

## Hearing Children's Needs

Approximately 450-600 of the 150,000 infants born in Ohio each year have hearing loss, and three to four newborns per 1,000 have a hearing loss that is likely to interfere with the development of communication skills. With these rates in mind, the Ohio Senate voted unanimously in favor of the Universal Newborn Hearing Screening legislation in March 2002. House Bill 150 requires Ohio hospitals to test each infant's hearing prior to discharge and mandates that hospitals be in compliance with the law by June 30, 2004. As a result, the Regional Infant Hearing Program was created in Ohio.

The Regional Infant Hearing Program is a family-focused, free-of-charge outreach service for infants and toddlers age birth to three who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and their families. Since 1994, the Family Child Learning Center (FCLC) has provided intervention services to hard-of-hearing and deaf infants, toddlers

and their families in Summit, Stark, Medina and Portage counties through an Ohio Department of Health-funded grant. In 2001, however, the Ohio Department of Health expanded services to include three additional counties in Region Nine of the 10 regions covered in Ohio, adding Wayne, Mahoning and Columbiana counties in this umbrella of services to families.

Housed at FCLC, the Regional Infant Hearing Program staff offer home visitation, information and support on hearing, hearing loss, amplification and cochlear implants. Coordinators can give objective, comprehensive information on communication options to empower families in making decisions for their child. Moreover, regional infant hearing specialists can provide links to audiology, speech therapy, deaf adults and help foster friendships with other families.

Project Director for region nine, Sandi Brotman Domoracki said, "Zero to three years of age is a critical time for language development. When hearing loss is identified early in infants and they receive early amplification, as well as family-focused assistance in developing



*The Regional Infant Hearing Program housed at the Family Child Learning Center conducts home visits to families on a weekly basis. Makenzie Dougherty is one of the 30 children who receive regular home visits from parent advisors.*

communication, we are able to capitalize on that very important stage in language growth." Emphasis is put on incorporating strategies in family daily routines and play, explained Domoracki, because this is the area infants and toddlers learn best.

The Regional Infant Hearing Program is funded by the Ohio Department of Health, Bureau of Early Intervention Service. Prior to 2001, the Ohio Department of Health supplied \$62,746 in grant funds for the hearing program. In 2001, with the expansion of the region, the grant tripled to \$206,594 in funding for family supports and services. With this extra funding, the Regional Infant Hearing Program coordinated a

tracking system for early intervention of infants identified as having failed the initial hearing screening at birth. With this tool, families can get the best start on intervention and assistive services to aid in communication development.

For further information on the Regional Infant Hearing Program Region Nine, contact the Family Child Learning Center at 330-633-2055. The Family Child Learning Center is a department of Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron.

