with neurodevelopmental needs are getting referred to supportive services through a coordinated and multidisciplinary system called the *Neurodevelopmental Foster Care Clinic*.

Thriving Families

One indicator of child safety are the County measurements of child abuse and neglect. Fortunately, the rates of child maltreatment are decreasing.

- Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2011 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have generally stayed below since).
- Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County moved from

being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have stayed below since).

These improvements may have been assisted by the efforts of the county-wide Triple P – Positive Parenting Program and the Families Together program, which launched in late 2009 and 2006, respectively.

First 5 Santa Cruz County helps strengthen parent-child relationships and reduce risk for child abuse and neglect

Through innovative programs, First 5 and its partners are helping to decrease the risk and incidence of child abuse and neglect.

- First 5 continued to implement and scale up the Positive Parenting Program, or **Triple P**. The program consists of five levels of intervention, from broad-based, universal efforts in the community to more intensive, focused efforts with individual parents. The Triple P model is an evidence-based program shown in numerous randomized studies to increase parental confidence and efficacy, promote positive parent-child interactions and child behaviors, and reduce rates of child maltreatment.

Highlights of Triple P include:

- **Evidence-based parenting support is available.** First 5 has implemented all five levels of Triple P in Santa Cruz County, ranging from a media campaign to intensive and focused individual services. Between 2010-2025, approximately 19,000 parents with over 36,600 children have participated in the program.
- **Parents are engaged and seeking more opportunities.** Over the past several years, analyses have consistently shown that brief services are an effective way of getting parents initially engaged in the program, and gives them an opportunity to participate in further services. Parents who attend Seminars and Workshops frequently request follow-up services, and parents who participate in one or two brief consultations for specific parenting concerns often return later for in-depth consultations and multi-session programs.
- **Parenting skills and knowledge are improving along several domains.** Parents who completed assessments that measured their levels of parenting skills and knowledge along several domains showed substantial improvements in all domains, including:
 - Improvements in child behavior and emotional regulation
 - Increased use of positive parenting styles
 - Improvements in parental emotional well-being and family relationships
 - Increased parental confidence
 - Reduced levels of conflict between divorced or separated parents
 - Improved anger management

- **Parents with more serious parenting issues are making the greatest improvements.** There was also evidence that parents who began the program experiencing more serious parenting issues demonstrated the greatest improvements as a result of receiving in-depth services.
- **Parents are satisfied with services.** Parents have rated the quality of services very high, noting that the program helped them deal more effectively with their child's behavior, and with problems in their family.
- **Parents are continuing to use the skills they learned.** On average, parents who participated in the Seminars and Workshops felt that they would continue to use the strategies they learned, and parents who received more in-depth training felt that the program helped them develop skills that could be applied to other family members.
- First 5 supports a program called **Families Together**, that provides prevention-based services to Santa Cruz County families experiencing hardships, such as involvement with Family and Children's Services (FCS), financial instability, and other adverse experiences. Families Together accepts referrals from FCS, CalWORKs, and the community. Engagement in Families Together services are completely voluntary, and families have access to services and resources that cover many domains of wellness, including emotional, social, financial, relational, and physical safety. The home visiting program includes comprehensive intake and risk assessments, development of a tailored case plan, parent support and education, child development activities, and periodic assessments. By assisting these families, Families Together can intervene early, before family difficulties escalate to the point of maltreatment or other adverse childhood experiences.

Results of the program have been very encouraging:

- **Reduction of risk.** Parents/primary caregivers receiving services from Families Together had their levels of risk assessed while they were in the program. Cumulative assessment results show that 77% of families were assessed as being "high risk" or "very high risk" upon program intake, but this dropped to just 16% of families who stayed in the program a full year.
- **Reduced rates of child maltreatment.** Results from 2024 show that 97% of families who received services from the Families Together program *did not have* a substantiated allegation of maltreatment in the six months after their cases closed.

Early Care and Education

First 5 is helping to improve the quality of early learning programs in Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California (QCC), a statewide initiative to strengthen California's early learning and care system to support young children and their families. QCC emphasizes an equity approach, prioritizing communities where early investment can make the highest impact, promoting environments, relationships, interactions, and activities that support children's development for success in school and life.

In 2012, First 5 Santa Cruz County launched a local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), partnering with family child care and center-based programs to improve the quality of early learning for children ages birth through 5 in Santa Cruz County. Funded by California's Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge federal grant, and First 5 California's Child Signature Program, this initiative led to the creation of the Quality Early Learning Initiative Consortium, now known as Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC). This Consortium brings together public and private center-based program leaders, family child care providers, higher education faculty, home visiting program partners, and other early learning stakeholders to improve early learning quality across the County.

Since 2015, a statewide QRIS has been established in all 58 counties. Renamed Quality Counts California (QCC) in FY 2017-18, QCC helps to ensure that children ages 0 to 5—particularly those who are low-income, English learners, or children with disabilities or developmental delays—have access to high quality early learning programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

"A QRIS helps improve the quality of participating programs so they are better prepared to help all children grow socially, emotionally, and physically in a healthy environment, with knowledgeable and caring providers who engage children in a range of enriching activities."

- Quality Counts California
<<https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>>

Beginning in FY 2023-24, QCC shifted some funding away from formal rating to maximize resources and meet the diverse needs of early learning and care providers through quality improvement, research, evaluation, and a focus on equity while still maintaining limited funding for ratings to support accountability and guide quality improvement priorities in the California State Preschool Programs (CSPP). QCC continues to maintain some funding for public programs to conduct ratings, inform prioritization of quality improvement activities, and increase public accountability.

- **Quality Counts California** – is the state's **Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)**, designed to enhance early care and education by assessing programs against research-based standards. These standards address key components of quality such as learning environments, staff qualifications, teacher-child interactions, and ratios. QCC supports educators through training and coaching, helps programs create nurturing learning environments, and provides families with information to make informed choices about early learning programs.

- **Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC)** implements this system locally, using the state’s Quality Continuum Framework (QCF)—formerly the Rating Matrix—as its foundation. The QCF provides a framework for quality improvement and is part of the QCC Implementation Guide which provides information to support implementation at the local level. The QCF outlines measurable quality elements and continuous improvement practices for all early learning and care settings, including the rating requirements for all **California State Preschool Programs (CSPP)**.

In December 2024, all 21 CSPP sites participating in QCSCC were rated using the QCF, and received a rating based on their cumulative scores in all six elements across five tiers of quality, with points assigned to each element. The ratings are valid for 3-5 years (5 years for sites rated at Tiers 4 or 5, and 3 years for sites rated at Tier 3 or below). Sites were rated on a 5-tier scale (1=lowest tier; 5=highest tier). All CSPP sites were rated at either Tier 4 or 5.

In addition to the 21 CSPP rated sites which may also have infant and toddler classrooms, there are an additional 20 Center sites and 60 Family Child Care provider sites participating in QCSCC at the Quality Improvement level, as well as a program for informal care providers called Family, Friend, and Neighbor care.

QCSCC overall participation, by Site type (2024-25)

SITE TYPE	NUMBER OF SITES	NUMBER OF PROVIDERS / ECE PROFESSIONALS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED (AGES 0-5)
Participating Child Care Centers	41	312	1,405
Participating Family Child Care (FCC) Sites	60	110	586
Participating Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Sites	7	7	7
Total sites	108	429	1,998

- **Quality Counts Santa Cruz County Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Workshops.** Beginning in FY 2024-25, QCSCC relaunched a Family, Friend, and Neighbor program for informal caregivers, who provide care outside licensed settings. These are typically relatives, neighbors, or friends who take care of young children, often providing care during hours that aren’t provided at licensed centers. To help ensure the quality and safety of these spaces, First 5 conducted workshops based on the Quality Continuum Framework. The FFN program served seven participants at Ann Soldo elementary school in Spring 2025, and will expand in FY 2025-26.
- **Quality Improvement Activities.** During this past year, Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) has provided online technical assistance to program directors, teachers and providers; maintained the QCSCC database; facilitated a Directors’ Professional Learning Community; and collaborated with partners to provide system-wide trainings.

- **Quality Counts California Regional Training, Technical Assistance and Coordination Hub – Region 4.** Santa Cruz County is part of Region 4 HUB with neighboring counties (Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, San Benito, and Monterey). Funded by First 5 California, the HUB counties strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, and align early learning practices, while minimizing duplication.

First 5 Santa Cruz County builds early literacy foundations by training early childhood educators to enhance language-rich practices in the classroom

One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child's reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade. Unfortunately, data show that Santa Cruz County children are struggling with their reading and writing skills. First 5 Santa Cruz County is working to improve these long-term trends by encouraging families to read together, providing language and literacy skill development for early childhood educators, and encouraging child assessments in order to individualize instruction.

- **The SEEDS of Learning™ framework is being used throughout Santa Cruz County child care programs.** Since the founding of the Early Literacy Foundations Initiative in 2006-07, **745** unique educators have been trained in the SEEDS of Learning™ framework. This includes 282 educators in state- and federally-subsidized classrooms, 25 educators in public school transitional kindergarten classrooms, 355 educators in licensed family child care homes and private/non-profit centers, and 83 Santa Cruz Reading Corps Literacy Tutors.
- **Classrooms and home-based settings of SEEDS-trained early educators are being transformed into literacy-rich environments.** SEEDS-trained early childhood educators are working to ensure their children are on target for kindergarten readiness by using evidence-based early literacy strategies, and integrating materials into their learning environments.

745 early childhood educators, Reading Corps Literacy Tutors, and informal family child care providers throughout the county have been trained to promote strong language and literacy foundations for children.

- **Toddler and Preschool classrooms.**

Research on teacher effectiveness shows that by focusing professional development on language and literacy and social/emotional development, children are much better prepared for school and have higher academic achievement. The first indicators of change are the literacy environment, teacher-child interactions, and language opportunities that teachers provide to children.

Selected questions from the ELLCO Pre-K assessment were used to evaluate the quality of support for language and literacy in SEEDS classrooms, which were completed at the beginning (Pre) and end (Post) of the workshop series.

Cumulative results from 2022-25 show that:

- On average, classrooms showed substantial improvements from the beginning of the series to the end, across each element of language and literacy.
- The classroom elements where the most change occurred were “Approaches to Curriculum,” “Efforts to Build Vocabulary,” and “Phonological Awareness.”

○ **Family child care settings.**

Early childhood educators from licensed family child care settings also participated in SEEDS training and received SEEDS coaching. Their sites were observed at the beginning of their SEEDS training in July and again at the end of their training in September. Beginning in FY 2022-23, coaching was no longer done in-home, but rather was conducted as a group in workshops.

Beginning in FY 2023-24, individual questions from the CHELLO have been selected to assess the settings at the beginning and end of the semester.

“The seeds of literacy are planted before children enter school.

Important literacy skills do not develop spontaneously, instruction shapes them.”

- Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998

Cumulative results from 2023-25 show that:

- On average, all components that were selected to assess the settings of home-based classrooms showed improvements from the beginning of the semester to the end.
- Among the individual Group/Family Observation components, the components that demonstrated the most improvement were “Storybook / Storytelling Activities” and “Use of Print.”
- **Parents are getting involved in their children’s reading.** SEEDS classrooms and family child care homes also implemented Raising A Reader (RAR), a weekly rotating book bag program for families, to boost shared reading practices and impact children’s early literacy skills. In the 2024-25 fiscal year, 2,833 children and their families participated in the program throughout the county, and nearly 33,833 children have participated since the beginning of this program in 2006.

Equitable and sustainable early childhood systems

First 5 continues to focus on increasing coordination and integration among County organizations and sectors serving young children and families, prioritizing efforts that are responsive to the needs of the County’s diverse community, and increasing local, state, and federal funding to sustain County investments in the early childhood system of care.

For over 20 years, these service integration and systems building functions have become a cornerstone of First 5’s strategy to promote and create an equitable and sustainable early childhood system of care in Santa Cruz County. Central to that strategy is the role that First 5 plays leading the coordination and evaluation of the county-wide Thrive by 5 initiative in partnership with the Human

Services Department and the Health Services Agency, with guidance from an Advisory Committee established by the First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission. In addition to Thrive by 5, First 5 has expanded the implementation of its communications plan, supported multiple community engagement activities and continues to play an active role in systems-building efforts led by First 5 partners.

- **Thrive by 5.** In January 2017, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors established the Thrive by Three (TbT) Early Childhood Fund as a dedicated funding source and a comprehensive local initiative to improve outcomes and indicators for the County's youngest children and their families. In May 2022, the Board of Supervisors approved a proposal to expand the scope and purpose of the TbT Fund to Thrive by 5 (Tb5). This created greater consistency and opportunities for alignment with other early childhood initiatives and funding streams. Since that time First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners have adopted the following updated set of strategic goals and community-level impacts and indicators:

Children and families are healthy

- Early access to prenatal care
- Healthy births
- Preventive health care
- Access to nature, open space

Children and families are ready for kindergarten

- Access to quality child care and early learning programs

Children live in safe, nurturing families

- Assets that promote resilience
- Safe families and home

Families have resources to support children's optimal development

- Economic security and stable housing

In FY 2024-25, First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners have:

- Convened four meetings per year of the Thrive by 5 Advisory Committee focusing on key topics and served as the Community Advisory Board for the Nurse Family Partnership program and the Trauma Informed Approach (TIA) Field Nursing program, both run by Santa Cruz County Public Health.
- Continued to convene the Tb5 Learning Collaborative for Tb5 partners, focused on a range of topics including the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program, Cabrillo College Student Services, financial literacy, the Semillitas program, collaboration between early care and education programs and home visiting programs in the County, and partnering to support families experiencing homelessness.

- Continued to convene a Coordinated Entry Workgroup focused on supporting and enhancing the process of referring CalWORKs participants to the four home visiting programs in Santa Cruz County, and enrolled 414 families.
- Continued to support integration, growth, and improvement of the HealthySteps program within the Thrive by 5 system of care.
- Delivered Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) to 111 infant and toddler care providers serving families who are eligible for state child care subsidies.
- **Communications and Community Engagement.** During FY 2024-25, First 5 Santa Cruz County continued to develop and implement its communications plan that focused on increasing awareness of early childhood development, offering resources for families and early care and education providers, and promoting the agency's programs and partnerships both locally and state-wide. First 5 has continued to address equity and access by consistently engaging Spanish language translation and interpretation services for its website, newsletter, additional outreach materials, and community engagement.

In FY 2024-25, First 5 Santa Cruz County:

- Continued to support the First 5 website, hosting over 4,800 unique visitors, of which 95% were new. The Triple P program pages were the most visited section, providing program information, an overview of class offerings, and registration links.
- Continued publishing a monthly bilingual e-newsletter, maintaining a distribution reach of over 1,000 individuals.
- Grew social media accounts in LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram to almost 1,000 followers combined, and launched the Thrive by 5 social media tool kit in March 2025.
- Placed a 30-second bilingual Medi-Cal renewal video in rotation at our county's two DMV locations beginning in May 2024, through November 2025, reaching a monthly average of over 25,000 people at both locations combined.
- Coordinated the distribution of over 1,860 Thrive by 5 pocket guides (*"A Parent Guide to Thrive by 5"*), and gave the Nurse Family Partnership program bilingual children's books for their 26 program graduates.
- Contributed multiple fiscal sponsorships for community events and endeavors over the year including: the Santa Cruz Children's Museum of Discovery's (MOD) Potter the Otter Exhibit, the "All Kids Play" Campaign (a fundraising initiative by County Park Friends to provide scholarships for low-income youth to access Santa Cruz County Parks and Recreation programs), Cabrillo College's "Make a Circle" Documentary Screening, The Diversity Center's Queer Youth Leadership Awards, Santa Cruz Community Health's 50th Anniversary, DataShare, and United Way Santa Cruz County's United in Purpose Celebration.

- **Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments.** CORE Investments is both a funding model and a broader movement to create the conditions for equitable health and well-being across the life span – prenatal through end of life. While not limited to the well-being of young children and families, CORE has emerged as a substantial and critical initiative designed to help create the type of equitable, integrated services and systems originally envisioned by the authors of Prop 10. First 5 serves on the CORE Steering Committee, helping guide the project through a multi-phase, collaborative planning process, which has resulted in defining eight interdependent “CORE Conditions for Health and Well being.” In April 2025, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors voted to establish a Supervisor-led subcommittee to review the existing CORE Investments funding process. To learn more, visit: <https://www.santacruzhumanservices.org/Home/FundingOpportunities/COREInvestments>
- **DataShare Santa Cruz County.** DataShare is a county-wide data sharing system designed to share data on a variety of factors that affect the well-being of residents in the county. DataShare’s mission is to provide an accessible, comprehensive, and reliable resource for local, regional, and national data that is available to everyone. DataShare Santa Cruz County envisions an equitable, thriving, and resilient community where everyone shares responsibility for creating the social, economic, and environmental conditions necessary for health and well-being at every stage of life. The website is an interactive data platform with local, state, and national data that allows users to explore and understand information about our local community. The site holds robust data and indicators in the areas of health, economy, education, environment, government and politics, public safety, transportation, and social environment. To learn more, visit: <https://www.datasharescc.org/>
- **Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network.** Building on a series of successful legislative visits and policy wins for early childhood in 2017, First 5 Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties joined forces in FY 2017-18 to help form the tri-county Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network (CCECAN). Representing over 94,000 children ages 0-8, CCECAN is a collaboration of organizations and individuals in the tri-county area committed to strengthening and advocating for policies and systems change at the state and local level that will support thriving children and families. To learn more, visit: <https://www.ccecan.org/>
- **Cradle to Career.** Building on the success of the Live Oak Cradle to Career place-based initiative, the effort has now expanded county-wide and is now known as “Cradle to Career Santa Cruz County” (C2C). Grown from a nascent idea in 2013 championed by former Supervisor John Leopold, to a vibrant results-based collaboration between parents and local education, health, and social service leaders in four school districts across the county, C2C’s mission is to work collectively to empower families, deliver resources, and advocate for equitable and inclusive support systems to eliminate disparities and ensure all Santa Cruz County children thrive in their education, health, and character. To learn more, visit: <https://c2csc.org/>

- **Oral Health Access.** Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County (OHA) was created in 2016 as a steering committee made up of community leaders and organizations, dental and medical clinics, and educators to address oral health needs in Santa Cruz County. Led by Dientes Community Dental, the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency Public Health Division, and numerous community partners, the committee's mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County residents by uniting stakeholders and advocating for sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education. In the spring of 2024, First 5's Executive Director agreed to serve as Co-Chair in overseeing the implementation of OHA's new 2024-2028 Strategic Plan. To learn more, visit: <https://oralhealthsc.org/>

