More than 1.4 million families live in Wisconsin. Well-designed educational programs help families better manage their financial resources, improve their skills as parents, maintain healthier lifestyles, and contribute to their communities. By improving people’s lives, Family Living Programs reduce the economic and social service costs to local governments. Family Living Programs operate on the principle that many of the challenges facing the state’s families and communities are far less expensive to prevent than to fix.

With educators in every county and university specialists based on the UW-Madison campus, Family Living colleagues are uniquely positioned to work alongside local and state partners to provide the evidence-informed education. Here are examples of Family Living Programs’ investments in educational programs that result in stronger families and communities.

Promoting Family Financial Security

Wisconsin families are facing significant financial challenges. As debt loads grow and savings decrease, families may jeopardize their financial security and become vulnerable to unexpected financial emergencies.

Wisconsin families manage more than $108 billion dollars in annual family income. Financial decisions people make can improve the quality of their lives or make life more challenging. Either way, the impacts of individual financial choices affect the overall economic health of families and communities.

Consumers participating in Family Living Programs improve their household credit management by enhancing financial security which benefits communities by boosting economic stability and contributing to a foundation for growth.

When educators facilitate family financial capability, learners will improve their household credit management, which enhances financial security and informed choice by entrepreneurship, and economic growth. More than 42,000 adults participated in Extension financial education programs in the last two years. Participants gained the knowledge, skills, motivation and confidence to make their own financial decisions. Some of these changes included planning for and tracking spending, starting a savings account, and paying down debt. Family Living educators trained almost 2000 community volunteers on the basics of household financial management so that volunteers from human service agencies, food pantries, and financial institutions were better equipped for talking with the others about budgeting and wise use of credit.

Many low income families and individuals qualify for tax credits and programs that provide some relief but accessing these resources can be difficult. Family Living educators promote awareness of tax credits, especially for low-income workers. This brings money back to Wisconsin families and
Cooperative Extension Family Living educators work to improve life for Wisconsin families. In counties round the state, educators are committed to providing residents with access to housing information based on the knowledge that a stable, affordable home environment is essential to the welfare of all Wisconsin families. Renting continues to be the best housing option for many families and individuals. But as the rental populations grows, more and more people are finding themselves in need of information to help them successfully navigate the process and develop better landlord/tenant relationships. Family Living educators train other professionals, from housing agencies, school districts, emergency shelters, human services, economic development and other types of organizations, using the Rent Smart curriculum. Landlords are providing incentives, such as rental credit, for potential renters who complete the Rent Smart Program.

Cooperative Extension is building the capacity of residents and their communities to help them obtain, sustain and create affordable housing. People who participate in Family Living educational programs report that they are better prepared as consumers and more satisfied renters and homeowners. Lack of adequate housing affects communities negatively by hindering economic development and reducing the number of new jobs to attract workers.

Promoting a Healthier Wisconsin

Family Living health and wellness education programs help individuals and families to:

- Acquire the knowledge and skills to practice healthy eating, physical activity, food safety and food resource management behaviors.
- Make well-informed decisions about health behaviors, and their medical care and treatment.

Family Living educators in collaboration with community partners also assist communities in creating environments that have healthy, affordable and safe food, opportunities for physical activity and healthcare resources.

As individuals and families gain knowledge and skills, and community environments support healthy living, there will be less illness, obesity, chronic disease and food insecurity. Wisconsin will benefit from these changes through decreased health care costs, increased productivity of Wisconsin’s workforce and improved quality of life for all Wisconsin residents.

Increasing Physical Activity through StrongWomen™

Studies show that, for women middle-aged and older, weight-bearing exercise can help increase strength, muscle mass and bone density while decreasing the risk of osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, depression and obesity. Since 2008 Wisconsin Family Living Programs has led StrongWomen™ programs training 190 new leaders representing 41 Wisconsin counties. Doctors, nurses, UW-Extension educator, health educators have become trainers for their communities. These instructors reached more than 3,000 Wisconsin participants through more than 300 StrongWomen™ sessions. Participants improve strength, endurance, balance and flexibility. Many women also indicated less need for medications that targeted chronic conditions and pain. The program provides Wisconsin women with knowledge and skills they need to achieve better health.
Healthy, Well-Nourished Families

In Wisconsin, growing numbers of 2- to 5-year-old children are either overweight or at risk of being overweight. Providing parents with knowledge about food and nutrition can promote healthy feeding and eating behaviors. Family Living educators with experience in the areas of both parenting and nutrition are in the ideal position to conduct this type of education in their counties.

Parents participating in Raising Healthy Eaters, a series of eight user-friendly classes, increased their knowledge of age-appropriate feeding practices, reduced television-watching during mealtime, and increased confidence in their ability to get their children to try new foods and drink water instead of sweetened beverages. These changes indicate an improvement in feeding practices that will lead to healthier children and lower rates of overweight in children, in addition to reduced health care costs.

School Breakfast

Research shows that children who eat breakfast demonstrate an increased ability to learn and improve their academic performance. Studies have also shown that eating breakfast improves behavior, decreases the risk of being overweight and improves the quality of children’s diets.

Both low-income and moderate-income children are less likely to skip breakfast if their school participates in a School Breakfast Program.

Through the collaboration of Family Living Programs, the Department of Public Instruction, and other organizations across the state, school breakfast participation in Wisconsin has steadily increased.

The Food Research and Action Center’s annual school breakfast score card indicates that in the 2009-2010 school year Wisconsin showed an almost 15% change in low income student participation in the program from last year, placing it among the top five performing states for increases in student participation. These increases have improved Wisconsin's national ranking from 43rd in the previous year, to 40th.

This same publication also shows that Wisconsin continues to make strides in increasing the number of schools that offer a school breakfast program. In the 2009-2010 school year 65.8% of schools in Wisconsin that offer school lunch also offered school breakfast. Increases in school participation place Wisconsin in the top six performing states showing greatest percent change, compared to the previous school year, in the number of schools that offer a school breakfast program. Family Living Programs’ role has been to provide research-based information, education, outreach and support to county-based efforts to expand the breakfast program.

Nutrition Education Saves Health Care Costs!

A national study by the USDA found that educational interventions to encourage Americans to improve their diets may prevent tens of thousands of cases of heart disease and save between $4 billion and $12 billion in health care expenditures and lost earnings over 10 years. In Wisconsin more than half of all death were due to heart disease, cancer and stroke, all of which have a strong dietary component. Rates of obesity are growing faster than any other public health issues. Nutrition education and other focused collaborative effects can be effective in helping to reduce the trend toward obesity, which could save over $3.9 billion in health care costs by 2018.

Low income families tend to have poorer quality diets and less knowledge about nutrition recommendations and ways to improve their diets than families with more financial resources.
The costs associated with feeding people in poverty, combined with the costs of treating diet-related diseases, speak strongly of the need for nutrition education. Nutrition education aims to improve the nutritional well-being of participants by providing information that will help them to change their behaviors. Lessons about choosing and preparing healthier foods, and following recommended food safety procedures, bring better health for families and individuals, and less of a need to spend money on health care. When participants learn to better manage their resources, they are less reliant on government nutrition and assistance programs. In tight economic times, it is important to point out that nutrition education pays off economically not only for learners, but also for taxpayers.

The Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP), a federally funded program led by Family Living Programs, provides community-based nutrition education programs in 68 counties. WNEP helps ensure that low-income families and youth have the information they need to make healthy eating choices. Community-based nutrition education programs made more than 429,000 educational contacts in 2011. More than 39% of these learners were youth or adults of color. The program targets food stamp-eligible pregnant women, families with children, youth, adults and the elderly. More than 750 community-based partnerships supported the program. These included public sector agencies such as public health, WIC and county municipal governments, as well as private non-profits and schools.

Six Wisconsin counties (Milwaukee, Rock, Dane, Racine, Kenosha, and Waukesha) participate in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). EFNEP reached 1,491 youth and 1,272 adults with educational programs in FY 2011.

A growing body of evidence confirms that well-designed, behavior-focused nutrition education improves diets and eating behaviors among families with limited resources. Multiple cost-benefit analyses in several states have highlighted the value of nutrition education. EFNEP saves states and families money: for every dollar invested in EFNEP, health care costs were reduced. In Iowa, nutrition education programming returns benefits of $10.75 in reduced long-term health costs for every $1 spend in program costs. Similar results have been shown in Virginia.

Wisconsin has documented the impacts of EFNEP, as well. At least 96% of the state’s program participants improved in one or more nutrition practices, such as considering healthful choices when selecting food, reading nutrition labels, planning meals, and feeding children breakfast. Eighty-two percent improved in one or more food resource management practices, such as planning meals, comparing prices, and using grocery lists; and 67% improved in one or more safe food handling practices, such as thawing or storing food safely.

The program encourages individuals and families to improve their diets, and increase physical activity. Studies show that people who run out of food or miss meals because they cannot afford them are among the most obese. Reducing obesity also saves on health care costs.

Nutrition education programs resulted in the following impacts:

- Youth learned to make healthful food choices.
- Parents reported that their children were eating more fruits and vegetables.
- Adults learned to eat healthy and be more physically active.
- Adults learned new skills and discovered resources to help them feed their families.
- Youth and adults learned to handle food safely.

Food security—the assured access to enough food for a healthy, active life—is vital to the wellbeing of children. Hunger and food insecurity have been linked to several health-related problems. In children this includes poor health, behavioral problems, and learning and academic problems. Additionally, studies have shown that food insecurity and tight budgets lead to increased household stress, particularly
amongst mothers and female caregivers. Medication adherence may not be a high priority for patients who must focus their resources on feeding their families.

Food insecurity puts children at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes. Compared to their peers in food-secure households, children in food-insecure households have worse math and reading scores, demonstrate poorer social skills, have more behavior problems, and experience worse health outcomes.

Nutrition programming improves access to sufficient, safe, affordable, healthful food. Family Living faculty and staff assess local levels of food insecurity, raise public awareness, and work collaboratively to make more families food secure. They also work to help limited-resource families achieve food security by teaching the skills to track spending, manage food dollars and plan nutritious meals.

Master Volunteers Help Consumers Preserve Safe, High-Quality Food for Their Families

In difficult economic times, hundreds of Wisconsin residents are turning to food preservation as a way to save money and ensure healthy, wholesome food for their families. Too often consumers use out-of-date recipes or methods that could fail to control harmful bacteria, causing illness or even death. Consumers need ready access to accurate information to ensure the products they prepare are wholesome and safe.

The resurgence of interest in home food preservation—and the growing awareness and concern about food safety—is drawing increased numbers of Wisconsin residents to Cooperative Extension Family Living Programs’ food preservation classes and resources. In 2010, more than 6,500 individuals across the state participated in educational programs on how to preserve food safely. To meet the increased need for assistance, Family Living trained more than 100 volunteers to assist. Master Food Preserver volunteers learn the science and safety behind food preservation and, once trained, they put their knowledge to work teaching others interested in canning or preserving their own food. Through a total of more than 6,000 volunteer hours, the reach of Family Living Programs has been extended to an even wider audience and the residents of Wisconsin have greater access to current, research-based information on safe food preservation.

Based on the work of Extension scientists in Ohio, $1.0 to $7.1 billion is a comprehensive estimate of a state’s annual cost of foodborne illnesses.

Strengthening Families, Building Statewide Capacity

Family-strengthening programs and policies create the conditions for families to carry out the many functions they efficiently and effectively perform for their members and for society in generating productive workers, in raising caring and committed members of society, and in caring for those who cannot always care for themselves, both young and old.

Research shows that protective parenting and strong relationships between parents and children can steer young people away from dangerous behaviors such as underage alcohol or drug use.

Over the past ten years, Family Living Programs has provided leadership in building strong parent-child relationships by training facilitators for the Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14. Almost 100 Extension county educators and 400 local partners have been trained to teach this program that has demonstrated positive results in communities across the state.

Every dollar spent implementing the Strengthening Families program saves at least $9.60 in alcohol-related treatment costs. Results of the program show that participating youth were less likely to use
alcohol and other drugs, display aggression and exhibit behavior problems. The program not only avoids negative outcomes for individuals and families, but also achieves substantial economic savings in funds that would otherwise have been spent on treatment costs.

**Parent Education—What Parents Need to Know**

Parent education and support programs that begin in pregnancy or soon after the birth of a child can help reduce child abuse and neglect. Family Living Programs provides three educational newsletters for parents—*Preparing to Parent, Parenting the First Year* and *Parenting the Second and Third Years*.

The newsletters guide parents through different stages of their child’s development with information on what to expect as their child develops and how to handle age-related concerns. Each newsletter suggests activities and offers tips for parents to bolster their child’s health, safety and well-being and enhance parent-child interactions.

Approximately 23,000 families—a bout one-third of all new parents in Wisconsin—received *Parenting the First Year* newsletters last year. Approximately 570,000 families have received *Parenting the First Year* since the project began 20 years ago. This means that approximately one in every 10 Wisconsin residents, and half of all Wisconsin children, have been raised by a parent who received this parenting education information.

An additional 13,000 Wisconsin families received *Parenting the Second and Third Years* last year. More than 700 of these received the Spanish language version of the newsletter.

A particular advantage of the *Parenting* newsletters is that they often reach parents most in need of parenting education but who may be the least likely to attend a class. UW-Extension offices in 61 counties coordinate distribution of the newsletters, along with partners that include more than 80 Kiwanis Clubs, 90 hospitals and health departments, and dozens of other businesses and service clubs.

*Preparing to Parent* is a new series for expectant mothers and fathers that became available in 2006. It includes three issues for early, mid and late pregnancy, and one issue on preparing for birth and immediately afterward. A Spanish version is also available. Electronic delivery is available free to the 72 county Extension offices around the state, their local partners and the families they serve.

Outcomes reported from those using Family Living Programs’ parenting information are significant. For example, parents cite the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series as a “very useful” source of child rearing advice more often than any other source of information. Parents change both their beliefs and actions in raising their children as a result of reading the newsletters. *Parents who receive Parenting the First Year, compared to those who don't, have beliefs significantly less like those of child-abusing parents. Parents who receive Parenting the First Year report spanking or slapping their babies significantly less often than comparable parents who did not receive the newsletters.*

These outcomes are making a difference for Wisconsin’s future. The benefits of good parenting skills flow to both families and communities in the form of less child maltreatment, increased immunization rates, increased frequency of breast-feeding and the increased school readiness of young children. *Conservative estimates indicate that for every dollar spent on Extension’s Parenting newsletters, nearly $7 in benefits are realized, savings in future spending by the child welfare, health care, educational, police and judicial systems.*

**Supporting Children When Parents Divorce or Separate**

More than 16,000 Wisconsin children experience their parent’s divorce each year. To help divorcing parents navigate the legal issues and make decisions in the best interest of their children, Family Living
Educators offer classes for divorcing parents. Effects on children, brought on by parental disagreements can appear in different ways—a drop in school performance, behavior problems at school, anxiety and depression. The good news is that research has identified the skills parents need to make their co-parenting relationship cooperative. Wisconsin’s family courts have the power to order divorcing parents to complete up to four hours of co-parenting education. Judges use this power in almost all counties. For more than ten years, Cooperative Extension’s family living educators have been working with family court commissioners, divorce mediators, judges and attorneys to conduct workshops for divorcing parents and children. Extension currently provides co-parenting education in 22 Wisconsin counties, involving 1,500 parents. The programs help parents understand the impact of parental conflict on their children, and build skills needed to successfully co-parent. Participating parents successfully complete mediation, resolve conflicts outside the courtroom, and are more likely to pay child support on time. These outcomes reduce the public costs of the court system, while creating significantly better lives for both parents and their children.

Caring for Family Members Across the Lifecycle

For most Wisconsin children, being cared for outside the home has become an expected part of early childhood. Research has shown that the quality of childcare has a big impact on young children. At its best, early childhood education can have positive life-changing effects on young children’s futures. Providing resources to help improve the quality of childcare can make a positive difference for the states’ youngest residents, improving their future school performance and preventing future behavioral problems. Family Living educators offered 1,600 local programs and discussion groups in 36 Wisconsin counties. In the last decade, approximately 15,000 educational contacts have been made with early childhood education staff at Better Kid Care programs. The programs bring valuable educational resources to childcare providers around the state, including rural counties with otherwise limited training opportunities, leading to improvements in early care and education programs in Wisconsin.

A 2009 national survey estimated that approximately 43.5 million people in the United States provide some level of care for an adult age 50 or older. For many caregivers, involvement in caregiving results in the need for more information or education. In the 2009 AARP survey, nearly eight in ten caregivers wanted more information on topics such as keeping a loved one safe at home; communicating more effectively with the care recipient and other family members; balancing work and eldercare; and managing the stress of caregiving (National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, 2009). In response to caregivers’ need for information and education, program specialists and county-based educators in Cooperative Extension Family Living Programs have been involved in training more than 500 persons to lead at least one of four evidence-based curricula designed to help caregivers. As a result of training provided by Family Living educators, leaders are now available in nearly 90% of Wisconsin’s 72 counties to teach at least one of four curricula designed to help caregivers. As of January 2011, more than 7,000 family caregivers had participated in these programs.

Overall, the leadership and participation of Family Living Programs has made a positive difference in addressing the needs of Wisconsin family caregivers and their families. Further, there is evidence that one of the most frequently taught caregiving curricula, Powerful Tools for Caregivers, has had a documented positive impact on the lives of those who experience it.

Working for Wisconsin Families

Family Living’s unique and effective programs are based on university research, Extension educators based in every county and on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus have a direct link to university resources, allowing them to draw from and contribute to current research about families. By responding to the challenges facing today’s families with evidence-informed programs and practices, along with local knowledge gained from living in the communities they serve, Extension educators are
helping to create an environment where families have the information, skills and assets they need to improve their quality of life and contribute to their communities.

**Family Living Educators Provide Community Leadership and Planning that Supports Children and Families**

Family Living faculty and staff often serve in leadership roles where they can engage people and support changes that benefit families. They lead and participate in strategic planning efforts, organize educational programs and help communities achieve goals based on local needs.

Through their efforts, Family Living educators strengthen the community’s capacity to meet pressing needs, with the end result being a better environment for children and families.

Family Living programs:

- Help create strong families that serve as the foundation for community life by enhancing family relationships, parenting, child development and the community institutions that promote family well-being.
- Promote healthy, well-nourished families as they learn to manage food dollars, plan nutritious meals, and purchase, prepare and serve food that is safe to eat.
- Help families meet future needs while keeping pace with day-to-day expenses and addressing the basics of earning, spending, saving, investing, health care, and housing issues.

When local institutions, agencies and groups work more closely with each other to coordinate services and programs and share resources and expertise, they are not only more cost-efficient but more effective. County-based Family Living Programs is an excellent investment in initiatives that are important to local communities and that can best be advanced by research-driven, community-based education.

*Educational planning, evaluation, and research skills save local agencies and departments thousands of dollars and help improve their capacity to meet the needs of children and families.*

Family Living Programs promotes family strengths and helps communities become more positive environments for family life. Community-based education provides direct teaching to individuals, better equips staff from public and private partners, and informs decision-makers.

More than ever, local, state and national leaders understand that people who lack the benefits of a healthy home and community environment are not as productive and satisfied as people who live in strong communities supported by strong educational programs.

**For More Information**

To see additional examples of Family Living Programs that support Wisconsin’s families, visit [http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/) or contact:

Laurie Boyce  
State Program Director & Assistant Dean/Director  
Family Living Programs  
Cooperative Extension  
University of Wisconsin-Extension  
laurie.boyce@ces.uwex.edu