

SPACE COAST EARLY STEPS; Helping those 'little ones' who can't help themselves.

Dr. Mary Ulrich Special to FLORIDA TODAY



Jamisy Unrue and Graham enjoy a Go Baby Go toy as part of Space Coast early Steps. Liza King Images/Special To FLORIDA TODAY

As an advocate for Brevard County's future (our children), I am excited for this opportunity to discuss Space Coast Early Steps (SCES).

Early Steps is a Florida-based, statewide program offering developmental and therapeutic services for infants and toddlers, birth to 36 months old, who have, or who are at-risk for, developmental disabilities or delays.



Dr. Mary Woods Ulrich is a pediatrician with Pediatrics in Brevard based at the Melbourne-Hibiscus Blvd. location. Craig Rubadoux/Special To FLORIDA TODAY

Created in 1993, within the Florida Department of Health, Early Steps was designed as an intervention program to support families and caregivers to help increase developmental skills and overall progress.

Brevard-based Space Coast Early Steps (SCES) does just that for local children. SCES services provide therapy support to help infants and toddlers learn to speak, walk, feed, explore, and/or develop other skills necessary to develop a mobile and vibrant life.

"Positive, early learning experiences are crucial for later success in school, the workplace, and the community. Research shows children's earliest experiences play a critical role in brain development," said Shelli Buckley, SCES Program Director.

Children who have, or are at risk of, developmental delays of any kind can be referred to Space Coast Early Steps either by their primary healthcare provider, a caregiver or family member.

SCES is funded through various avenues, including federal and state funding. However, with the ever-growing need for services, that funding is not enough to keep up with the demand for referrals from clinical providers.

With that stated, SCES is in constant need of fundraising initiatives, community partners, and general donations.

Existing partners include Stumpy's Hatchet House, and The Power of Pizza Charities, which recently held the Eat My Crust 5k Run/Walk fundraiser with a portion of the proceeds benefiting SCES.



Jeanette VanDuyn, Doctor of Physical Therapy at Space Coast Early Steps, works with Abraham. Liza King Images/Special To FLORIDA TODAY

Our organization also partners with 13 therapy agencies with more than 75 therapists who provide services to an average of 850 families per month. These therapists (and coordinators) subsequently help children transition into Brevard Public Schools through the Child Find program at 3 years of age, when needed.

Additionally, SCES works closely with Dr. Tamara Pawich, from Cocoa Beach Psychology, who completes quarterly autism screenings with SCES.

An additional partner of SCES is the Variety Children's Charity of Florida, which recently donated 250 sensory appropriate toys, a mobility bike and multiple Go Baby Go toddler cars.

Go Baby Go toy cars help children better engage socially, while enjoying mobility and exploration, which most healthy children take for granted.

"On behalf of Variety, the Children's Charity of Florida, I would like to express our delight in providing support for Space Coast Early Steps and the University of Central Florida, Go Baby Go program," said Marshall Cohn, Variety Children's Charity of Florida, President.

Variety was brought to the state in 1989 by Donna Draves and Connie Ginakes for the purpose of helping special needs children in Central Florida. The volunteer-based organization has spent more than three decades helping children across the state.

The University of Central Florida (UCF) is another collaborative partner for SCES. Specifically, Dr. Jennifer Tucker, who brought the Go Baby Go program to Central Florida, with a goal of providing innovative and accessible options for mobility for special needs children.

"We have collaborated with Space Coast Early Steps for more than a decade. That work includes research, provider training, and dedicated events," said Dr. Jennifer Tucker, PT, DPT, PCS.

"The UCF Go Baby Go program was formed with a goal of providing innovative and accessible options for mobility. Space Coast Early Steps not only identifies children who would benefit from the mobility cars but has therapists who assist with them."



At right, Pam Wise, BS Ed/ITDS (Infant Toddler Development Specialist) at Space Coast Early Steps, with Christy Curry and Niyah. Liza King Images/Special To FLORIDA TODAY

Additionally, Dr. Tucker plans to collaborate with Brevard County middle schools to expand Go Baby Go. Tucker's team will teach middle school students the importance of helping individuals with disabilities, while also assembling toy cars for patients.

As you can now understand, SCES makes a tremendously positive impact on the lives of thousands of our local little ones, while also working to increase developmental support for their families and caregivers.

Eligibility for SCES depends solely upon the needs of the child, with no financial requirement. Children are determined based on specific criteria determined by the Federal Government, or if diagnosed with an established condition (such as Down syndrome or Autism). SCES then coordinates the child's developmental services.

If you suspect your child may need a developmental evaluation, go to the SCES website, at spacecoastes.org, to self-refer, or request the child's clinical provider or pediatrician send a referral. SCES provides evaluations and therapies, also, at no cost to the patient or family.

For general information on SCES, or future fundraising events and sponsorship opportunities, contact us at 321-634-3688, ext. 5401, or go to www.spacecoastes.org.

Dr. Mary Ulrich is a board-certified Pediatrician at Pediatrics in Brevard, Melbourne office. Dr. Ulrich is also the medical director for the Advanced Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care facility in Melbourne as well as the medical director for Space Coast Early Steps.