

# # FIRST THINGS FIRST

Pinal Region

# IMPACT REPORT 2021



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90%

of a child's brain growth happens before kindergarten.

## Early childhood matters.

First Things First partners with families and communities to help our state's youngest children prepare for kindergarten and beyond.

Many young children in Arizona face challenges that threaten their healthy development and learning. In the FTF Pinal Region, there are **34,984 children** (under age 6) with **24% living in poverty**.

Here is how FTF is working to support young children and their families in this region.

“Early childhood education is the building block with which we give our children to grow, thrive and develop. The critical nature of early childhood educational activities cannot be emphasized enough.”

**Adam Saks**

*Executive Director of Maricopa Economic Development Alliance and Chair of the FTF Pinal Regional Council*

## FTF Pinal Region Strategic Priorities



### Strengthening Families and Early Literacy

Families are a child's first and best teachers. FTF programs in the Pinal region give parents choices for how they want to support their child's health and learning. The region offers **evidence-based trainings** for parents to learn more about early childhood development. Families of newborns throughout the region and across the state also receive the **Arizona Parent Kit**, with helpful information and resources to support new parents.



### Quality Preschool and Child Care

Children who attend high-quality early learning programs go on to do better in school and are more likely to graduate. The Pinal region provides funding for child care providers and preschool programs to participate in FTF's **Quality First**. Providers benefit from training, coaching and a wide range of evidence-based supports to improve the quality of their early learning programs in ways that help children learn, grow and thrive. The region also funds **Quality First Scholarships** to help low-income families afford quality early learning for their young children.



### Preventive Health

Undetected or untreated health issues can impact learning later on. Left unaddressed, developmental delays and chronic medical conditions can contribute to serious learning problems. FTF works to support the health and development of young children in the Pinal region by funding **developmental and sensory screenings** to detect vision, hearing and developmental issues and help prevent later learning challenges. **Oral health screenings and fluoride varnishes** are also offered to protect children against childhood tooth decay, a leading cause of school absences.



## Sensory and developmental screening helps identify speech delay in Queen Creek toddler

Like many Queen Creek families last year, Tori Shank, her husband Nathan, and their infant daughter Kayleen didn't have a lot of interactions with other families due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As restrictions lessened, it wasn't until her family met with relatives over the Thanksgiving holiday that Kayleen, who was 17 months at the time, was able to play with a group of cousins similar in age. As a first-time mom, Shank noticed her daughter's speech appeared to be behind the other children.

Several people tried to convince Shank that Kayleen's speech delay was nothing to be concerned about. But Shank's mom, who works as a dental hygienist for the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension in Pinal County, knew the Cooperative Extension offers free sensory and developmental screenings.

Shank jumped at the opportunity to have her daughter screened.

For many families with young children, it is difficult to know if a small delay is possibly something more significant. Regular screenings can help ensure that a child is meeting their developmental milestones. For those who are behind, the screenings can address a delay before it develops into something bigger.

"If we know there is an issue that needs to be addressed, we can address it early in life, so when kids get to kindergarten, they are going in on the same level as other children," said Esther Turner, senior program coordinator for the UA Cooperative Extension in Pinal.

Sensory and developmental screenings can be conducted in a variety of ways, from in-person screenings, traditional mail, live video chat or phone conferences. Using the online screening tool, Shank discovered that her daughter's speech was delayed. Kayleen was going to need some additional supports. The program arranged for Shank and Kayleen to connect with a speech therapist and set up a schedule of care.

Sensory and developmental screenings do not diagnose, but as in Kayleen's case, they are an important indicator if further evaluation is needed. Following up with providers can be a big hurdle for parents, which is why such wrap-around services are essential, Turner said. If additional follow-up is needed, the program will help the family find a provider.

"We want to help with that navigation," Turner said, "so we know that they are not going to fall through the cracks."

While sensory and developmental screenings are an essential resource for families, Turner noted that many families are intimidated from participating. Many parents are worried about the potential results and don't want their child labeled.

Turner noted that screenings determine that the majority of children are determined to be on track, and that the process of screening is an excellent way for parents to learn what milestones they should be looking for and what to expect, and not expect, from their little one.

Kayleen is now in speech therapy bi-weekly through live video chat, FaceTime and both mom and daughter couldn't be happier.

**"If we know there is an issue that needs to be addressed, we can address it early in life, so when kids get to kindergarten, they are going in on the same level as other children."**

**—Esther Turner, senior program coordinator, UA Cooperative Extension**

"It's Kayleen's favorite time," Shank said. "She really enjoys it."

Prior to the speech therapy, Kayleen's inability to communicate led to a lot of tantrums, Shank said.

"I had no idea what she wanted," Shank said. Now, through therapy, Kayleen is learning new words and both Shank and Kayleen are learning to communicate through sign language.

Kayleen just turned age 2 in June, and while her speech is still behind, she is making progress with her ability to communicate with her family.

"I understand what she wants," Shank said.

And for that, she's grateful.

"I don't know how well I'd be able to communicate with [Kayleen] if we hadn't done it," Shank said.

 Read more FTF stories at  
[FirstThingsFirst.org/Region-Stories](https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/Region-Stories)

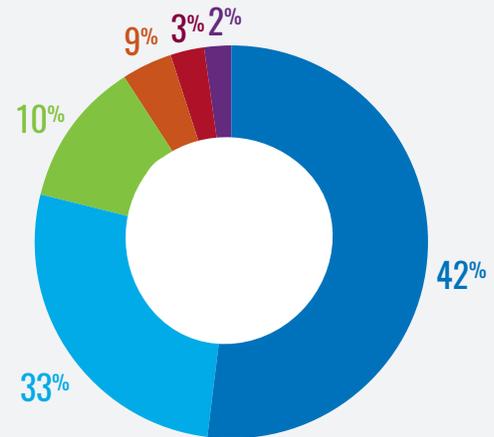
## FTF Pinal Regional Partnership Council

The FTF Pinal Regional Partnership Council is made up of volunteers who study the unique needs of the local community and decide how funds should be used to best support the healthy development and early learning of young children from birth to age 5. FTF invests in proven

programs and innovative strategies through grants to community organizations that provide services to children and families. Some of the programs in this region include developmental and sensory screening, Fun Van and Family, Friend and Neighbor.

### FTF Pinal SFY21 Total Regional Program Expenditures

Quality Child Care and Preschool	\$3,132,820
Strengthening Families	\$1,619,780
Preventive Health	\$730,615
Parent and Community Awareness	\$204,130
Research and Evaluation	\$191,430
Coordinating Care	\$95,694
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$5,974,468</b>



## FTF Pinal Regional Partnership Council and Staff

*Chair*  
**Adam Saks**

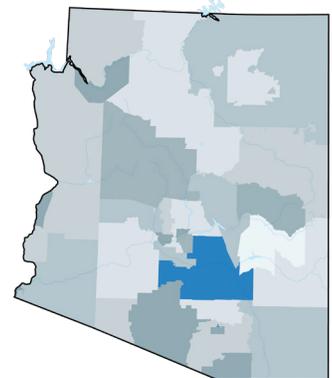
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*The **FTF Pinal Region** is defined as Pinal County, not including the lands belonging to the Gila River Indian Community, the Tohono O'odham Nation or the San Carlos Apache Tribe. The region does include the land belonging to the Ak-Chin Indian Community. The FTF Pinal Region includes Legislative Districts 8 and 11. (Legislative districts are not necessarily congruent with regional boundaries.)*

Learn more at  
[FirstThingsFirst.org/Regions/Pinal](https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/Regions/Pinal)