



Early Learning and School Readiness

July 2006

The Early Years Matter

Children are born “wired for feelings and ready to learn,” with their development continuously influenced by both biology and experience.¹ The early years lay the foundation for a child’s physical, social, and emotional well-being, and set the stage for life-long learning. As American society has dramatically changed in recent decades, the needs of young children have often been overlooked. We know nurturing relationships are central to child well-being; yet parents, child care providers and preschool teachers often do not have the resources they need to support children’s health and development. Far too many children are arriving at kindergarten unprepared to succeed and unlikely to ever catch up.²

School Readiness is about Children, Families, Communities, and Schools.

The National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), created to assess and report on state and national progress toward achieving the National Education Goals, stated that the first national goal is “All children will enter school ready.” The NEGP said that school readiness means:

- (1) Children are ready for school
- (2) Schools are ready for children
- (3) Families and communities have the supports they need to help children be ready for school.^{3,4}

Children’s readiness for school is about healthy development in the broadest sense:^{5,6}

- Physical health, well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning
- Language and literacy development
- Cognition and general knowledge

Parents are Children’s First Teachers

Learning occurs in the context of nurturing relationships, starting first and foremost with parents. However, only one-third of parents feel “very prepared” for parenthood, according to a national survey conducted in 2000.⁷ The mobility of American society often leaves parents without extended family or support systems to help them.

Parenting information and support might include:

- Prenatal care and support
- Home visits
- Information to support children’s health and development, including the importance of play
- Early literacy information, such as the importance of reading and talking with young children.
- Family support services, with attention to the prevention of child abuse and neglect

Communities Provide Supports and Services

Meeting the needs of young children involves a partnership between families and communities to insure that all families have the information and resources they need to promote their children’s health and development. Governments, employers, and businesses can help parents promote their children’s health and development through “child and family friendly” policies, including part-time work, flexible hours, and paid family leave.

Community-based services could include:

- Food and nutrition resources, like WIC
- Access to health insurance and comprehensive health care
- Oral health promotion and dental care
- Developmental screening and early intervention services
- Parenting classes and support groups
- Mental health services

Families Need Access to High Quality Early Education and Child Care

Approximately 60 percent of children younger than 6 years across the United States are in some form of early care and education setting on a regular basis.⁸ This provides an important opportunity to enhance early learning experiences for young children. Unfortunately, most young children are not in high quality early care and education settings because they are often difficult to find and afford. State preschools and the federally-funded Head Start program, combined, reach only half of eligible low-income four-year-olds.⁹ Tuition for private part-day pre-k programs often cost more than the yearly public college tuition, making high quality care inaccessible for much of the middle class population as well.¹⁰

Quality early education includes:¹¹

- Parent involvement
- Well-trained, educated and nurturing caregivers and teachers
- Low staff turnover
- Low staff to child ratios
- Age-appropriate materials and curriculum
- Stimulating and enriching learning environment

Children Benefit from Quality Early Learning

Quality child care provides an opportunity to influence children’s cognitive, social and emotional development and provides a link for children and families to comprehensive health, nutrition, and social support services. Long term studies have clearly demonstrated the impact of high-quality early learning experiences, including the High Scope/Perry Preschool in Michigan; Abecedarian Project in North Carolina; and Chicago Parent-Child Centers in Illinois.^{12,13,14}

Society Benefits from Investment in Children

Quality early education programs benefit society socially and economically. Long-term research studies link quality early education to lower rates of special education, grade retention, and smoking, all of which economically impact local, state, and federal government. Preschool experiences are also associated with higher achievement test scores, higher graduation rates, and higher post-secondary enrollment rates, which positively correlate with greater individual economic success.¹⁵ For every dollar invested in quality early education, society saves between \$4 and \$8 by reducing costs associated with crime and delinquency, welfare participation, special education, and remedial education.¹⁶

School Readiness Is Everybody's Business

Research is clear about what children need to thrive, and equally clear that current policies and programs fall far short. An exciting early childhood movement is beginning to better address the needs of young children. However, greater awareness and advocacy about early learning at the local, state and national levels is still needed. We can work to implement and sustain policies and programs which help assure that all children are healthy and ready for success in school and in life.

Children's Doctors Can Influence School Readiness

Doctors care for young children regularly during the first few years of life and play a very important role in connecting parents with the information and resources they need. Doctors are also particularly effective public messengers on early childhood issues. They know that the development of young children is influenced by physical, cognitive, cultural, social, emotional and environmental factors; yet often feel unable to affect many of those issues. By publicly making connections between social causes and health and developmental consequences, doctors can reach beyond their clinic and office walls to improve outcomes for children. Doctors can work with advocacy agencies, the media, and elected officials to emphasize the critical importance of a child's first five years of life.

Early Learning Resources

Docs For Tots fact sheets www.DocsForTots.org

AAP Child Care and Health Partnership Program

www.healthychildcare.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children

www.naeyc.org

Born Learning www.bornlearning.org

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies www.naccrra.org

¹ Shonkoff, Jack P., and Deborah Phillips, eds. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000.

² Ibid, Shonkoff

³ Kagan, S.L., Moore, E., and Bredekamp, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Reconsidering Children's Early Learning and Development: Toward Shared Beliefs and Vocabulary*. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.

⁴ Child Trends.(2001). *School Readiness: Helping Communities Get Children Ready for School and Schools Ready for Children*. Research brief. Washington, D.C.: Child Trends. www.childtrends.org

⁵ Cople, C. and the Goal 1 Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group, eds. (1997). *Getting a Good Start in School—A document Based on Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning*. National Education Goals Panel, Goal 1. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. www.negp.gov/Reports/good-sta.htm.

⁶ Ibid, Kagan et al. (1995)

⁷ DYG, Inc.(2000). *What grown-up's understand about child development: A National benchmark study*. On-line: <http://www.zerotothree.org>

⁸ NACCRRRA. (2006). *Child Care in America*. Available at www.naccrra.org/randd/data/

⁹ Children's Alliance. (2005). *Child Facts: Child Care in Washington*.

¹⁰ Schulman, K. (2000). *The High Cost of Child Care Puts Quality Care Out of Reach for Many Families*. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

¹² Washington School Readiness Information Packet. (2004). *School Readiness in Washington*. Available at www.earlyeducationcoalition.org/Docs/what_is_school_readiness.pdf

¹² Schweinhart, Ph.D., Lawrence, J. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions*. www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/

¹³ Campbell, F.A., Ramey, C.T., Pungello, E.P., Sparling, J. and S. Miller-Johnson. (2002). Early childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes from the Abecedarian Project. *Applied Developmental Science* 6: 42-57.

¹⁴ Reynolds, A.J. (1997). *The Chicago Child-Parent Centers: A Longitudinal Study of Extended Early Childhood Intervention*. Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper no 1126-97. <http://ideas.repec.org/p/wop/wispod/1126-97.html>

¹⁵ Barnett, S. (2004) A Benefit-Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention. New Jersey: NIEER.

¹⁶ Wright, E. (2003). *The Case for Quality Preschool: It Can Be Done*. NGA Center for Best Practices.