



NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS

2024-25 ANNUAL REPORT



From left: Braxton Lindhorst, CYFS grant specialist, daughter Sofia, wife Martha and daughter Scarlett.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools hit a major milestone in 2024 — two decades of research, collaboration and impact. And we've entered our third decade with great optimism.

Looking forward, our focus remains clear: make a positive difference for Nebraskans, at every stage of life, through social, behavioral and educational research.

Relationships have always been the center's greatest strength. Over the years, our many collaborations and partnerships in research, practice and policy have turned ideas into action and ensured our work supports meaningful change in communities across the state.

Thanks to the remarkable contributions of our faculty, staff and students — along with our interdisciplinary network of more than 100 research affiliates — we continue to make significant progress toward our mission and build new partnerships.

The center's progress would not be possible without support from hundreds of educators, administrators, parents, policymakers, funders and others who engage with us.

CYFS' newest breakthrough is made possible by private donations through the University of Nebraska Foundation: The Signature Research Impact Program (SRIP). Launched in conjunction with our 20th anniversary, this exciting program supports high-impact social, behavioral and educational research that tackles critical issues affecting Nebraska's children, youth, families, schools and communities. The program directly benefits Nebraskans, while generating key data to secure future external grants. We are incredibly grateful for the generosity that made this program a reality and look forward to sharing its results.

Working alongside CYFS' dedicated team continues to fill me with pride and purpose. Together, we're not just conducting research — we're changing lives, both today and for future generations.

Susan M. Sheridan



Susan M. Sheridan, Ph.D.

Director, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families & Schools
George Holmes University Professor of Educational Psychology

CONNECT WITH US

cyfs.unl.edu	@unlcyfs	@unlcyfs.bsky.social
cyfs@unl.edu	@unlcyfs	@unl_cyfs

ABOUT CYFS

CYFS was founded in 2004 as an interdisciplinary research center within the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. CYFS receives support as a UNL Program of Excellence, and its research programs are funded largely through external grants and contracts.

CYFS is home to two specialized academies:

- Nebraska Academy for Early Childhood Research (NAECR)
Learn more at: naecr.unl.edu
- Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics & Psychometrics (MAP Academy)
Learn more at: mapacademy.unl.edu



SUPPORT CYFS

If you wish to support CYFS, please visit:
cyfs.unl.edu/donate

Our mission is to make a positive difference in people’s lives through research in the social, behavioral and educational sciences.



Scarlett and Martha Lindhorst.

Our vision is that all children, youth, families and schools have the opportunity to realize their potential and reach beyond.

We conduct research through grant-funded programs, provide comprehensive research support, and share research findings across audiences and platforms.

HELPING RESEARCH GROW

CYFS offers competitive funding opportunities to University of Nebraska researchers whose work makes a positive difference in people’s lives. These programs advance innovative, transformative research and foster interdisciplinary collaboration that strengthens our collective impact.

CYFS Signature Research Impact Program (SRIP)

Funder: Private donors

This program supports high-impact research in the social, behavioral and educational sciences that is relevant to Nebraskans while fostering collaboration and generating pilot data to secure future external funding.

Learn more on page 22.

Applied Analytics & Data Infrastructure (AADI) Catalyst Program

Funder: Nebraska Research Initiative

This program enables faculty to collaborate with MAP Academy researchers, drawing upon their expertise in rigorous analysis and database support while laying the groundwork for future research partnerships and competitive proposals.

Learn more on page 23.

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The research projects featured in this report are housed in CYFS. Learn more about our research support services at cyfsgrant.unl.edu.

CYFS RESEARCH THEMES

CYFS collaborates with faculty across the University of Nebraska system, and with funding agencies and other partners, to address the needs of children, youth, families, schools and communities. CYFS research focuses on six primary themes listed below.

BY THE NUMBERS: 2024-25 Academic Year

This year, 81 grants representing all six themes were awarded to CYFS research affiliates. Most grants encompassed more than one theme — reflecting the complexity of social, behavioral and educational challenges.

Research theme icons appear throughout this report to show how individual projects connect to the center’s research priorities.



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Leen-Kiat Soh, principal investigator



EMPOWERING FUTURE K-12 TEACHERS WITH COMPUTER SCIENCE SKILLS

As computers become more and more ubiquitous in nearly every aspect of daily life, the demand for teachers who can prepare the next generation of tech leaders is more pressing than ever.

Leen-Kiat Soh, professor of computing, is working to ensure future generations of K-12 teachers in Nebraska are equipped with the skills and knowledge to bring cutting-edge computer science into the classroom.

“Training in-service teachers to teach K-12 computer science is no longer sufficient,” he said. “There is a need to engage and train undergraduate

students studying to become K-12 teachers to teach computer science as part of their initial teaching load.”

A growing shortage of in-service teachers in critical areas of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and in career and technical education continues to impact students’ educational opportunities.

Although several programs have emerged as part of a widespread effort to expand participation in advanced computing, such programs have focused on training in-service teachers — not on undergraduate students preparing to enter the education field.

Soh is building a sustainable, end-to-end ecosystem of computer science education to recruit, train and support continuous learning for undergraduate pre-service teachers.

He and his team are helping build infrastructures and pathways — such as policies and curricula — across four- and two-year colleges. Researchers are also exploring best practices and methods for recruiting, training, educating and engaging pre-service teachers.

To ensure their models are suited to a variety of classroom settings and teaching pathways, researchers are collaborating with educators and leaders at Southeast Community College, Metropolitan Community College, Western Nebraska Community College, Northeast Community College and Central Community College.

The team is also partnering with other state institutions and local industry — such as the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Tech Collaborative — to form a consortium that offers teachers ongoing support and education throughout their careers.

“We need more computer science courses taught at the K-12 level,” Soh said. “We have to find teachers who want to learn about computer science and pass it on to future generations of students.”

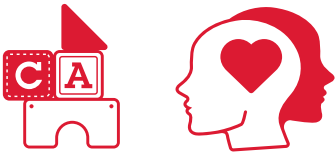
This project is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation. Along with Soh, the research team includes Brian Dorn, associate professor of computer science and associate dean for academic and faculty affairs at the University of Nebraska at Omaha; Gwen Nugent, research professor emeritus, CYFS; Wendy Smith, director and research professor, Center for Science, Mathematics and Computer Education; and Guy Trainin, professor of teaching, learning and teacher education.

CYFS Research Themes: Academic Intervention & Learning; Rural Schools & Communities

GETTING READY AT 20: ENGAGING FAMILIES, PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SUCCESS



From left: Susan Sheridan, Lisa Knoche, Tammi Hechtner-Galvin, Sue Bainter and Katie Zabel.



For more than 20 years, the Getting Ready research program has enhanced young children’s learning and development by bringing evidence-based family engagement strategies to early childhood programs throughout Nebraska.

As one of the first research programs launched by CYFS in 2003, Getting Ready has focused on strengthening relationships in children’s lives, including relationships among parents and the early childhood educators connected to the family.

The Getting Ready intervention was developed by Susan Sheridan, CYFS director, and the late Carolyn Pope Edwards, who served as the program’s first principal investigators. Its original funding came from the National Institutes of Health as part of a large federal interagency consortium on school readiness.

Since that time, more than 5,500 children and 620 early childhood educators across Nebraska and the Midwest have benefitted from the Getting Ready program. Preschool children receiving the Getting Ready program have been found to fare better than 75% of their peers in handling their emotions, managing their own behavior and developing and sustaining relationships. They also tested better than 80% of their peers in language and early reading abilities.

“We have taken what we’ve learned from two decades of rigorous research and successfully applied it in homes, classrooms and communities across the state.”

“Getting Ready is a great example of translating university research into something that really works in practice,” said Lisa Knoche, CYFS co-director and current principal investigator of Getting Ready. “We have taken what we’ve learned from two decades of rigorous research and successfully applied it in homes, classrooms and communities across the state.”

Developed at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Getting Ready is designed to boost learning and development among children ages 5 and younger who participate in home visitation or center-based early childhood programs. The collaborative approach supports children’s growth by encouraging family engagement and building on the strengths of both parents and children.

The approach includes eight strategies and a collaborative family communication structure educators can use in their interactions with families during home visits, parent-teacher conferences, informal conversations and more.

Together, educators and families set goals to help children reach their fullest potential.

The program has provided opportunities for struggling young children — particularly those with disabilities or other disadvantages — to make progress that will help them succeed as they move through school.

Knoche said Getting Ready’s steady growth and recognition has been fulfilling.

“Initially, when you’re establishing the evidence, you’re just a research team,” she said. “Getting Ready is now recognized by the early childhood community in Nebraska, and people understand how it can positively impact their program and families served.”

Getting Ready has been funded by grants from the National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Education; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-Administration for Children & Families; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; Nebraska Department of Education; Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services; and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation.

CYFS Research Themes: Early Childhood Education & Development; Social, Emotional & Behavioral Well-being

REDUCING CHILD OBESITY WITH RESPONSIVE FEEDING PRACTICES

Healthy eating habits developed during early childhood lay the foundation for lifelong wellness, helping prevent many chronic health issues.

Promoting these habits is particularly important for children in rural communities, where resources are sometimes limited. Research shows that rural children are 26% more likely to experience obesity than their urban peers.

Because obesity is a leading risk factor for serious diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease, Dipti Dev, Betti and Richard Robinson associate professor of child, youth and family studies and Nebraska Extension specialist, is spearheading a five-year program to help rural child care programs foster healthy eating habits among young children.

“Rural children and their caregivers face unique challenges with diet and nutrition,” she said. “In-home child care settings are especially vital in rural areas because they provide flexible schedules that suit the needs of farmers and other rural families.”

Central to the project is EAT for Prevention, an online community engagement program designed to equip child care providers with responsive feeding skills. This approach encourages children to self-regulate their food

Graduate research assistant Rachel Nicole Augustine measures a young girl's height and weight.

intake and make conscious choices about eating, guided by their hunger and fullness cues.

Dev's earlier research indicates children eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains as a result of the program. Providers also reported lower stress during meals and noted that children seemed more engaged — and even expanded their vocabularies through mealtime conversations.

Building on these early findings, her team is observing mealtimes of 200 children, ages 3-5, from 100 rural in-home child care settings, measuring what foods children are served and how much they eat.

Changes in children's diet and BMI will be measured, and changes in skin carotenoid — fat-soluble plant pigments that accumulate and protect the skin from sunlight-induced oxidation effects — will be evaluated using a Veggie Meter® device, which assesses skin carotenoids as biomarkers for fruit and vegetable intake.

Providers' feeding practices will also be monitored through surveys and observations. Nebraska Extension professionals will serve as coaches, offering tailored guidance based on each provider's mealtime routines and challenges with children's eating behaviors.

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Rural children and their caregivers face unique challenges with diet and nutrition. In-home child care settings are especially vital in rural areas because they provide flexible schedules that suit the needs of farmers and other rural families.

Dev is collaborating with local communities, Extension professionals and researchers from seven universities, as well as the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Dev expects this first-of-its-kind study on responsive feeding practices to have far-reaching impacts on research, policy and practice, and to build capacity among rural child care providers to address childhood obesity.

“I envision Nebraska leading the way in this area, advancing best practices in responsive feeding to create healthier futures for rural children across the nation,” she said.

This project is funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health. Along with Dev, the research team from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln includes Lisa Franzen-Castle, associate dean for faculty affairs, College of Education and Human Sciences; and Lisa Knoche, CYFS co-director. Another partner is David Dzewaltowski, professor of health promotion at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

CYFS Research Themes: Early Childhood Education & Development; Rural Schools & Communities; Social, Emotional & Behavioral Well-being



Graduate research assistant Ashna Chauhan measures a young boy's fruit and vegetable intake using a Veggie Meter.

STUDY EXPLORES EFFECTS OF INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY DYNAMICS ON CHILD WELL-BEING



Family dynamics among caregivers tend to be complicated. They can become even more complex when grandparents take on coparenting roles.

Weiman Xu, postdoctoral fellow at the Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy) and a recent graduate from the Global Family Health and Well-being program within the Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, is exploring the association between intergenerational coparenting and children’s social-emotional development.

Xu is studying the role of grandparents in raising children and its effect on children’s well-being — and the potential impact of their coparenting



Weiman Xu,
principal investigator

relationship with the child’s parents.

Xu spent about 40 days in 2024 gathering data in China’s Shandong Province. She distributed surveys to more than 700 families with children ages 3-6 and one or more grandparents who are involved in raising the children. For each family, both parents and the primary grandparent shared information about their parenting views and responsibilities in the family.

“I want to see whether coparenting with grandparents creates a significant influence, and whether that influence is good or bad,” Xu said.

Xu notes that traditional Chinese family values emphasize family cohesion and harmony, and respect for elders. Smaller family sizes and rising maternal employment in China, she said, have made grandparent involvement in child-rearing more common.

“Almost 73% of grandparents in China are involved in child-rearing,” she said. “We are looking at the dynamics among these caregivers, and how those dynamics affect the children involved.”

Globally, only 16 published studies exist that examine the relationship between intergenerational coparenting and child development, all of which were conducted in China and the U.S. That shortage of research, Xu said, provides an opportunity for her findings to support future studies.

Xu intends to provide parents, grandparents and other caregivers with useful insights and strategies to work together in raising children, supporting both child development and family well-being.

This project is funded by a one-year graduate scholars grant from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute. Xu’s faculty mentor is Gilbert Parra, professor of child, youth and family studies.

CYFS Research Themes: Social, Emotional & Behavioral Well-being; Rural Schools & Communities



SEARCHING FOR MEANINGFUL SOLUTIONS TO BULLYING

Because bullying often begins and ends at school, teachers are the front line of defense against such behavior.

However, teachers in one country may respond differently than their international counterparts.

Jared Noetzel, doctoral candidate in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s school psychology program, is leading a dissertation study on culturally responsive teacher training to prevent bullying in schools.

Research shows bullying affects about one-third of adolescents globally, and has a major impact on well-being, health and quality of life. Because teachers interact daily with their students and have great power to directly reduce bullying, understanding what influences their response is crucial to improving teacher training and school climate.

While individual-level factors related to teacher response have been widely examined,



Jared Noetzel,
principal investigator

studies on culture are limited. International variability in teacher responses has been identified, but the specific reasons behind this variability are unknown.

“I’m hoping to start an initial conversation about cultural differences,” he said. “The more we know about how culture might impact people’s decisions, the more we can develop systems and make spaces more accommodating.”

Noetzel is gathering survey data from about 1,900 primary and secondary teachers in the U.S. and South Korea — equally split among the two countries and school levels — to assess how they respond to a hypothetical bullying scenario. He will then

identify similarities and differences in teachers’ decisions to intervene or not.

Noetzel’s findings will clarify how national context and self-identity affect a teacher’s decision to intervene in bullying.

“How a teacher interprets survey items and their subsequent responses in one country likely will not be directly comparable to those teachers from another country,” he said. “Cultural comparisons will be tricky.”

This project is funded by a grant from the Society for the Study of School Psychology. Noetzel’s faculty mentor is Susan Swearer, chairperson and Willa Cather Professor, Department of Educational Psychology.

CYFS Research Theme: Social, Emotional & Behavioral Well-being



From left: Janella Kang, Sanya Tuncan-Minden, Amanda Prokasky, Kerry Miller, Lorey Wheeler, Laura Fritz, Charlie Lewis and Alexis Chavez.

Early screening and support are vital for healthy child development, especially for immigrant and refugee families navigating unfamiliar systems in the U.S.

A recent multi-campus study found that many immigrant and refugee families in Nebraska struggle to access services to address developmental delays or disabilities in children, particularly those age 3 and younger.

Barriers include language differences, limited awareness of available services and discomfort with the health care system due to past experiences.

Despite these challenges, immigrant and refugee caregivers, like their Western counterparts, actively support their children's development, emphasizing good nutrition; viewing speech difficulties as early signs of potential concerns; modeling routines; and encouraging learning through toys, books and conversation.

Lorey Wheeler, CYFS research professor and director of the Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy), recently collaborated with researchers at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Munroe-Meyer Institute to improve access to early childhood resources for immigrant and refugee families in Nebraska — and to identify barriers to accessing those resources.

Through community engagement and listening sessions, researchers explored how immigrant and refugee families think about child development, delays and disabilities, and how

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Knowing how to navigate health and education systems made a big difference for caregivers, which demonstrates the value of expanding access to community liaisons or navigators who can guide families through these systems.

cultural differences may influence access to early intervention services.

To meet their children's needs, Wheeler said, immigrant caregivers turn to a mix of formal and informal supports, including doctors, teachers, online resources, and advice from family members and other parents.

Wheeler notes the families' reliance on doctors and teachers illustrates the need for professionals to be aware of the unique challenges these families face.

“Knowing how to navigate health and education systems made a big difference for caregivers, which demonstrates the value of expanding access to community liaisons or navigators who can guide families through these systems,” she said.

Language remains a key barrier. Parents reported struggling when interpreters were unavailable or ineffective. When materials were

available in their primary language, parents were more likely to understand and use services.

Wheeler said findings will be used to inform targeted strategies to better serve the state's immigrant and refugee families.

“Continued efforts can build on families' knowledge and strengths to make sure all families have access to the care, information and resources needed to help their children thrive,” she said.

This project is funded by grants from the University of Nebraska Collaboration Initiative and the Nebraska Department of Education's Early Development Network. Along with Wheeler, the research team includes Charlie Lewis, project director at the Center on Children, Families and the Law; Kerry Miller, associate director of Munroe-Meyer's Department of Education and Child Development; Amanda Prokasky, MAP Academy senior research specialist; Julie Tippens, former associate professor of child, youth and family studies; and MAP Academy research assistants Alexis Chavez and Janella Kang. UNMC contributors include Laura Fritz, Yaritza Estrada Garcia, Rosy Htu, Sanya Tuncan-Minden and Graciela Sharif.

CYFS Research Theme: Research, Measurement & Evaluation Methods



RESEARCHING WAYS TO EVALUATE, STREAMLINE COMMUNITY BREASTMILK SHARING PROGRAM

Children who are breastfed as infants are less likely to develop obesity. However, despite recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 25% of infants in the U.S. are exclusively breastfed for the first six months.

As many as 70% of mothers experience problems with breastfeeding, contributing to lower rates. Research suggests these low breastfeeding rates may compound potential nutrition-related health disparities from the start of life.

Patty Kuo, associate professor of child, youth and family studies, and Alex Mason, professor of child, youth and family studies and CYFS, are partnering with Malone Maternal Wellness to evaluate an innovative, community-led breastmilk sharing program.

Kuo and Mason are exploring ways to enhance the Malone Milk Share Program, which provides free breastmilk to anyone regardless of income, race or ethnicity.

They will survey 25 participants and 25 non-participants to establish the program's feasibility and acceptability.

Jillian Boldt, director of Malone Maternal Wellness, said the evaluation project is essential to the milk share program's future and possible expansion.

"There are so many maternity care deserts out in western Nebraska that could benefit from a program like this," she said. "But potential funders want to see that it's effective. That's where the data from this project come in."

Founded in 2023, Malone Milk Share is the nation's only community-based program that facilitates breastmilk sharing through informed donor screening, and human milk storage and delivery aligned with international safety standards.

Since the program's launch, more than 19,600

ounces of milk have been delivered. By Boldt's calculations, that has saved recipient families nearly \$113,000.

"Most babies drink 24 to 32 ounces a day," Boldt said. "With some milk banks charging \$6.25 an ounce, that adds up quickly."

Milk is delivered to recipients by the Malone Center's Milk Mobile, within a two-hour radius of Lincoln and Omaha, in Nebraska only.

Kuo and Mason are also collaborating with the Bureau of Sociological Research to include some questions in their statewide survey to better gauge Nebraskans' beliefs and knowledge about breastmilk sharing.

"We want to get the pulse on statewide thoughts on breastfeeding, and what barriers exist if there is a potential need," Kuo said."

The community partnership aspect of the project is what most appeals to both Kuo and Mason.

"The unique thing about this program is that it's already in place, developed by a community provider in response to needs they have observed in their community," Mason said. "Partnering with Malone and helping to rigorously evaluate these programs is important."

This project is funded by a grant from the Great Plains IDeA-CTR at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

CYFS Research Theme: Early Childhood Education & Development



“*There are so many maternity care deserts out in western Nebraska that could benefit from a program like this.*”

From left: Jillian Boldt, Jordan Hardesty, Patty Kuo and Alex Mason.



A “KNEW” PARTNERSHIP FOR RECRUITING, RETAINING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

For many Nebraska families, finding affordable child care can seem like piecing together an impossible puzzle. Parents juggle waitlists, long commutes and tough choices between work and staying home — all while early childhood teachers themselves face low pay, long hours and stress.

To address this challenge, Nebraska Extension, Communities for Kids, the University of Nebraska at Kearney and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln are collaborating to launch the Knowledge Network for Early Childhood Education Workforce (KNEW), a workforce development program focused on recruiting and retaining early childhood

educators across the state — particularly in rural communities, where the shortage is most severe.

The program is led by Philip Lai, associate professor of communication disorders at UNK; the UNL portion is led by Holly Hatton, associate professor of child, youth and family studies. Both are CYFS research affiliates.

“The KNEW project is truly a cross-campus collaboration,” Lai said. “This work is vital in addressing a troubling decline in both the availability and quality of early childhood care and education across rural Nebraska.”

In recent years, Lai said, growing vacancies in child care professionals have posed serious challenges. Without access to enriching early learning environments, he said, children’s development may be hindered.

According to a 2023 report from Voices for Children in Nebraska, 84 of the state’s 93 counties do not have enough spots in licensed child care facilities to meet demand. Nine of those counties were classified as “child care deserts.”

Additionally, research from Nebraska Extension and We Care for Kids shows that almost one-third of parents with children ages 5 and younger left the workforce because they were unable to find affordable child care, and 74% of Nebraskans believe a lack of quality, affordable child care is a serious statewide problem.

“

This work is vital in addressing a troubling decline in both the availability and quality of early childhood care and education across rural Nebraska.

“At the same time, parents lacking dependable child care often face difficulties in maintaining steady employment — an issue that reverberates through local businesses and impacts the broader state economy,” Lai said.

Using a collaborative approach to strengthen Nebraska’s early childhood workforce, KNEW brings together educators, businesses and nonprofits from 15 rural communities to build local capacity and enhance professional development.

By assembling this diverse team, the program creates local networks for skill building, professional support and identifying effective and sustainable ways to provide quality child care.

One ardent supporter of KNEW is Nebraska



Sen. Deb Fischer, who sponsored the federal appropriation. She called the program “an investment in Nebraska’s next generation.”

Hatton is working with Nebraska’s Extension’s Early Childhood team to design, implement and evaluate personalized professional learning experiences. These include training in emotional resilience, conflict resolution and reflective practice.

“Our work is about more than training; it is about providing community-based learning and supports that uplift educators’ existing knowledge while helping them grow new skills,” Hatton said. “Through professional learning experiences that focus on resilience, reflection and connection, we can strengthen both educators and children’s early learning environments.”

Nebraska Extension is offering 16 hours of paid training for educators through a mix of online learning and reflective consultation.

“Our goal is to support and create compassionate caregivers for Nebraska’s children — helping them respond to conflict in healthy ways and better understand themselves and how they interact with others,” said Jaci Foged, Early Childhood Extension coordinator. “We think this training offers valuable tools for educators to use in their daily work.”

This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through a subaward from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

CYFS Research Theme: Early Childhood Education & Development

Jaci Foged, early childhood Extension educator, leads KNEW workshop.



NEW DATA COORDINATION CENTER TO STRENGTHEN EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE



From left: Amanda Prokasky, principal investigator, and Lorey Wheeler, co-principal investigator.

“Ultimately, the shared dataset will allow researchers to focus on how best to support the early childhood workforce. A well-supported workforce ensures that young children can thrive in the best possible early childhood environment.”

Because university researchers often use different methods and measures, comparing results across studies can be problematic.

Amanda Prokasky, senior research specialist at the Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy), and Lorey Wheeler, MAP Academy director, are collaborating with five other universities to develop a data coordination center to support cross-site analyses and help share findings more effectively.

The Head Start University Partnership: Early Childhood Education Workforce Well-being Data Coordination Center includes research teams from six universities, including the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Each research team has conducted its own intervention, at their own sites, to improve the emotional, mental and physical well-being of early childhood teachers.

The center, led by Prokasky and Wheeler, is responsible for building a large, combined dataset that will equip consortium partners to answer questions about how to support

well-being among the early childhood workforce — questions that cannot be addressed by a single site’s data alone.

They are also developing cross-team research questions for all six sites using the shared dataset, and creating analytic plans, decision-making guidelines and universal file-sharing procedures for merged datasets.

Eventually, data will be combined into a master shared dataset, or multiple datasets focusing on different aspects of the consortium’s work, to address its analytic needs.

“One of our main tasks is to create variable harmonization across all six sites so we can combine all the data,” Prokasky said.

Wheeler noted the center is further supported by the MAP Academy’s Applied Analytics and Data Infrastructure (AADI) Research Core funding from the University of Nebraska.

“The Nebraska Research Initiatives investment in the MAP Academy through AADI funds

have helped us build and train staff with the data harmonization skills needed to do this work,” Wheeler said. “It highlights how the MAP Academy can support and push research agendas further through our analytics and data infrastructure expertise.”

In addition to highlighting the importance of the early childhood workforce, Prokasky said the center helps the MAP Academy establish itself as a leader in data infrastructure.

“Ultimately, the shared dataset will allow researchers to focus on how best to support the early childhood workforce,” she said. “A well-supported workforce ensures that young children can thrive in the best possible early childhood environment.”

The center is funded by a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families. Along with Prokasky and Wheeler, it includes researchers from the Universities of Colorado at Denver, Oklahoma, Virginia and Texas Health Sciences Center at Houston, as well as Georgetown University.

CYFS Research Themes: Research, Measurement & Evaluation Methods; Early Childhood Education & Development



STUDY EXAMINES PARENTS' WELL-BEING IN FAMILIES WITH AUTISTIC CHILDREN



For families raising a child with autism spectrum disorder, everyday moments of connection can be difficult. The disorder affects about 1 in 36 children in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and often hinders social communication skills essential for personal, professional and academic growth.

HyeonJin Yoon, CYFS research assistant professor, is leading the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's role in a cross-campus study exploring how parents' well-being affects how they communicate with their autistic children.

Researchers in Lincoln, Omaha and Kearney are recruiting two groups of participants at each site: families with autistic children and families with typically developing children. The target age range for children is 6 to 10 years.

"This project is designed to make a meaningful impact on Nebraska families and children by closely examining the dynamic between parent well-being, and parent-child communication," Yoon said.

During each visit, parents complete a survey that assesses emotions, anxiety, depression and stress levels. Parents and their children then participate in a brief play session with toys, which is recorded and analyzed to determine potential links between parents' overall psychological well-being and how they communicate and interact with their child.

Yoon said this research is especially timely following the COVID pandemic, which disrupted access to health and support services for many families.

"What excites me most is the opportunity to better understand the

connection among parenting, well-being and parent-child communication," Yoon said. "We don't fully understand how those areas relate, especially in families of children with autism. I'm looking forward to uncovering those relationships, which will hopefully lead to more personalized support or intervention for both autistic children and their caregivers."

This project is funded by the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Great Plains IDeA-CTR. Along with Yoon, the research team includes Philip Lai, associate professor of communications disorders at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, and other researchers from UNL, UNMC and UNK.

CYFS Research Themes: Social, Emotional & Behavioral Well-being; Early Childhood Education & Development



HyeonJin Yoon, principal investigator

2025-26 LAYMAN AWARD

Funded by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's Office of Research and Innovation, Layman Awards provide funding for projects that will enhance the recipient's ability to obtain external funding to support prominent scholarly work.

The following 2025-26 Layman Award is housed in CYFS.

"Developing a Policy Framework for Well-being and Success of College Students Experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity"



MILAD MOHEBALI
Assistant Professor,
Educational Administration

An alarming number of college students experience basic needs insecurity, including food, housing and health care, as they navigate complex and uncertain policy contexts to get by, earn a degree and get ahead.

While existing research has examined the extent and impacts of basic needs among college students, little research is available on how these students navigate shifting and uncertain policy contexts in and outside of college.

This study fills this gap by addressing the following research questions: What policy contexts, in and outside of college, affect the daily lives of students experiencing basic needs insecurity, and how?

During the 2025-26 academic year, Milad Mohebali, assistant professor of educational administration, will conduct interviews and collect data on participants' everyday experiences, examining field notes and reviewing policy documents related to programs, institutions and community contexts where students live, work and study.

Participants in this pilot project will include 30 college students from different backgrounds who self-identify as experiencing basic needs insecurity, each studying in different geographic and institutional settings in Nebraska.

Findings will help develop an innovative policy framework, critical for informing the design and implementation of policies and programs that are efficient and effective in addressing basic needs insecurity on college campuses and improve well-being and academic outcomes among these vulnerable populations.

CYFS SIGNATURE RESEARCH IMPACT PROGRAM

The CYFS Signature Research Impact Program (SRIP) tackles critical issues affecting Nebraska’s children, youth, families, schools and communities.

Established in 2024 as part the center’s 20th anniversary milestone and vision for the future, it supports high-impact research in the social, behavioral and educational sciences that benefits Nebraskans, fosters collaboration and generates pilot data to secure external funding.

Funding for this program is provided by generous private donations directed to the center through the University of Nebraska Foundation.

2025-26 SRIP Award



CIARA OUSLEY
Assistant Professor, Special Education & Communication Disorders
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

“Understanding Sibling Relational Dynamics to Support Autistic Children Who Use AAC”

Autism is the fastest-growing disability category in Nebraska. About 30% of autistic children do not develop vocal speech by age 4 and require non-verbal augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods such as gestures, facial expressions, picture cards and tablets to communicate.

While family-implemented interventions can boost communication and AAC use, they often exclude siblings as communication partners. Research is limited on how neurotypical children perceive their autistic sibling, particularly when they use AAC.

Ciara Ousley, assistant professor of special education and communication disorders, is leading a two-year project to better understand relationships between typically developing children and their autistic siblings who use AAC. She and HyeonJin Yoon, research assistant professor at the Nebraska Center for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy), are exploring how siblings view their roles and responsibilities with one another through interviews and observations of the siblings’ play-time interactions.

“When we talk about family supports, that typically means parents and caregivers,” Ousley said. “We sometimes forget about including siblings who could really influence the child as well.”

Ousley is recruiting 10 families to participate, each with an autistic child between the ages of 6 and 12; a neurotypical sibling, age 5 to 15; and a parent or caregiver.

At-home interviews help researchers gather data on each child’s perceived roles and responsibilities in their sibling relationship, while parents are interviewed to expand and validate the children’s responses.

Families video record 15-minute sibling play sessions at home and the team analyzes these videos to see how the children naturally communicate in their everyday settings.

Ousley said this research provides the foundation for developing a sibling-implemented intervention for the nearly 600,000 autistic children who use AAC.

MAP ACADEMY PROGRAM PROMOTES HIGH-QUALITY RESEARCH, NEW COLLABORATIONS

The Nebraska Academy for Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics (MAP Academy) offers an innovative support opportunity to help researchers strengthen their data and analyses.

The Applied Analytics and Data Infrastructure (AADI) Catalyst Program was developed to meet growing demand for the MAP Academy’s highly specialized supports among interdisciplinary faculty conducting human subjects research across the University of Nebraska system.

Now in its second year, the program promotes rigorous, high-quality research, while also serving as a catalyst for new collaborations.

The MAP Academy offers support in many content areas and partners with faculty during all stages of research. Example services include providing rigorous methodological and study design support, setting up dynamic data systems, performing in-depth analyses and more.

Successful applicants may receive up to \$5,000 in project support from MAP Academy faculty and staff. The program is made possible through a grant from the Nebraska Research Initiative.

The awards enable faculty to engage with the MAP Academy team, drawing upon its expertise in rigorous analysis and database support, with the ultimate goal of building collaborations to support future research.

The MAP Academy, housed within CYFS, promotes the advancement of methodologies, applied analytics and data infrastructure to support and enhance rigorous research within the social, behavioral, health and educational sciences. Experienced faculty and staff work closely with researchers to understand their needs and ensure high-quality data through advanced statistical and methodological approaches.

2024-25 AADI Catalyst Awards



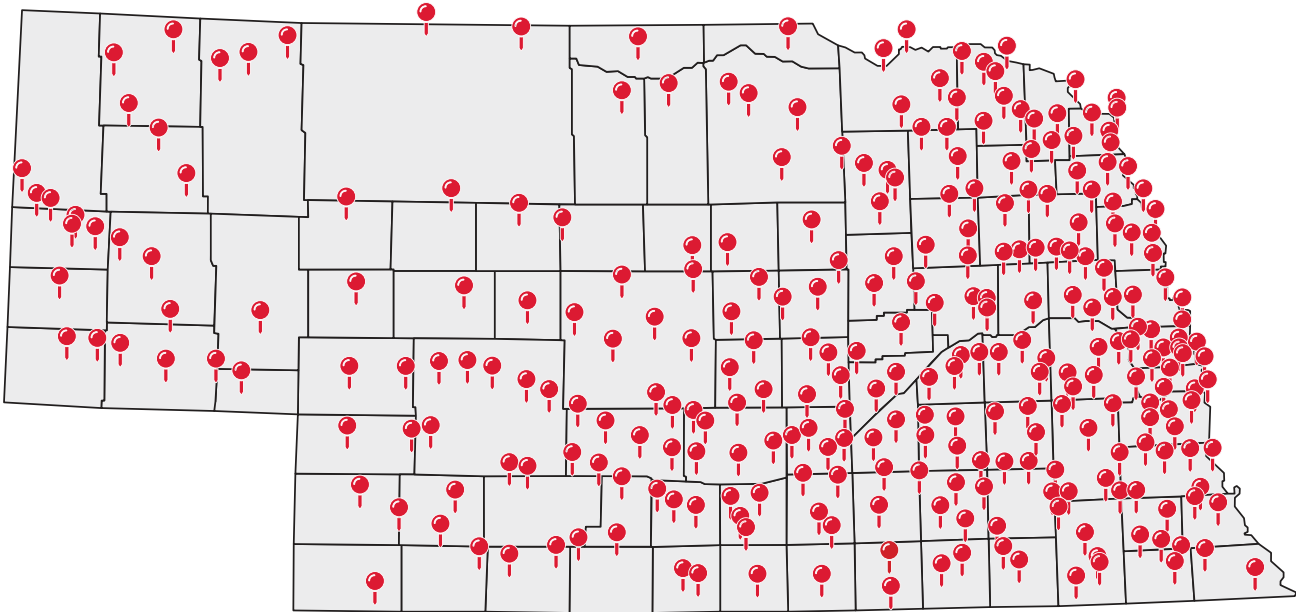
ANN ROGERS
Assistant Professor,
Department of Health Promotion
University of Nebraska Medical Center

“Youth Sports Participation by Geographic Location: 2021-2022 National Survey of Children’s Health”



KAILEY SNYDER
Assistant Professor,
School of Health & Kinesiology
University of Nebraska at Omaha

“A Cross-sectional Examination of Lactation Disparities Based on Employment Type Using the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey”



Statewide Reach

In support of UNL’s land grant mission, CYFS’ research activities extend across all 93 counties in Nebraska, benefiting nearly 300 communities throughout the state.

93 **286**
COUNTIES COMMUNITIES

Grant Activity

The figures below highlight CYFS’ cumulative grant activity since 2004.

1,085
Total grants submitted

415
Total grants funded

39%
Grant submission success rate
(based on known decisions)

\$27.13
Return rate to the UNL for
every \$1 invested

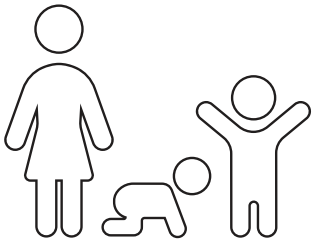
Community Engagement

Since 2004, thousands of research participants have generously shared their time and experiences, helping CYFS and its affiliates generate knowledge that makes a positive difference in people’s lives. Partnership with schools, programs, agencies, families, educators, specialists and others is essential to the center’s mission. The following metrics are cumulative estimates of CYFS’ engagement with communities in Nebraska and beyond.



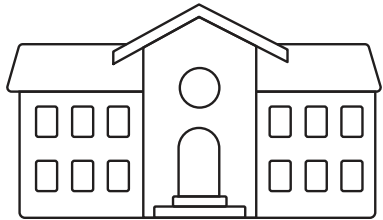
78,948

Nearly 79,000 children ages 5 and younger have participated in CYFS research.



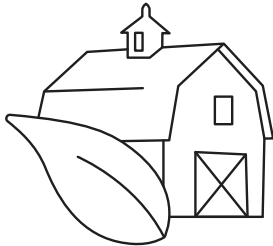
322,105

An estimated 322,105 infants, children and adolescents have engaged in CYFS research.



3,523

More than 3,500 early childhood settings and K-12 schools have engaged in CYFS research in the U.S. and abroad.



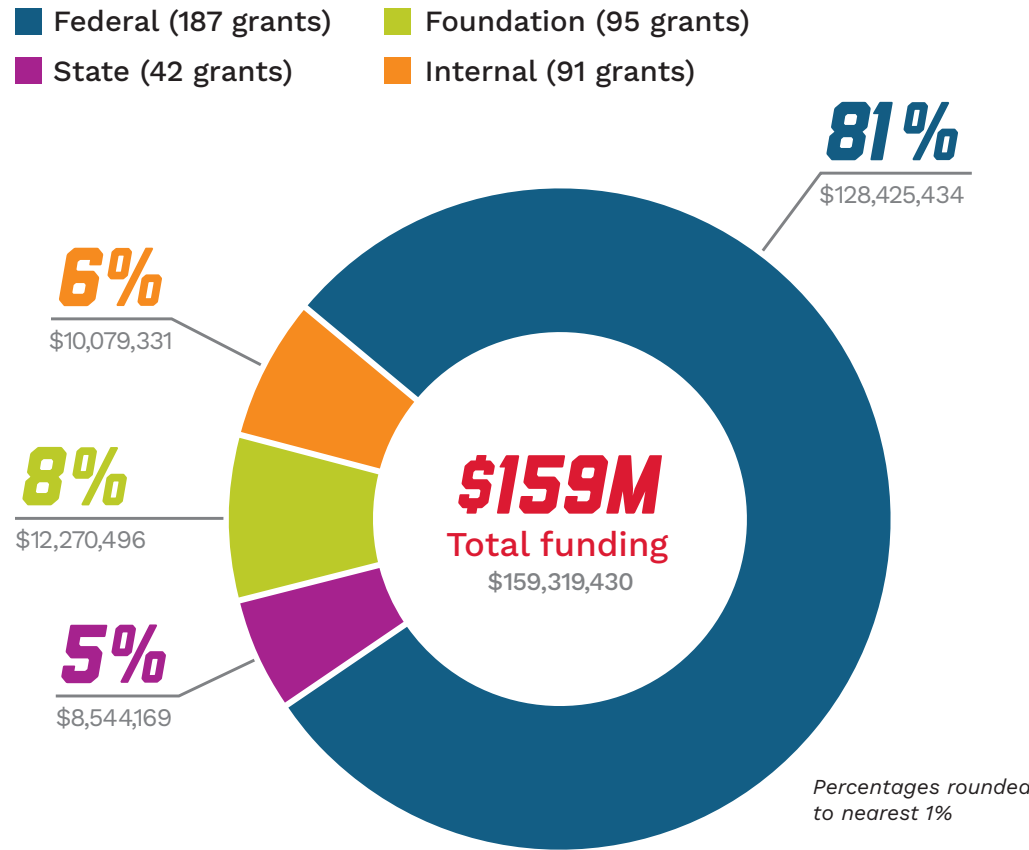
254

CYFS has partnered with more than 250 rural communities in Nebraska and across the U.S.

LANDSCAPE OF SUPPORT

Sources of Funding

The chart below shows the total dollar amount of grants supported by CYFS since its inception in 2004, and the proportion of funding through federal, state, foundation and internal (i.e., University of Nebraska) sources.



Funding Entities

The following federal, state and foundation/other entities provided funding for active grants and contracts during the 2024-25 fiscal year.

Federal Awards

- Administration for Children and Families
- Centers for Disease Control
- National Institutes of Health
- National Science Foundation
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Justice
- U.S. Department of Treasury

State Awards

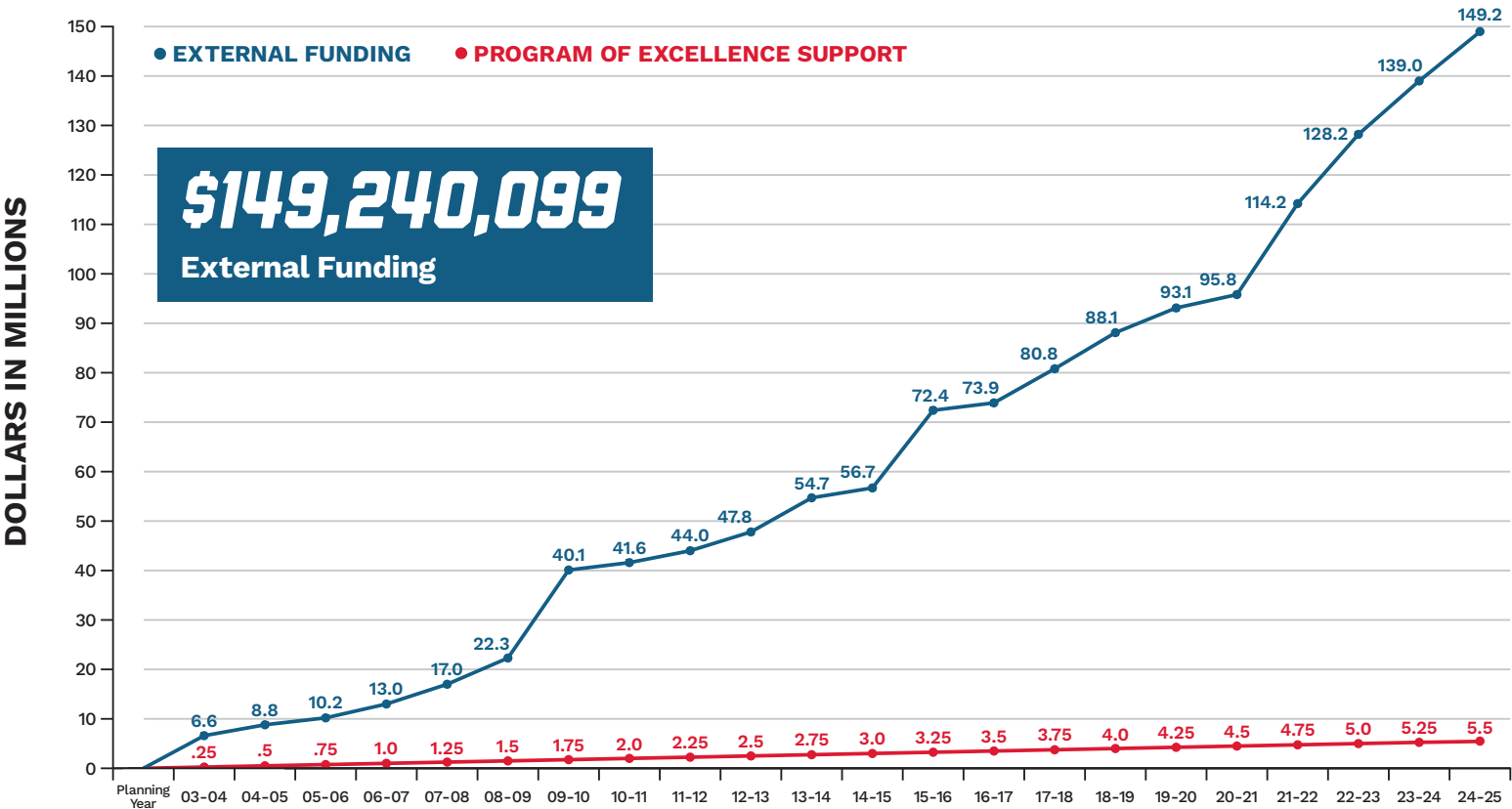
- Nebraska Department of Education

Foundation/Other Awards

- Buffett Early Childhood Fund
- Buffett Early Childhood Institute
- Canadian Institute for Health Research
- Early Educator Investment Collaborative
- Midwest Sociological Society
- National 4-H Council
- Nebraska Children and Families Foundation
- Spencer Foundation
- UNL Community Engagement Seed Funding
- UNL Grand Challenges Catalyst Grant Award
- UNL Grand Challenges Planning Grant Award
- UNL Layman Seed Award
- UNL NRI New Core or Service Funding Request Award
- UNL Office of Research and Innovation Revision Awards
- UNL Research Council Faculty Seed Grant
- William T. Grant Foundation

Cumulative External Grant Dollars

The line graph below depicts the total dollar amount of external funding (i.e., federal, state and foundation) supported by CYFS, relative to Program of Excellence funding support from the University of Nebraska.



AFFILIATES & PERSONNEL

CYFS Research Affiliates

Research affiliates make up a network of over 100 faculty from across the University of Nebraska system who make significant contributions to Nebraska’s interdisciplinary research community in the social, behavioral and educational sciences. Research affiliates are actively engaged with CYFS and are integral to our mission. Through their formal connection to the center, they also have opportunities to engage in valuable research exchanges, professional development, technical assistance and networking events, along with communications support to make their CYFS-housed work highly visible and accessible.



EXPLORE THE
CYFS RESEARCH
NETWORK:
go.unl.edu/cyfsnetwork

University of Nebraska Medical Center

Munroe-Meyer Institute

Nursing

Therese Mathews

Psychology

Brandy Clarke

College of Public Health

Department of Environmental, Agricultural and Occupational Health

Ellen Duysen
Aaron Yoder

Department of Health Promotion

Abbie Raikes
Ann Rogers

Office of Academic Affairs

Interprofessional Academy of Educators

Michelle Howell Smith

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

College of Education & Human Sciences

Nebraska Center for Research on CYFS

Jungwon Eum
Lisa Knoche
Natalie Koziol
Gwen Nugent
Amanda Prokasky
Susan Sheridan

Lorey Wheeler
Amanda Witte
HyeonJin Yoon

Educational Administration

Elvira Abrica
Crystal Garcia
Deryl Hatch-Tocaimaza
Taeyeon Kim
Channel McLewis
Milad Mohebal
Nicholas Pace
Scott Sturgeon
Jiangang Xia
Sarah Zuckerman

Educational Psychology

Dena Abbott
James Bovaird
Mun Yuk Chin
Carrie Clark
Edward Daly III
Beth Doll
Matthew Gormley
Sungeun Kang
Neeta Kantamneni
Kenneth Kiewra
Scott Napolitano
Susan Swearer

Child, Youth & Family Studies

Kelley Buchheister
Katelyn Coburn
Rochelle Dalla
Dipti Dev
Maria Rosario de Guzman
Holly Hutton
Cody Hollist

Soo-Young Hong
Blakelee Kemp
Patty Kuo
W. Alex Mason
Amy Napoli
Gilbert Parra
Julie Tippens
Julia Torquati
Yan Xia

Nutrition & Health Sciences

Lisa Franzen-Castle
Georgia Jones
Megan Kelley
Natalie Sehi

Special Education & Communication Disorders

Pamela Bazis
Cynthia Cress
Michelle Hughes
Susan Loveall
Ciara Ousley
Kevin Pitt
Mackenzie Savaiano
Jing Wang
Yingying Wang
Kristy Weissling

Teaching, Learning & Teacher Education

Theresa Catalan
Lauren Gatti
Edmund Hamann
Jillian Harpster
Minji Jeon
Lydia Kiramba
Lorraine Males
Ursula Nguyen

Lawrence Scharmann
Amanda Thomas
Guy Trainin

Textiles, Merchandising & Fashion Design

Michael Burton
Mary Alice Casto
Na Young Jung

College of Arts & Sciences

Biological Sciences

Brian Couch

Center on Children, Families and the Law

Dawn Davis

Communication Studies

Jody Koenig Kellas
Angela Palmer-Wackerly

Computer Science & Engineering

Marilyn C. Wolf

Psychology

Lisa Crockett
David DiLillo
Jenna Finch
David Hansen
Timothy Nelson
Anne Schutte

Sociology

Kimberly Tyler

College of Business Administration

Bureau of Business Research

Mitch Herian

Economics

Daniel Tannenbaum

College of Engineering

Durham School of Architectural Engineering & Construction

Lily Wang

School of Computing

Leen-Kiat Soh

College of Journalism & Mass Communications

Advertising & Public Relations

Changmin Yan

Institute of Agriculture & Natural Resources

Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication

Lindsay Hastings

Nebraska Extension

Bradley Barker
Kathleen Lodl

University of Nebraska at Kearney

College of Education

Communication Disorders

Philip Lai

Educational Administration

Aprille Phillips

Kinesiology & Sports Science

Megan Adkins

University of Nebraska at Omaha

College of Arts & Sciences

Psychology

Juan Casas
Lisa Kelly-Vance
Brian McKevitt

College of Education, Health & Human Sciences

School of Health & Kinesiology

Danae Dinkel
Kailey Snyder

Special Education & Communication Disorders

Shari DeVeney

University of Nebraska

Buffett Early Childhood Institute

Walter Gilliam

Student Affiliates

Odera Achingale
Madison Berube
Elizabeth Brower
Alexis Chavez
Genevieve Dashiell
Farya Haider
Roshawn Hollie
Annica Jonson
Janella Kang
Jiabin Lyu
Michael Nti Ababio
Abril Rangel-Pacheco
Camryn Steckelberg
Elizabeth Valerio-Boster
Melanie Willis
Weiman Xu

CYFS Personnel

Research Faculty

Lisa Knoche
Co-Director, CYFS; Director, Nebraska
Academy for Early Childhood Research;
Research Associate Professor

Natalie Koziol

Research Assistant Professor

W. Alex Mason

Professor

Gwen Nugent

Research Professor Emeritus

Susan Sheridan

Founding Director, CYFS; George Holmes
University Professor of Educational Psychology

Lorey Wheeler

Director, Nebraska Academy for
Methodology, Analytics and Psychometrics;
Research Associate Professor

Amanda Witte

Project Director, NeMTSS Implementation
Support Team; Research Associate Professor

HyeonJin Yoon

Research Assistant Professor

Project Managers

Nicole Adams

INSIGHTS in Nebraska

Laura Escobedo

TAPP Online, Tele-TAPP

Sommer Fousek

Early Learning Network-Lead, Nebraska
Academy for Early Childhood Research,
Coaching in Early Intervention, TransformED

Maureen Halpenny

NeMTSS Implementation Support Team

Tamara Hechtner-Galvin

Getting Ready, TransformED: Connections
for Kids

Kylee Rhamy

Nebraska WORDS Project

Hana Sindi

RESPECT Across Nebraska

Sarah Trainin

Art TEAMS

Sara Wing

Nebraska WORDS Project

Postdoctoral Researchers

Mingqui Li

Raynimol Thomas

Weiman Xu

Communications, Media & Database

Istiaque Ali

Database Developer & Analyst

Tom Anderson

Workstation Support Associate

James Fleege

Video & Multimedia Specialist

Chuck Green

Communications Associate

Dana Ludvik

Communications & Media Specialist

Kyleigh Skaggs

Visual Communications & Website Designer

Seth Teager

Communications & Media Manager

Administrative Services

Julie Erickson

Administrative Coordinator

Julie Gillmor

Proposal Development Coordinator

Tina Horan

Assistant Director for Research Operations

Catherine Jensen

Grant Specialist

Matilda Kond

Grant Specialist

Braxton Lindhorst

Grant Specialist

Maria Moreno

Grant Specialist

Rebecca Voigtlander

Grant Specialist (Post-Award)

Annual Report Staff

Julie Erickson, Editor

Chuck Green, Writer

Dana Ludvik, Editor

Kyleigh Skaggs, Designer & Photographer

Photography Credits

Chuck Green (p.10-11)

Karen Wedding (p.16)

Aaron Amat | Dreamstime.com (p.17)



University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools
P.O. Box 880235 | 60 Carolyn Pope Edwards Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0235



**NEBRASKA CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS**

College of Education & Human Sciences

PHONE: (402) 472-2448 | E-MAIL: cyfs@unl.edu | WEBSITE: cyfs.unl.edu

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