

Aiding kids for 30 years

The county's Early Childhood Council has screened about 25,000 children.

BY MONICA BENNETT
Times Correspondent

APOLLO BEACH — At 20 months, Liam Crawford didn't talk as much as his friends. Later, he turned into a chatterbox but not all his words were as clear as his peers'.

Lauren Crawford knew exactly where to go with her concerns about Liam: the Early Childhood Council of Hillsborough County.

Thanks to ECC screenings, Crawford ultimately learned Liam had a blockage of wax in one ear, which had affected his hearing. ECC also shared her concerns about Liam's speech progression so the almost 3-year-old is monitored to make sure he is on level with other youngsters his age.

"The screening process is an invaluable resource to parents," said Crawford, an Apollo Beach resident and a stay-at-home mom with a master's degree in child development. "You have access to all these health professionals and it's all free."

Stephen C. Martaus is proud of his agency's work over the last 30 years, noting they have screened about 25,000 children. A number of those youngsters were referred for further evaluation.

ECC assessments focus on developmental issues, such as speech and language, hearing, vision, motor skills and cognitive problems or delays. There is no cost for the screenings but youngsters must be under the age of 5. The ECC community screening programs occur once a month.

The goal: to evaluate children at an early age and then get them the help they need, if necessary.

"Early intervention is the key," said Martaus, the ECC's executive director. "We want them to enter kindergarten on the same playing field as any other child."

In Liam's case, ECC staff found a problem with the hearing in his right ear. Crawford then took her son to the pediatrician, who discovered his ear was impacted with wax. After irrigating his ear, Liam's speech improved.

Crawford said she is still concerned about her son's articulation. She said ECC staff will see Liam again once he turns 3, but she has been given ideas on ways to help him between visits.

When Liam struggles with words, such as "frog," ECC staff told Crawford to hold a toy frog in her hand, say "frog," then tell Liam to repeat the word. Something so simple may help his



Courtesy of Lauren Crawford

Lauren Crawford and her son, Liam, pictured here with Mr. Crawford, benefited greatly from the services of the Early Childhood Council. Lauren and Liam will be guests at the anniversary luncheon.



BRENDAN FITTNER | Times

Lauren Dungy, left, visits with Deer Park Elementary students Anna Stevens-Hill, center, and Jordan Bryan, right, last week after reading her latest book, *You Can Be a Friend*, which she co-wrote with her husband, Tony Dungy.

articulation, Crawford said.

Crawford is hoping Liam's next screening with an ECC speech pathologist will give her more answers. She is grateful ECC is available to help young children like Liam.

"If there is an issue," she said, "I would much prefer to catch it early and get it resolved before he starts school."

Crawford and Liam will be special guests at the ECC's 30th anniversary celebration at 7:45 a.m. Thursday at the Main-sail Hotel & Conference Center

in Tampa. Lauren Dungy, wife of former Bucs and Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy, will deliver the featured speech. The Dungys' son Jordan also received help from the ECC.

Bay News 9's Josh Linker will emcee the event.

Tickets are \$30 in advance and \$40 at the door. Tables can be purchased for \$275 and seat 10 people. For more information, visit www.ecc.tampabay.org.

Monica Bennett can be reached at hillsnews@tampabay.com.