

Family Focus on . . .

Early Childhood

Issue FF60

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Home-based preschools in village communities: Lessons from field work in Cambodia

by Anu Sachdev, Ph.D. student, Comparative and International Education, Lehigh University, and Director of the Early Childhood Education Program *Art as a Way of Learning*; Whitney Szmodis, Ph.D. candidate, Teaching, Learning, and Technology, Lehigh University; and Sothy Eng, Ph.D., Professor of Practice, Comparative and International Education, Lehigh University; asachdev@northampton.edu

As graduate students in Comparative and International Education at Lehigh University, we were afforded the opportunity to conduct field research through a partnership with a nonprofit organization, Caring for Cambodia (CFC). The majority of our time in Cambodia

was focused on working with the home-based preschool program provided by CFC and supported by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS). Through our research and personal observations, we saw the numerous benefits and positive impact of a community-supported preschool program. We would like to share some of our field work observations in the villages surrounding Siem Reap, Cambodia. Communication with parents and families was supported by experienced Cambodian translators.

Although MoEYS has established a foundation for early childhood care and development through articulation of their policy and action plan, implementation remains sparse due to lack of financial and human resources. CFC provides the necessary infrastructure and resources to implement a successful home-based preschool program. The organization operates in conjunction with government schools in grades K–12, focusing on teacher training, health and



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dental care, school meal program, and informal education. The preschool program operates in the local villages adjacent to the K–12 schools with the intent to foster lifelong learning and investment in education. This process begins at an early age and continues through high school. Families involved in the preschool program were more likely to send their children to kindergarten at the appropriate age compared to families who did not participate in the program.

The home-based preschool program began in 2008 in a village near the first CFC-supported school, the Amelio Primary School. The lessons learned through the first few years of operation reinforced that parent engagement and participation is closely connected to school enrollment, attendance, and low dropout. In Cambodia, mothers typically play the role of primary caregiver during children's formative years and are often supported in this role by

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other family and community members. The home-based preschool program is designed to engage parents in the educational process of their children.

In the initial stages of its launch, CFC recruited parents, especially mothers, door-to-door to participate in the preschool program. Gradually mothers noticed the positive changes the program made in their children. The participating mothers recruited their neighbors and friends into the program. The informal nature of the home-based preschool and its location in the familiar village surroundings continues to help in recruitment of families, reducing any transportation-related issues connected with participation.

The program structure also offers opportunity for involvement to interested parents. This helps build sustainability in the system. Mothers can volunteer to work as key mothers, who serve as resource persons for other families in the village. With experience, parents may apply to be assistant teachers in the program. This helps to nurture local talent by giving leadership roles to qualified individuals and mentoring those who are in the process of becoming leaders.

Since 2008, the program has grown in size and popularity, with 15 preschools located in villages surrounding the six government schools, serving 331 mothers and 469 children in 67 groups. Preschool is held weekly at one of the homes in the village. Children are accompanied by an adult or older sibling if mothers are unavailable. This facilitates building a community of learners that includes children, families, and other adults in the community.

The curriculum for the preschool program demonstrates how parents can integrate education into everyday tasks in the home,

giving examples of how to transform daily life activities into teaching and learning opportunities. Parents begin to see the connection between home activities and skill development. Each preschool session provides parents with examples of how to engage their children in activities at home while building school-readiness skills.

Conceptualized within the preschool curriculum framework is the “whole child” approach, focusing on development of (a) thinking and learning skills, (b) physical well-being, (c) social-emotional skills, and (d) communication skills. The thinking-and-learning component includes activities to promote divergent thinking and help

children learn about their environment. Concepts of number, shape, color, size, etc., are introduced through activities within the child’s familiar

environment. In the physical well-being component, activities focus on the development of motor skills through playing games and learning basics of personal health and hygiene. Parents and children learn about benefits of healthy foods and drinking clean water. Demonstrations are given on self-care to nurture hygienic habits in the family. The social-emotional growth component provides activities that demonstrate how parents can engage in positive interactions and develop closer bonds with their children. Parents are encouraged to provide positive feedback and include children in activities around the home to build close relationships. The communication component centers

on nurturing speaking and listening skills through activities such as storytelling, singing, and learning the alphabet and rhymes. At the weekly home-based sessions, parents learn songs, stories, and other literacy-development tools to encourage communication skills. Picture books are provided to enrich children’s vocabulary. Many of these activities support a holistic approach to promoting the overarching goal of preparing children for school and building family and community support for education.

Most home-based lessons begin with free play. The mothers and children play with various items or draw and read together while using the materials to ask questions. The

preschool teachers introduce the focus lesson of the week, inviting the children to participate. While the young children are playing, the teachers con-

verse with mothers about health and hygiene, nutrition, and child development. The key mothers from the village make follow-up home visits to review the lessons with mothers. This structure helps build sustainability and a support network among parents.

Most parents understand the importance of preschool for school readiness. One mother explained that school readiness meant that her child was “brave” in the school environment, which translated as participation in activities and interaction with peers and teachers. It was another way of saying that the child should be socially and emotionally ready for

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Conceptualized within the preschool curriculum framework is the “whole child” approach, focusing on development of (a) thinking and learning skills, (b) physical well-being, (c) social-emotional skills, and (d) communication skills.



The economic payoffs of early childhood education

by Timothy J. Bartik, senior economist, W.E. Upjohn Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan, bartik@upjohn.org

Rigorous evidence suggests a large economic payoff to early childhood education programs. Early childhood education includes all programs for children under the age of 5 that have an effective focus on educational development, including pre-K programs, high-quality child care, and parenting programs. A large economic payoff simply means that these programs cause large increases in future adult earnings of participating children relative to program costs.

Why frame this issue in dollars and cents? Politics is one reason: Business and political leaders value benefits to the economy. Furthermore, in modern American society, getting a job at good wages is important to a person having a decent standard of living and enhanced sense of self-worth.

Debating this issue now is important because our political system is at a critical point in deciding whether to expand early childhood education. For example, state pre-K programs expanded from 14% of all 4-year olds in 2001–2002 to 28% today, but funding has stagnated since the 2007 recession. Some states have almost universal pre-K (e.g., Oklahoma has 74% of all 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K), but 10 states have no state-funded pre-K. The Affordable Care Act funded some expansion of parenting programs, but these programs are still far from reaching all eligible families. The political debate might be shifted by evidence of these programs' economic payoffs.

The large economic payoff to early childhood education is demonstrated by rigorous evidence, in which program participants are compared to similar nonparticipants, either in randomized or natural experiments. For pre-K, we have strong evidence for long-term earnings effects from the Perry Preschool program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. For high-quality child care, we have strong evidence for long-term effects from the Abecedarian program in North Carolina, which is similar to today's Educare program. For parenting programs, several experiments

have shown long-term effects for the Nurse Family Partnership, in which trained nurses work with disadvantaged first-time mothers from the prenatal period until their children are age 2.

In addition to these studies with direct long-term evidence, rigorous studies have found strong-enough effects on school test scores to predict sizable adult-earnings effects. For pre-K, there is strong evidence of sizable school test-score effects from studies in Boston, Kalamazoo, Tulsa, Arkansas, Georgia, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia. For child care, there is good evidence that quality child care during the first years of life can significantly increase school test scores from studies of the Infant Health and Development program.

These earnings effects range up to a 26% increase for high-quality, full-time child care and pre-K from birth to age 5 (the Educare/Abecedarian program). But even less intense interventions make a big difference. For example, one school year of full-day pre-K at age 4 is estimated to increase future adult earnings for disadvantaged children by 10% in Tulsa's pre-K program and 15% in Boston's pre-K program.

These earnings effects vary for children from families with different incomes; eventual outcomes vary for different program types. Apparently the educational development services provided by high-quality pre-K are difficult for many middle-class families to afford on their own—which is not surprising, as full-day pre-K for one school year can often cost more than \$10,000. The broad range of benefits across income groups argues for public support for universal access to pre-K at age 4.

On the other hand, for early-age child care and parenting programs, the evidence suggests that benefits are far greater for children from lower income families than middle-income families. Because child care in particular can be expensive—high-quality,

full-time, full-year child care can cost more than \$18,000 per year—these programs should be targeted at disadvantaged families.

In addition to these benefits for children, many early childhood education programs have significant benefits in boosting the earnings of parents. This happens to a minor degree even with one school year of pre-K services. But the evidence suggests that the earnings benefits of five years of free full-time child care for parents are likely to be similar in magnitude to the future adult-earnings benefits for children. Free child care allows parents to work more immediately and also allows for education and work experience to increase long-term parental wages. In addition, parenting programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership have also been shown to increase mothers' work, education, and wages.

Considering the earnings benefits to both participating children and their parents, early childhood education programs have very high cost-benefit ratios. Full-day pre-K at age 4 has a ratio of costs-to-future-earnings benefits more than one to five; an Educare/Abecedarian style child care program from birth to age 5 has a cost-to-earnings benefits ratio of more than one to three; parenting programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership also provide earnings benefits at least triple their costs.

A skeptic's natural question is, "Why should I pay to educate other people's children?" If I can afford to pay for quality pre-K for my children on my own, or if I feel my children do not need pre-K services, why should I pay higher taxes to provide pre-K or other early childhood education services to other people's children?" One reason is that early childhood education programs not only benefit participating children and their families,



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but also provide important spillover benefits to everyone in society.

These spillover benefits include reduction in crime, which benefits potential crime victims and saves costs for justice administration and prisons. In addition, higher earnings to children and parents as a result of early childhood education programs will lead to higher tax receipts and lower costs for welfare programs. These fiscal benefits allow governments either to lower tax rates and provide the same levels of public service or to expand public services at the same tax rates.

Another spillover benefit concerns peer effects in education. Research has shown that if a higher percentage of children in kindergarten have participated in quality pre-K, overall kindergarten learning is higher, even for children who did not participate in any publicly subsidized pre-K. My child may benefit from the subsidies I pay for other people's children.

An important economic spillover benefit of early childhood education is the effect of improved skills on others' wages. Research suggests that my wage depends not just on my own skills and education but on the average education level of other workers in my local economy. Skills have these spillover wage benefits for several reasons. My firm's ability to introduce new technologies, stay competitive, and pay high wages depends not just on my individual skills, but on the skills of everyone at the firm. My firm's ability to pay high wages may depend upon having high-quality suppliers, which will depend on the skills of workers at those suppliers. In addition, many firms benefit from having clusters of related industries in which firms benefit from the ideas of other firms and from workers moving from firm to firm and bringing new ideas, so that my firm may be more innovative if workers at other firms are more skilled. These cluster spillovers are part of what makes areas such as Silicon Valley so innovative and productive.

As a result, the research evidence suggests that when we increase skills for some workers, the direct effects on the earnings of those workers are matched by spillover benefits for earnings of other workers that are of similar magnitude. We're all in the same economy together. When overall worker skills are

higher, firms invest more, create more jobs, introduce more new technologies, and pay higher wages, which will benefit all workers, even those whose skills stay the same.

Many of the economic benefits of early childhood education are local. Americans are not as hypermobile as is sometimes assumed. More than 60% of all Americans spend most of their working careers in the state where they spent their early childhoods. About half spend most of their working careers in the metro area in which

... one school year of full-day pre-K at age 4 is estimated to increase future adult earnings for disadvantaged children by 10% ...

they spent their early childhoods. These percentages do not vary hugely across states or local areas or over time.

Therefore, if a state invests in early childhood education programs, it can count on a large proportion of the economic benefits accruing to the state. Many of the children participating in these programs will stay in the state. The increased worker skills will increase economic growth and job creation in the state, which will increase earnings of all workers in the state and provide state and local fiscal benefits.

Based on this evidence, there are good economic reasons for both the federal government and state governments to significantly increase their investments in early childhood

education programs. Federal investment could help boost the overall national economy while improving economic opportunities for lower income families. If federal action is infeasible because of political factors, or because there is too much else on the plate of the federal government (for example, health care and the needs of an aging population), then state governments also have strong reasons to make such investments. Investing in early childhood education is in the enlightened self-interest of state governments and state voters.

The United States has historically been a world leader in broadening educational opportunities, from the Common School movement of the 19th century, to the high school movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the broadening of college access in the 20th century. These educational investments have historically been promoted as a way to broaden economic opportunity and boost the overall economy. Economic history suggests that the American strategy of educational investment has worked. A logical next step, backed by research evidence, is to boost the American economy through significant investments in early childhood education. ■

Author note

This article is based in part on *Investing in Kids: Early Childhood Programs and Local Economic Development* (2011) and *From Preschool to Prosperity: The Economic Payoff to Early Childhood Education* (forthcoming).

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school. Parents also identified "having the hands ready for writing" as an essential skill for school. This was observed to be an area of emphasis, as we found teachers providing writing tools and materials to children. Learning some basic academic concepts such as colors, shapes, and a few Khmer letters were also identified as important skills.

Parents expressed great appreciation for hygiene items such as soap, toothpaste, and toothbrushes, which allowed them to implement the preschool lessons at home. Parents described these items as both a benefit and an incentive to participate in preschool program. Some mothers also confessed: "We

call children to come and learn, when before we just let them go away. Now we let them help and explain why. We teach them many things." Mothers in the program explained how they give individualized attention to their children, which did not happen before. Mothers confirmed that the whole family had become closer. "The children are interested when mother and father do something together," they stated. Fathers feel happy when their children are in school and are learning how to be helpers at home. Furthermore, the mothers clarified: "The children know what belongs to each parent in the

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Raising children in an age of overindulgence

by David Bredehoft, Ph.D., professor emeritus, psychology and family studies, and former chair of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, Concordia University, St. Paul, bredehoft@csp.edu

Several highly visible cases labeled “affluenza” by the press have recently generated countless hours of airtime on radio and TV and in the press. This is testimony to the fact that we live in an age of overindulgence. Has overindulgence become the new normal? Some everyday examples:

4-Year-Old and Screen Time

While at the local coffee shop you see a dad come in with his 4-year-old daughter. He orders drinks and then sits down to check email on his computer. To keep his daughter occupied, he gives her an iPad. Daughter like father, they both stayed glued to their devices for more than an hour without uttering a word to each other.

3-Year-Old Disrupts Dinner

You and your spouse are eating at a local restaurant. A family with a young child sits in the booth behind you. As the meal progresses, the child becomes impatient, squirms, and begins to fuss. He finally calms down when his mother gives him a favorite toy. Soon he begins hitting the booth

with his toy. His parents ignore it. Then he reaches over and hits you on the head with his toy. Both parents laugh and comment, “How cute,” but do nothing to prevent it from happening again and again.

Unfortunately, overindulgence has become the new normal.

What is Overindulgence?

Overindulgence meets an adult’s needs not a child’s needs. Overindulgence is giving children too much of what looks good, too soon, and for too long. Adults overindulge when they do things for children that they should be doing for themselves. Adults overindulge when they give a disproportionate amount of family resources to one or more children. Overindulgence does harm (Clarke, Dawson & Bredehoft, 2014).

When Does it Begin?

Overindulgence patterns begin between parent and child from a very early age, such as early childhood, and research suggests that in many cases they continue throughout childhood and adolescence and even into

adulthood. In our first of 10 studies on overindulgence, 39% reported overindulgence continuing through adolescence, 9% through young adulthood, and 9% through later adulthood. Of the respondents, 22% said they have been overindulged throughout their lives and that it was still continuing (Bredehoft, Mennicke, Potter, & Clarke, 1998).

Occasional indulgences add color, joy, and even excitement to life, but when they become a pattern, they become overindulgence. Our research (Bredehoft, Clarke & Dawson, 2003) identified three types of overindulgence patterns: *too much* (too many toys, clothes, camps, sports, etc.); *over-nurture* (doing things for children that

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David Bredehoft

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home, and the father becomes very happy to see his children become smarter.” Mothers expressed that the program has made a positive impact on the children’s behavior. “The program has changed the child’s behavior from bad to good,” several mothers confirmed. “The children have learned how to make better choices, listen, play well with others, and have become more polite.”

Mothers repeatedly acknowledged how participation in home-based preschool helped to develop their parenting skills. It changed their views on how to look after and interact with their children. Mothers, preschool staff, and other stakeholders pointed out that domestic violence had diminished in families participating in these preschool programs. Some mothers commented that they “used to hit or scream at their children. ... Now, this has changed.”

A survey of 142 parents of kindergarten children was conducted in CFC schools, of

which 71 had participated in CFC preschools and the other half had not. Results showed a difference in parent participation, attitudes related to gender roles, value of education, and malleability of human intelligence between parents who participated in the program and those who did not. Participating parents were more involved in school and tended not to subscribe to culturally held gender roles subjecting females to a subservient role in society. Parents also tended to hold positive attitudes toward their children’s potential to learn and perform in school. Participating parents also demonstrated belief in the value of education for their children.

During many discussions with families and the village community, it became evident that a community-supported home-based preschool has many unanticipated positive outcomes for the wider community. It strengthens the relationship between CFC and the village community. The preschool

program provides a forum for parents to share information, to network, and to become informed about events such as vaccination programs that occasionally happen in their villages. Home-based preschool also offers an outlet for mothers to exchange ideas about parenting. The model informs the field about the importance of using the home and community as an effective context for early education, building collaborative partnerships with families, communities, and the government. Overall, the preschool program supported by CFC has created social capital for the community at large that fosters parent participation in their children’s education and the norm of valuing education. While educational success is usually measured by a benchmark of access and performance statistics, changes in the community starting with people’s perceptions and attitudes toward education (e.g., trust or norms believing in educational investment) are equally important as intangible resources. ■

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they should be doing themselves); and *soft structure* (not having rules, not enforcing rules, not having chores). Parents can overindulge in one, two, or all three ways. Some examples with options:

Too Much

—You have a very popular parenting blog and each week UPS brings boxes and boxes of new toys for you to review and endorse. Your 4-year-old son thinks they are all for him. He thinks, “It’s better than Christmas, Hanukkah, and birthday rolled into one!” You think, “What’s the harm? It makes him happy.” The problem is your garage is full of boxes of toys and you have to park the cars outside.

Why not hire your son as a toy tester? Give him a job. He plays with each toy, rates it, tells what he likes and what he dislikes. You both agree ahead of time on a number to keep and a number of toys he will donate to charity. He can decide which charities.

—As a parent, you believe that it is important that your three young children be engaged in activities. It has gotten out of hand: church, preschool, sports, music lessons, and on and on. You are having difficulty keeping track and getting everyone where they need to be, especially since you and your spouse both work full time.

One possibility is to have a monthly family meeting and do a family calendar listing all activities, deciding which ones stay and which ones can be eliminated, and determining rules for adding new or unexpected activities.

Over-Nurture

—Your baby daughter is creeping across the floor to get a toy; you pick it up and give it to her.

Let her learn to get it herself; that enhances competence and confidence.

—Your 5-year-old son makes a bad baseball card trade with a friend and comes crying, wanting you to get it back for him.

After he calms down, talk to him about living with the deal he made, and then help him to develop rules for the future trading of prized possessions.

Soft Structure

—Your 3-year-old son throws a tantrum every time you go through the checkout line.

He expects you to buy him something—a toy, candy—and if you do not, he cries, yells, and screams. You give in. Next time the tantrum is louder and longer.

Consider making a rule about buying toys and candy when you go shopping. Share that rule with your son. Remind him of the rule each time you go into a store, several times in the store, particularly at checkout. Each time he throws a tantrum, apologize to the clerk, leave your items, and go to the car. Wait till he calms down and only then return to the store to purchase your items.

—Your 8-year-old daughter has chores she conveniently forgets. You have tried a number of tactics to get her to do them, but they haven’t worked. She waits you out. You give up and do them yourself. Besides, you do them better.

One option is to announce a new family policy: no chores—no services. If she balks at chores, discontinue family services such as rides to friends’ houses or favorite snacks for school lunches.

Our studies indicate that parents who overindulge their children risk raising kids who: feel that they are center of the universe; have an overblown sense of entitlement; are ungrateful; are irresponsible; have poor boundaries; need immediate gratification; have poor self-control...

Risks of Overindulging

Parents often ask, “What’s the harm in overindulging my child?” I tell them what they are risking. I ask: “Are these characteristics the ones you want for your child as an adult?” Our studies indicate that parents who overindulge their children risk raising kids who:

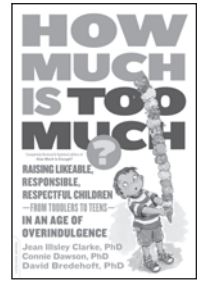
- feel that they are center of the universe;
- have an overblown sense of entitlement;
- are ungrateful;
- have not learned valuable adult life skills;
- are irresponsible;
- have poor boundaries;
- need immediate gratification;
- have poor self-control;
- are materialistic;
- have overspending and overeating problems;
- have goals of wealth, fame, and image, and do not have goals of meaningful relationships, personal growth, or making the community better.

How do I know if we are overindulging?**The Test of Four**

Parents often ask, “How do I know if we are overindulging?” That’s a challenging question. Each situation has to be examined individually. We have a tool we teach parents to use when examining a situation. We have parents ask four questions. We call this tool the Test of Four.

1. Does it hinder the child from learning his or her developmental tasks?
2. Does it use a disproportionate amount of family resources for one or more children?
3. Whose needs are being met? Does it benefit the adult more than the child?
4. Does it do harm to others, society, or the planet?

If, after you examine the situation, there is a “yes” answer to one or more of the Test of Four questions, it probably is overindulgence. Now think about 4-year-old and



screen time, the 5-year-old in the shopping cart, and the 3-year-old disrupting dinner. In your own mind apply the Test of Four to each case. What did you decide?

What Can Parents Do Instead?

I have found that overindulgence comes from a good heart. I believe parents do not want the worst for their child—they want the best. The problem is they often go overboard. Here are a few suggestions for parents who are struggling with overindulgence.

—*Recognize and Own it.* The first step is becoming aware that you are overindulging. Own it and choose to do things differently.

—*Use the Test of Four.* The Test of Four is a powerful tool and like any tool you get better the more you use it.

—*Work on One Problem Area at a Time.*

It is easy to say “I want a total parenting makeover, and I want to do it now,” but this

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Nutrition and gardening education for young children

by Meeshay Williams-Wheeler, Ph.D., CFLE and associate professor, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, mwwheele@ncat.edu

The cliché, “if they grow it, they will eat it” has resonated throughout the North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University Child Development Laboratory (CDL) for the past three years. This has been the result of a United States Department of Agriculture teaching grant awarded to the author, titled *Educating Healthy Children: A Gardening Education and Nutrition Curriculum* (EHC). The aim of this three-year federally funded project was to develop the college course, Nutrition and Gardening Education for Young Children, in which students learn age- and developmentally appropriate ways to teach preschoolers about healthy eating, nutrition, and physical activity in the context of an edible garden. College students from various majors have enrolled in the course to receive interdisciplinary instruction from healthcare professionals, horticultural scientists, nutritionists, parent educators, and child development specialists, as well as clinical nurses and registered dietitians. Young children are presenting with an increased incidence of obesity, often combined with insufficient dietary intake of fruits and vegetables. Through a variety of in-class and outdoor gardening activities, college students better understand the “field-to-the-fork” perspective and the value of growing and harvesting fruits and vegetables.

Garden-Based Education

The movement for “greening” schoolyards through school gardening projects is gaining momentum. Garden-based learning is an effective and engaging way to meet learning standards and to give preschoolers the chance to develop a wide range of academic and social skills. In recent years, garden-based nutrition education programs have become a popular strategy for enhancing dietary intake of fruits and vegetables in young children. The rationales for school gardening include outdoor learning laboratories, aesthetically pleasing spaces for children to play, and the increased consumption of fresh produce. Several researchers have

found that children who plant and harvest their own vegetables are more willing to incorporate them in their diet. Gardening education, combined with nutrition and physical activity, has been shown to be an effective way to improve young children’s health.

Reggio Emilia

Also known as the project approach, Reggio Emilia is a signature educational philosophy used by many preschool education programs and is based upon the following set of principles: (a) children must have some control over the direction of their learning; (b) children must be able to learn through varied

The rationales for school gardening include outdoor learning laboratories, aesthetically pleasing spaces for children to play, and the increased consumption of fresh produce.

experiences, which can include touching, moving, listening, seeing, and hearing; (c) children have a relationship with other children and with material items that children are encouraged to explore; and (d) children must have endless ways and opportunities to express themselves. The Reggio Emilia philosophy is designed to use projects and activities to enhance life-long learning in young children. Considered as adventures, projects may be as short as a day or a week or could continue throughout the school year.

The Project

Aligned with Reggio Emilia philosophy, the project for the EHC grant is the edible children’s garden. Using the project approach, teachers and project investigators use the edible garden as a context to increase preschoolers’ awareness of nutrition and healthy eating. Gardens lend themselves well to the project approach because of the complexity and variety of ways children can become involved. CDL teachers expand on

the current curriculum to integrate various disciplines such as science, language arts, social studies, math, and fine arts. The project approach as a theoretical foundation develops cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional skills in young children.

There are three edible gardening plots that surround the playground at the CDL. Participants grow a variety of vegetables, such as zucchini, okra, onions, and tomatoes, as well as basil and strawberries. During scheduled outdoor time, children are encouraged to use their five senses when exploring the garden—listening to the birds, smelling the fresh herbs, touching the smooth leaves, observing the plants’ bright colors, and even tasting the strawberries. Several times a semester, college students engage the preschoolers in creative, fun indoor and outdoor experiential learning activities centered on gardening, healthy eating, and physical activity.

To broaden our knowledge of physical activity among preschoolers, project investigators and several students received formal training in Be Active Kids. This innovative, interactive nutrition and physical activity program was launched by Blue Cross and Blue Shield more than 15 years ago. Be Active Kids focuses on children ages 4 and 5 to establish early, positive relationships with one’s body through participation in fun, physical activities and education about basic healthy eating concepts. The EHC research team has presented several lessons from the Be Active Kids curriculum to the CDL. College students, preschoolers, project investigators, and some of the teachers enjoyed running, jumping, and hopping along to activities and exercises—everybody was moving!

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Meeshay Williams-Wheeler

Childhood trauma: prevention and intervention strategies

by John Machir, supervisor, Mountain State Healthy Families, Point Pleasant, WV, john@teamwv.org

In the past two decades, neuroscience has done a great deal to advance our knowledge of the human brain, its architecture, and how it functions. Behavioral epigenetics as well as knowledge of the brain's chemical responses to variable stimuli (including stress response) help us understand the role that the environment plays in shaping human behavior through gene regulation and the resulting expression of heritable traits.

This article focuses on early childhood stress response to trauma and abuse and its effects upon brain architecture, function, and the correlation between stress and the development of risk factors that lead to less-than-optimal life course trajectories as well as chronic disease and early death in adulthood. The role that evidence-based interventions can play in minimizing the lifelong effects of trauma and abuse are also examined.

The Science

Human ability to cope with new or potentially threatening situations or physical danger is essential to our survival. Our capacity to deal with these threats is developed within specific brain circuits beginning prenatally or in the first three to five years of life, when brain circuitry is more plastic or malleable.

Not all stress is equal. Stress can be damaging, tolerable, or positive depending upon the duration of the stressor and the intensity of the bodily response that it provokes. Stress as defined by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2009/2014) at Harvard University, includes the following types.

—**Toxic Stress:** Strong, frequent or prolonged activation of the body's stress management system. Stressful events that are chronic, uncontrollable, and/or experienced without the child having access to support from caring adults.

—**Tolerable Stress:** Stress responses that could affect brain architecture but generally occur for briefer periods, which allow time for the brain to recover and thereby reverse potentially harmful effects. In addition to their relative brevity, one of the critical in-

redients that make stressful events tolerable rather than toxic is the presence of supportive adults who create safe environments that help children learn to cope with and recover from major adverse experiences.

—**Positive Stress:** Moderate, short-lived stress responses, such as brief increases in heart rate or mild changes in the body's stress hormones. This kind of stress is a normal part of life, and learning to adjust to it is an essential feature of healthy development.

Toxic stress is the greatest stress concern during the formative years. Toxic stress in the early years affects developing brain circuits and hormonal systems in a number of specific ways that can lead to poorly controlled stress-response systems. Frequent or sustained activation of these systems often leads to undesirable health outcomes and vulnerability to well-being through the development of conditions such as depression and anxiety disorders.

Two hormonal systems play a large part in the regulation of stress response. The systems producing adrenaline and cortisol can mobilize the body's energy stores and suppress immune responses during a crisis. Sustained stress responses can have lasting developmental consequences for children. Particularly, sustained elevations in the release of cortisol or corticotropin-releasing hormone can result in switching off or switching on specific genes essential to early brain development. In short, the persistent release of these substances can determine which genes are used in early brain development, when they are used in stages of development, and where they are used in the developing brain. Elevations in stress hormones may affect brain architecture and blunt the stress response and may persist even after the child is moved to a safe environment.

Changes in brain architecture are most apparent in three structures in the brain: the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala plays an important part in emotional reactivity. Stress can be

expressed in impulsive or aggressive behaviors. Stress-related changes in the architecture of the hippocampus can also affect learning and memory. The prefrontal cortex acts as a mediator in suppressing and regulating impulsive or emotional behaviors.

In the late nineties, researchers reviewed standardized medical histories of 17,000 patients in a primary-care setting to determine the effects of toxic stress on adult health in later years (Felitti et al., 1998). Hypothesizing that childhood experiences contributed to the development of dysfunctional health risk behaviors, the study assessed the correlation between a number of specific Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and risk factors in later life. These included smoking, severe obesity, physical inactivity, depressed mood, suicide attempts, alcoholism/substance abuse, a high lifetime number of sexual partners, and a history of a sexually transmitted disease. Adverse childhood experiences included emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, child neglect, witnessing domestic violence, a household member with mental illness, a household member with substance abuse, an incarcerated parent, and the loss of a parent through separation or divorce. The results of the study were staggering with nearly 40% of affected individuals reporting two or more in their history.

Effects on physical health were also alarming. There was a strong graded relationship between early childhood adversity and the development of risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults, including unintentional injuries. Follow-up studies also implied impaired job functioning, criminal justice involvement, and increased risk of homelessness in adulthood.

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The human cost of adverse childhood experiences is incalculable. The financial cost of child abuse and neglect is measureable, costing the United States an alarming \$80 billion per year (Gelles & Perlman, 2012). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that each case of nonfatal child maltreatment will cost the economy more than \$210,000 over the child's lifetime. The science and the financial numbers look particularly bleak. The science behind these studies does not support the conclusion that all young children who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences will develop stress-related disorders. Variability among children in their level of resilience appears to be the differentiating factor that mediates the effects of adversity. The question then becomes, "Why are some children more resilient than others?" and "What can we do?"

Protective Factors

Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) asserted, "The cumulative burden of multiple risk factors is associated with greater vulnerability; the cumulative buffer of multiple protective factors is associated with greater developmental resilience."

The task of helping children and families address neglect, abuse, trauma, and economic stressors largely hinges on helping them to develop resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adverse situations. The development of specific protective factors coupled with qualitative relationships between children and their caregivers increases the probability that families will be able to develop and use adaptive solutions to the stressors that confront them. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (2007) has identified protective factors that foster resiliency in families:

- concrete support in times of need
- knowledge of parenting and child development
- parental resilience
- social connections
- social and emotional competence of children

When families are in crisis, the children are more protected if the family can quickly gain access to the resources that will alleviate their financial, physical, or emotional distress. Parents who receive appropriate parenting information then implement guidance and discipline techniques that are developmen-

tally appropriate, thereby reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect. Helping isolated families connect socially also strengthens parenting skills and protects children from abuse and neglect. When parents cease to ignore challenging events and acknowledge the feelings that go along with these difficult situations, resiliency is strengthened as they regain hope, the ability to solve problems, and the ability to take action to address their difficulties and feelings. Parental resilience provides a model for children to follow as they progress through the developmental stages of childhood. Children learn to identify their feelings, empathize with others, share emotions appropriately, and seek positive outcomes with peers and adults, modeling the

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examples of parents and caregivers. In this manner they develop effective mechanisms for interacting interpersonally.

Home Visiting Programs

The emotional and financial costs of abuse and neglect are enormous, and it is clear to researchers and policymakers across the country that there is a cumulative negative effect on human behavior and physical health as a result of trauma experienced during the formative years. It seems glaringly obvious that prevention programs would be the most effective vehicle to prevent or ameliorate the effects of adverse experiences during early childhood.

Evidence-based home visiting programs have shown tremendous promise in preventing or minimizing the lifelong effects of early childhood adversity. Programs such as Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership, Maternal Infant Home Outreach Worker, Early Head Start, and others aim to promote the safety and well-being of children and families. The efficacy of home visiting programs is significantly improved when coupled with Infant Mental Health services. The most successful home visiting programs are those addressing the critical

need of training, especially in dealing with families who have experienced trauma and acute distress. Infant Mental Health Associations can provide this much-needed training and an endorsement that certifies the skills of the home visitor.

Home visiting programs are cost-effective, providing prevention services at an average of one-fourth the cost of traditional therapeutic services. Home visiting services are voluntary and can be implemented to all parents. The bulk of services should be targeted to those families whose children are at greatest risk for abuse and neglect. In 2012, more than 3 million calls were made to child protective services. Of those, 38%, a figure representing more than 1 million children, were screened out for not meeting the definitions of imminent or actual harm to a child and did not trigger an investigation or receipt of services. The families who demonstrate indicators of potential risk are an important target group for community-based prevention programs. Screening assessments such as the Family Stress Checklist can help identify these families.

Effective home visiting programs achieve success through the implementation of services that are highly relationship-focused, build on family strengths to achieve objectives, maintain the fidelity of their program model, adhere to credentialing standards that address target populations and staff training and skill development, and allow for reflective supervision and parallel process. Home visitors assist families in navigating complex government and community resources to help alleviate the family's concrete needs such as housing, heating, food, clothing, and medical services. Participants can access resources to increase their earning capacities to help lift their families out of poverty.

A number of these programs work with families prenatally to secure good maternal health and birth outcomes. As the stresses of physical and financial need are relieved, protective factors are strengthened. The home visitor becomes a partner in the family's journey, witnessing the development of parents and children. Successful resolution of a family's personal challenges increases parental optimism and resilience. Parents who have experienced abuse and trauma

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is unrealistic and defeating. Instead, identify one overindulgence problem area that routinely surfaces between you and your child. It could be with any of the three types of overindulgence: Too Much, Over-Nurture, or Soft-Structure. Choose only one. Think of a new, more effective way to respond.

—*Forgive Yourself for Your Parenting Mistakes.* We all make mistakes. We are all human. Learn to forgive yourself for your parenting mistakes so you can learn more effective ways of parenting.

—*Ask for Help and Support.* We live in an age of overindulgence. I don't think we can change that. That said, we are in charge of the choices we make in this overindulgent world. One choice is to ask others for help, or to surround yourself with parents who are also

concerned about overindulgence—find allies. Another choice is to join a parenting group and receive as well as give others help. ■

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in early childhood may lack confidence in parenting their own children. Home visitors provide parents with developmentally appropriate information, which can reduce the potential for child abuse.

The growing body of evidence indicates that the effects of adversity and toxic stress in childhood and their effects on lifelong health are serious. The efficacy of evidence-based home visiting programs in preventing or reducing the impact of these factors should be considered an integral part of a public health approach, which also partners with pedia-

tricians, early childhood educators, public policymakers, faith-based communities, family-service agencies, and others who will collaborate to alleviate familial stress. The goal is to nurture safe, stable relationships that foster family resilience and stronger communities. ■

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**nutrition and gardening**

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As a result of the EHC project at the CDL, teachers have infused various concepts of the garden into their math and science lessons, including shape, color, texture, and seasonal growth of vegetables. For example, story time and circle time often focus on books and activities related to gardening, farms, and healthy foods. To highlight math concepts, teachers may encourage children to count the leaves and fruit on various plants in the garden.

An enlightening educational activity the EHC team conducted at the CDL was a parent–child cooking demonstration. Weeks before the cooking event, teachers read to the preschoolers *Growing Vegetable Soup* by Lois Ehlert. The book focuses on gardening activities related to growing a variety of vegetables. The cooking event occurred on the evening of a PTO meeting. Adorned in their chef hats and aprons, 30 preschoolers ages 2½ to 5 years and their parents/guardians prepared vegetable soup. Charts were created and posted in the classroom to help children identify the chronological steps in preparing the soup, including washing hands, washing vegetables, and cutting vegetables. At each station, children and parents were equipped with large pots, spoons, cutting boards, child-safe knives, bowls, and a variety of vegetables—some homegrown. Children enjoyed rinsing and cutting the vegetables and preparing the soup. Parents also enjoyed the experience of cooking with their children.

After cooking, the parents and children shared delicious, freshly made vegetable soup. Many children asked for another helping and their parents committed to cooking similar soups at home. The recipe for the soup was in the back of the *Growing Vegetable Soup* book. The EHC team considered the parent–child cooking demonstration an excellent learning experience for young children, parents, and teachers. Not only did the children learn about fruits and vegetables they had helped to plant and harvest, but they could eat and enjoy them as well. Gardening-based education can enlighten young children to appreciate “field-to-the-fork” when eating healthy foods. We can proudly say, “If they grow it and cook it, they will enjoy it!” ■

Parenting in the early years: what children and parents need

by Marti Erickson, Ph.D., director emerita of the Irving B. Harris Programs, Center for Early Education and Development, University of Minnesota, and co-host of Mom Enough® (www.momenough.com), marti@momenough.com

No doubt you've heard about the many children who enter kindergarten insufficiently prepared to succeed (40% in my home state, despite Garrison Keillor's claim that Minnesota children are all above average). And you've read about widening disparities in health, education, and well-being, gaps traced in part to disparities in opportunity and experience in the earliest years of life. The early years are a highly sensitive period of development; what happens then has life-long effects on how a person learns, loves, and lives.

But in your community and mine, we are presented each day with a fresh opportunity to get it right; each day babies are born who will thrive in school and life if we and others in our community (and state and nation) work to ensure that they have the experiences they need. Although high-quality child care and preschool are part of that equation, parents continue to be the primary providers of young children's most potent experiences. So any serious effort to improve the life prospects of children must start with a thoughtful consideration of parenting.

Picture three different families who are about to welcome their first baby into their lives:

Nadifa, a recent immigrant, is 7 months pregnant and trying to figure out life in a strange, new place. Feeling isolated and depressed, she longs for her mother and sister, who remain in Africa. Nadifa's husband, Abdi, works two jobs and gets little sleep, plagued by night terrors about things he witnessed in his homeland. But he is excited about becoming a father and determined to build a good life for his new family.

Seventeen-year-old Kim expected her boyfriend to marry her when he learned she was pregnant. But he is dating someone else

and hasn't seen Kim for weeks. Kim's mom wants to help with the baby, but Kim wants to prove she can handle things on her own. She says, "Besides, what does my mom know? She couldn't protect me. She had to know what my stepdad was doing when he used to sneak into my bedroom at night!"

Jason, a physician, and Matt, an attorney, have been together for 10 years and married as soon as same-sex marriage became legal last year. A surrogate will bear their baby soon and Jason and Matt have baby-proofed their home and purchased top-of-the-line baby equipment. They have never changed a diaper, but they have read all six parenting books stacked on their coffee table.

A wealth of research points to key experiences these children—all children—need in those early years, all of which happen in the context of parent-child relationships.

What will the babies born into these very different families need in order to succeed and thrive and find joy in school and life? What can their parents do to put them on a trajectory to become caring, competent, contributing adults?

What Children Need

A wealth of research points to key experiences these children—all children—need in those early years, all of which happen in the context of parent-child relationships.

A Healthy Birth

A child's first environment is the womb, and its quality depends on good maternal nutrition and avoidance of tobacco, alcohol, and other toxic substances. A healthy birth also is influenced by prenatal care—not only formal medical services, but also informal support and care to keep mom calm and healthy.

A Secure Foundation

Decades of attachment research shows that babies thrive with parents who respond sensitively to their cues and signals, foster-

ing a strong sense of security. Within safe, predictable, loving relationships, babies develop trust in others and confidence in their ability to solicit the care they need. Soothed and comforted at times of distress, young children learn to calm themselves and regulate emotions and impulses. Self-regulation is central to a child's ability to focus attention, accept direction, and get along with others.



Marti Erickson

A Rich Language Environment

As demonstrated by the classic 1990s study by Betty Hart and Todd Risley, how and how much parents talk to their young children matters a great deal to future learning. Parents need to talk to children long before they can talk back; engage children with stories, songs and rhymes; ask "why?" and "how?" and "what if?" questions that stretch children's minds and vocabularies; and introduce children to the rich world of books. Most likely to thrive and succeed are children who are engaged as active, joyful learners, discovering the wonder and power of the spoken and written word.

Safe and Stimulating Opportunities to Play and Explore

Infants and young children are naturally curious and eager to explore. They advance their own development through exploration and mastery. With sensitive guidance from parents who support their growing autonomy, children build motor skills, cognitive concepts, social understanding, confidence, initiative, and creativity.

Clear and Reasonable Limits

Although children protest when their desires are thwarted, without limits they feel insecure and overwhelmed by their impulses.

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Without clear limits, young children will be hard-pressed to learn to set reasonable limits for themselves. To learn and grow optimally, young children need limits expressed in clear, simple language; reasons for the limit (e.g., “That’s dangerous” or “He feels sad when you take his toy”); logical consequences when they violate limits; and recognition when they behave well. These lessons are magnified when, after children misbehave, parents help them think about what they could have done differently and what they will do next time a similar situation arises.

Opportunities to Make Choices and Handle Responsibilities

The older children become, the more they must make decisions and handle tasks without adult guidance. Preparation for increasing independence begins early in life—a toddler’s choice between two healthy snacks or between the red shirt or the blue shirt. When preschoolers put their toys away before a trip to the park or help clear the table or fold laundry, they build life skills and discover that they contribute to the common good.

Protection from Violence and Trauma

Both physical and emotional abuse have devastating consequences for children’s development, and studies show that even witnessing violence does equal harm. Violence teaches young children the roles of both

victim and perpetrator. Without appropriate intervention, these destructive patterns are likely to continue into future generations. As researchers like the University of Minnesota’s Megan Gunnar have found, extreme stress and trauma have not only psychological but physiological effects on young children, stimulating the production of stress hormones that flood the developing brain and undermine emotional regulation and clear thinking. Some stress, of course, is a normal part of life and can help children build coping skills. But severe or prolonged stress in early childhood, especially when not buffered by the presence of sensitive, loving parents, becomes toxic and does lasting harm.

What Parents Need

Now reflect back on Nadifa and Abdi, Kim, and Jason and Matt, the parents-to-be described earlier, and consider the factors that might help or hinder them in providing those essential experiences for their children. More broadly, what (beyond basic needs for food and shelter) does any parent need in order to provide those important early experiences? Research yields some answers to that question as well, a good starting point for thinking about what our society can do to support parents in this most important job.

Child Development and Parenting Knowledge

Parents need reliable, research-based information about child development—not only the basics of what children typically do when, but a deeper understanding of the meaning of certain key behaviors, such as separation anxiety or toddler negativism. They need practical knowledge of positive parenting approaches, which they may not have learned in their families of origin. In our ever-changing world, parents also need up-to-date knowledge about the effects of new trends on children’s development. For example, what is the proper place of technology in the life of a baby or young child? What are the effects of nearly constant cell phone or tablet use on parental responsiveness, so essential to attachment?

A Viable Support System for Themselves

Although parental knowledge is important, the greatest challenge often lies in the space between what a parent knows and what a parent does. It is in that space that support plays such a critical role. Parents need both

instrumental and emotional support to enable them to apply their best knowledge. Although formal programs are important, particularly in the face of mental health problems or other significant risk factors, informal support from family, neighbors and friends often matters even more. Safe neighborhoods, parks, community centers, and other welcoming and accessible gathering places can help parents build the support networks that will sustain them and their children.

A Safe Place to Consider Their Own History

In recent years, both attachment research and studies of intergenerational cycles of abuse and neglect have focused on how important it is for parents to reflect on how they were parented, examine how that experience shapes their relational behavior and responses to stress, and consider what they want to repeat and what they want to leave behind in their own approach to parenting (what I call “looking back, moving forward”). Pioneered by Mary Main and colleagues, adult attachment research offers hope: How we parent is not only a function of how we were parented, but how we have come to think about the way we were parented. That reflective process can happen in many ways, both informally and formally. But, for parents who received very poor care in their own childhoods, the process happens best, individually or in a group, with the guidance and support of a well-prepared professional.

So, how well are we, in our communities, states, and nation, helping to ensure that parents have what they need so they can provide what their children need? What is happening in your community for parents like Nadifa and Abdi, Kim, and Jason and Matt?

Many years ago a young mother much like 17-year-old Kim told me how overwhelmed she felt when she looked at her tiny son and thought of how little she knew about babies and what poor parenting she had learned in her own childhood. Tearfully, she whispered, “All I can do is look into his eyes and say, ‘Here I am, here I am.’”

That may be a good place for Kim to start when her baby is born in a few weeks. And wouldn’t it be a good place for us to start if we looked into Kim’s eyes and said to her, in words and actions, “Here I am, here I am”? ■



Early childhood literacy: What about families?

by Neda Moinolmolki and Juana Gaviria, Ph.D. candidates, Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware; and Myae Han, Ph.D., associate professor, Human Development & Family Studies, University of Delaware; nmoinolm@gmail.com

With the recent momentum in our society toward raising the bar for early childhood education, through Race to the Top grants as well as the current Preschool for All initiative, the importance of family literacy has fallen to the side. Although there are a couple of family literacy-based early childhood education programs, many of them are early-intervention programs targeting at-risk infants and toddlers. Most of the literacy programs implemented for preschool children are center based, with limited family literacy components. This is a problem because of the important role families play in children's language and literacy development. The background of family literacy, its importance, the current state of literature within the field, along with limitations and future directions are discussed.

What is Family Literacy?

Family literacy refers to the way in which families, parents in particular, promote and facilitate their children's communication, reading, and writing skills through routines at home. This has theoretical underpinnings in Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, in which children's development is seen to be shaped by the interplay of multiple contexts, with the family being considered the primary microsystem in which development takes place. In the case of children's language and literacy development, parents are considered the first and most important teachers, because they regulate the environment in which children learn and develop. Parents also decide on children's practices and interactions (Rodriguez et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that common family literacy practices consist of high-quality speaking interactions, storytelling, shared storybook reading, cognitive-stimulation activities, and play.

Why is Family Literacy Important?

Family literacy practices are important during preschool years because during this time children acquire a greater vocabulary than in any other life stage. According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2005), children's

language and literacy development during the preschool years provide the necessary foundations for their later reading success. Supporting children's language and literacy development at an early stage seems crucial for children's future success. Research suggests that young children with highly involved parents tend to develop better literacy and prereading skills than children with less-involved parents. Furthermore, the subsequent rate of vocabulary growth in children seems to be strongly influenced by how much parents talk to their children.

Play has also been found to be an important component within family literacy practices, due to the predominant role it has in children's preschool years. Play has been linked to children's literacy development and has been shown to be an important way for children to build new vocabulary and literacy skills. In 2005, Davis-Kean explained that

Our findings suggest that, despite our limited sample size, parents involved in family literacy intervention showed increased frequency of reading to their children when compared to the control group.

when parents are involved in play activities with their children, more literacy behaviors are present at home. Scholars have related literacy and play to higher cognitive functioning through the use of symbolic thinking.

Literacy Interventions

Two current approaches seem to be predominant in family literacy interventions: shared dialogic storybook reading and narrative/storytelling. Shared dialogic storybook reading, as described by Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001), provides parents with strategies to facilitate, scaffold, and build upon their children's literacy skills through activities targeting oral language, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, comprehen-

sion, and concepts of print. This intervention model has been shown to be effective and enduring in promoting children's emergent literacy skills, in addition to language, metalinguistic, and print knowledge awareness (Chow & McBride-Chang, 2003).

Oral narrative/storytelling is based on the promotion of parents' communicative expansion of their children's stories. It focuses on increasing parents' usage of open-ended questions during their children's communicative narratives of past events with the use of "when" and "where" questions. Studies looking at oral narrative/storytelling family-based interventions, such as Schick and

Melzi (2010), have found them to be highly effective in increasing children's vocabulary and emergent literacy skills.

A New Approach

Although these family literacy interventions have shown effectiveness, there has been a lack of connection with what children learn at school. If these interventions are connected with high-quality curriculum at school, one might expect higher impact on children's literacy learning and development. This hypothesis led us to implement a small pilot study to examine the impact of a three-month family literacy intervention aligned with an evidence-based literacy curriculum

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Strong foundations for future success: Early childhood programs and family engagement

by April Trent, MPA, director for the Rosenwald Center for Families and Children, and Javiette Samuel, Ph.D., CFLE, associate extension administrator and associate professor, Division of Family and Consumer Sciences, Kentucky State University, april.trent@kysu.edu

Introduction

It is not surprising that there are achievement gaps between economically advantaged and disadvantaged kids. Educators see it. Policymakers know it. Budget analysts assess it. When children are able to experience high-quality early learning and care programs, they perform better in school, rely less on social programs, have fewer educational interventions, and contribute more to the economy. Most children are not benefiting from the type of high-quality programs that will help them thrive. Investing resources in early childhood education and care is worth every penny and more. Impoverished learning environments do not support what should be our most prized investment, namely, the developing minds of our children.

Imagine a dimly lit room with no windows, a strange smell, and dingy walls. In the same room we see a couple of caregivers talking to each other; they seem almost oblivious to the children surrounding them. There are some children watching television, some coloring with tattered crayons, some looking at books that are torn or have missing pages, and some fighting over the few toys that are available. There is chaos due to the lack of caregiver training. There is inadequate food being served, unsanitary practices are the norm, and there is sadness.

Now picture a classroom where everything is child-sized, there are lots of windows, and the walls are covered with children's artwork. It smells and looks clean. Children and caregivers are on the floor, singing and reading, and educators are helping children cope with their emotions. The staff have early childhood education degrees and have been trained on how to assist children, educate children, and care for them in the best way possible. The smell of roasted turkey is coming from the kitchen. Caregivers are happy, children are happy, success is in sight. These vast differences in experiences are inevitably contributing to a readiness gap for children before they enter kindergarten. The readiness gap has begun

and it can evolve into a gorge that creates challenges that affect educational attainment and the social-emotional health of children.

Research

While defining readiness precisely is difficult, the notion of being ready to enter formal education includes adequate physical health, social-emotional health, cognitive abilities, language acquisition, flexibility, adaptability, cooperation, communication, and independence. The latest research reveals a staggering statistic about language. Infants in low-income families hear about 600 words per hour while children in households where parents are college-educated hear about 2,100 words per hour. At this rate, there is a difference of about 30 million fewer words being heard during the infant-toddler stage. There is a direct correlation between the number of words heard and the IQ. Children who were exposed to more language also outperformed in school. It is important to note that words from the television were not counted. It was also discovered that TV talk had negative effects on speech and language.

Studies have indicated that many children are not ready for the demands of kindergarten. The Kentucky Governor's Office of Early Childhood released a study that captured data from the BRIGANCE K Screener. This screening tool was used for 50,532 kindergarten students in all 173 school districts at the beginning of the 2013–2014 school year. The screener measured how well a child is prepared to succeed at the time of the screening. The students were asked questions such as whether they could say their name and age, to recite the alphabet, and to count to 30. Among Black students screened statewide, 55.8% were not ready for kindergarten. Among students receiving free and reduced-cost lunches, 62.4% were not ready. And among disabled students, 71.8% were not ready. According to the U.S. Department of Education, most states report that as many as half of their children, especially children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are



April Trent



Javiette Samuel

entering kindergarten ill-equipped for the expectations that await them.

Teachers of kindergarten classrooms are struggling with demanding test-score-driven priorities. Children are entering school behind and everyone is paying the price. Every child deserves a high-quality early-childhood experience, but America is falling short. Countless studies show how crucial a positive and high-quality early-care experience is for children later in life; evidence confirms that children participating in well-balanced programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, and not be incarcerated.

National Perspective

Early childhood advocates, parents, and children are hopeful that the new initiatives proposed by President Obama surrounding early childhood will not only increase the number of high-quality programs but the number of children who can attend. Sadly, 96% of infants and toddlers who are eligible are not served by Early Head Start due to lack of funding. There are thousands of children who have not attended a preschool or early learning program due to cuts in childcare subsidy funds. Some parents do an excellent job providing stimulating home environments. For other children, enrollment in a high-quality early-learning center provides opportunities to grow and thrive. Results from the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers study and the Economics of Family Child Care Study

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revealed that most early-care programs are mediocre at best. The State of America's Children 2014 Report sheds light on the number of children that are at risk in early-care facilities. The Strong Start for Children Act would create new funding to help states make high-quality early care and education more accessible to more families. A program would receive funding for families enrolled who are falling below 200% of the poverty level. High-quality standards will be enforced, but those states that can deliver developmentally appropriate programs will receive funding. Programs that wish to take part must meet children's developmental needs cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically. In 2013 a bipartisan poll was conducted, and 70% of Americans support a plan to increase the quality and participation early-care programs. Comprehensive services must be provided, including access to nutrition, health, and social services and activities to engage and educate parents.

Family Engagement

To achieve greater efficiency and increased effectiveness, we must start where education begins, at birth. The windows of opportunity that exist for optimal brain development are at a premium during early childhood. It is necessary to capitalize on experiences of young children that maximize their greatest opportunity for success. In programs committed to high quality there is a lot to be learned by parents, too. A community of parents, guardians, families, and early childhood educators can observe positive interactions, seek advice, and stay aware of trends and policies that affect their families.

Incorporating parents into the equation can increase children's success. Indeed, parents are the first teachers of young children and home is the first school. Despite the fact that the Head Start model mandated family involvement 50 years ago, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children recognizes the significant role that families play in their standards, using parents as a resource has not always been a variable in the early childhood success equation. Parents are the first individuals to help children understand the value of education, literacy, goal-setting, and other important factors related to academic and individual success. "Researchers at the University of Oxford found that children whose parents participated in the Peers Early

Education Partnership [a program geared towards supporting families of children ages 0–5] made significantly greater progress in their learning than children whose parents did not participate. These strides were found in children ages 3 to 5 and included progress in vocabulary, language comprehension, understanding of books and print, and number concepts. In addition, these children also exhibited higher self-esteem in comparison to children of nonparticipating parents" (as cited in Sanabria-Hernandez, no date). Teacher education and training, plus parent interaction and involvement, can equal a decrease in the achievement gap. Some examples of activities and strategies that promote school readiness and good family functioning include:

Understanding Child Development

Workshops on physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development can help parents understand developmental milestones, developmentally appropriate behaviors, and developmentally appropriate activities. Using curricula that assess children daily to address skills and objectives helps families and teachers know if there are delays in development.

Healthy Children, Healthy Families

Encouraging healthy eating and physical activity can promote overall well-being. Providing a well-balanced menu for children will ensure a healthy diet and will encourage parents to serve healthy foods at home. Providing literature for families about the importance of nutrient-rich meals will promote health and wellness. Initiating health and wellness fairs will help families have fun while learning important information about their diet and food choices.

Family Literacy Initiatives

Read-along activities at home and in the classroom can highlight the importance of literacy. Creating special places for reading helps children realize the value of literature. Invite community partners to come and read to the children.

Parent–Child Communication

Offering programs and resources that promote parent–child communication can help ensure that parents are meeting children's needs. Make sure that parents receive developmental information on milestones for speech and communication and have resources available to them if additional assistance is needed.

Parent–School Communication

Effective communication is crucial. It can come in many forms, including but not limited to discussions and meetings, letters and memos, email, listservs, and social media.

Green Space over Screen Space

Promote outdoor physical activities on playgrounds, parks, and outside space, rather than watching television or being on the computer. Have program planning that gets families outside and enjoying nature. Complete an activity that is normally housed indoors, outdoors. Make sure to include a cart for books and art supplies for the outside. Children can become inspired by their surroundings. Consider the use of an outdoor classroom.

Community Resources

Provide families with resources to address issues beyond the scope of the early childhood learning center. The center is a major part of the families' everyday life. It is a place that families come almost every day. Ensuring that community resources are available and promoted will put families in touch with community partners that can enhance their lives.

Action Steps

There are a number of steps that early childhood education centers can take to encourage family engagement. They include but are not limited to the action steps below. The Rosenwald Center for Families and Children parent-involvement activities are scheduled at least once per month. It is the mission of the program to provide a holistic approach to early care in education, one that focuses on the family unit and not just the child. The following experiences are provided at this center. We want to ensure a sense of pride, have families invested, demonstrate teamwork, and involve the community.

Provide a Welcoming Environment

The center should be well-lit and welcoming. The teachers and staff should be positive and friendly. Knowing the names of the families and children in the center always makes people feel valued. Families should communicate with staff and teachers openly. Everyone should feel safe and appreciated.

Create Opportunities for Parents to be Engaged

Plan a family training seminar such as "The Five Love Languages for Children" so families can have the keys to success when filling

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HOT tips for early learning

by Carol Patrick, Ed.D., Lisa Gannoe, Ed.D., Helyne Frederick, Ph.D., Family and Consumer Sciences, Eastern Kentucky University; carol.patrick@eku.edu

Strategies for implementation of higher thinking skills are being developed across many educational institutions. In recent years, stronger emphasis has been placed on higher-order thinking in childhood. If we can teach children from a young age to develop higher-order thinking, then it could become the norm. Parents are the child's first teachers and play an important role in helping infants and toddlers learn higher-order thinking skills. Family Life Educators can assist families in understanding how higher-order thinking can be easily incorporated into everyday routines and experiences. The following information is provided as a guide to assist Family Life Educators working with parents of young children.

In Benjamin Bloom's book, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956), he identifies six major levels that are involved in thinking. His descriptions can assist parents with understanding what is involved in higher-order thinking.

Bloom's Taxonomy

—Knowledge: This involves the child's memory and the answer is given verbatim. The child doesn't necessarily understand.

—Comprehension: The child understands the information and can relate it back to you in his or her own words.

—Application: The child will take the information and use it in a new way by solving problems.

—Analysis: The child can determine arrangement and logic, and distinguish between different parts.

—Synthesis: The child will take the different parts and make a whole and create new ideas.

—Evaluation: The child will compare and make judgments; this requires an understanding of values.

Applying Bloom's Taxonomy

Knowledge and Comprehension

The questions that we ask children on the first two levels of thinking are convergent in nature. These are the questions that test the child's knowledge and comprehension about the topic and usually have a right or wrong answer. When we are working with parents,

they should be encouraged to create an atmosphere where children can gain new information about themselves and the world. It is important to teach them the accurate words and meanings of words.

Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation

When questions are asked on the higher four levels of the taxonomy, children are encouraged to think abstractly with a more sophisticated integration of content and experience. We don't naturally implement this type of questioning with children. It is a skill that has to be learned and practiced. According to Alice Thomas and Glenda Thorne, "It is important for adults to model for children what Higher-order Thinking (HOT) looks like by 'thinking out loud'—tell your thinking process to children when you are using HOT" (Booth, 2010). Parents can be taught to use discussions and activities that encourage children to analyze and to think about the how and why of learning rather than simply memorizing isolated facts.

As children engage in awareness of new information, exploration, asking questions, and using new information, adults should plan interactive ways to teach new vocabulary and introduce topics to young children. Exploration involves selecting activities that provide experiences with all senses. Inquiry requires a question for investigation by the whole group, small groups, or individuals. It follows predicting, investigating, recording, and discussion (Dubosarsky et al., 2011). At the end of the process, adults should provide opportunities to extend or apply the new knowledge in new situations.

High-quality learning environments are motivating and involve multiple-skill learning. The environments are arranged to accommodate different interests and address all areas of development. Resources in the environment should be plentiful and attractive to entice children to experience the surroundings.



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Creating a HOT Home Environment

Daily routines provide opportunities to develop abstract thinking. For example, diapering, meal and bath times, walks around the neighborhood, and shopping trips are ideal opportunities to count, point out shapes and sizes, talk about patterns, and describe how things are the same and different. Gathering, sorting, and classifying are ways of analyzing information to help children make sense of their world.

Nurturing relationships and stimulating environments help young children learn to think, and they thrive on the warmth and caring that come from those close relationships. Having someone who responds quickly to a baby's cues will help the child build a base of security that will support exploration, learning, and identity formation (Copple, 2012). Experiences stimulate neural connections in a baby's rapidly developing brain. When you cradle a contented newborn in your arms, hum a lullaby, and gently rock him or her, you are actually helping neural systems to fire. Caregivers need to provide materials that encourage children to explore and reinforce their attempts at exploring and solving problems. In doing so, development will be stimulated while promoting advanced critical thinking. Children will show pride in their own abilities to find out more about how their world works.

At-home learning is encouraging children's interest and curiosity; listening to children's ideas and questions; reacting to children by asking questions such as "What do you think?" and comments such as "Let's find

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out” as you seek information together; praising children’s motivation to learn; guiding children as they make discoveries; monitoring children to help maintain their focus; and discussing children’s understanding.

For preschool children, we can probe deeper and create more concrete opportunities and situations for fostering higher-order thinking. Rather than telling them about objects or behaviors, we can ask questions. Questions allow them to think and use prior knowledge to apply to and or evaluate new circumstances or content. Some good question starters are:

- What might happen if?
- What can you tell me about?
- What did you notice?
- What worked best? Why?
- How many ways can you?

HOT Activities for Family Life Educators

Family Life Educators work with individuals at each phase of the life cycle and in a variety of settings. Whether working in the home, child care program, community center, or during family therapy, the following are examples of activities and questions can be incorporated and modeled with children ages 3 and older.

Creating Art

Provide children with a variety of construction paper, crayons, paints and other similar resources. You can ask them:

- How many ways can you use a piece of paper?
- What might happen if we put water on construction paper?
- What do you think will happen if we mix red and yellow?

Allow them to try and find out for themselves. These activities will allow children to learn about color, line, shape, and form and apply previously learned ideas and skills as they create objects.

Sand and Water Play

Whether on a playground or in a backyard, children can learn many science concepts. Provide children with a funnel, various containers, a sieve, and lighter and heavier objects (coin, ball, toys, cups). Then ask:

- What do you think would float in the water?
- What do you think would sink?
- How can you keep sand from leaking from the sieve?
- Which container will hold the most water? Which will hold the least? Why?

—How can we make this floating cup sink?

Allow them to practice and throw things in the water to learn for themselves what will float and what will sink. They should quickly learn that lighter things float and heavier things sink.

Block Play

Provide children with a variety of blocks and then to get them started, ask them:

- What will happen if you add more blocks to one side of your tower?
- What else can you tell me about your building?
- How many ways can you build a bridge?
- What did you notice when the top block fell?
- How are these blocks the same and different?
- How can you use these blocks to measure the table?

Such open-ended questions encourage children to think about the processes involved in block building and feel that their input and thoughts are important. Many mathematical and architectural concepts can be learned. As young children manipulate objects and observe their properties through hands-on experiences, they are able to practice synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating.

Music and Literature

Linking movement with language builds thinking skills. When language is paired with sensory-motor skills, young children then have two opportunities to comprehend an experience. As Marigliano and Russo (2011) state, “During creative movement experiences, children learn to think before they act, pay attention to detail, and consider differences between experiences” (p.48). Children’s literature also offers opportunities to engage children in solving problems. Something as simple as providing a photo or picture of an event and encouraging children to make up a story about it builds imagination and problem-solving skills. Words should be used that extend children’s language, encourage children with specific feedback, and make connections to children’s lives (Dangel & Durden, 2010). In other words, more challenging conversations extend and expand ideas and go beyond back-and-forth talk. Higher-order thinking also involves solving and working through conflicts.

Am I Fostering Critical Thinking?

Reflection is important, as reflection is remembering with analysis and remembering accompanied by evaluation (Epstein, 2003). Epstein proposed strategies to promote reflection in children, such as making reflection an ongoing part of the day, asking open-ended questions, interpreting and elaborating on what children say, accepting different viewpoints and interpretations, commenting on their play, writing down their thoughts, helping them connect activities with reflection, and providing them with opportunities to extend their activities over a longer period of

As young children manipulate objects and observe their properties through hands-on experiences, they are able to practice synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating.

time. Parents may ask themselves what children enjoyed the most and how they can use what the children learned for future activities.

Teaching families to use critical thinking skills with young children is not an easy task. For most adults today, it is not how we were taught to approach learning. Nevertheless, it can be a fun and interesting experience for both adults and children and teach children to move beyond memorization. Children can learn that their ideas are important. The purposeful planning of activities to foster critical thinking in children and toddlers will create an atmosphere that’s HOT for learning. ■

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Strengthening families: Making the connection to early childhood policy

by Dena K. Wise, Ph.D., professor and family economics specialist, University of Tennessee Extension; Denise J. Brandon, Ph.D., professor emeritus and former parenting and family relations specialist, University of Tennessee Extension; and Alex Tucker, graduate student, Child and Family Studies, University of Tennessee; dkwise@utk.edu

Making a sound connection between research and policy is not always straightforward, but pertinent information can contribute to a more focused and deliberate approach to both family and early childhood policy. Family Impact Seminars facilitate the research-policy connection through the presentation of research-based information to state policymakers to help them develop and evaluate policies that impact families. The University of Tennessee Extension's initial Family Impact Seminar, held in February 2014, engaged 38 state policymakers, including 19 legislators, in discussion around family policy issues, particularly focusing on families with young children.

After a committee of legislators unanimously chose the topic, "Strengthening Families," for Tennessee's first Family Impact Seminar, the authors (Wise and Brandon) were faced with the task of interpreting the topic in a way that might inform family legislation and policy. The authors worked with a committee of academic, agency, and government experts to narrow and define the topic.

Among the committee's initial decisions was to place emphasis on family function rather than family form, with the goal of defusing common value judgments regarding family form. Recognizing that many social issues, including poverty, unemployment, incarceration, lack of education, family violence, and addictions, are often related to family dysfunction, the committee determined that the content of the seminar should be framed around three questions:

1. What does research tell us about strong families?
2. What are the consequences when families fail at their tasks?
3. How can state policies strengthen families?

The expert committee identified sources of high-quality research on strengthening families, including the Urban Institute, Center for Law and Social Policy, Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), American Academy of Pediatrics, National Alliance

for Parents, National Center for Fathering, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and various university research centers/initiatives. The committee also suggested potential speakers with compelling messages related to the three questions above. After reviewing a number of online presentations by suggested speakers and others, the authors chose three nationally recognized experts to address the seminar questions.

What Does Research Tell Us about Strong Families?

Dr. Don Bower, professor emeritus and extension human development specialist, University of Georgia, was selected to provide an overview of research on strong families. Dr. Bower focused primarily on the five protective and promotive factors identified by researchers from CSSP (<http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/the-basics/protective-factors>). These five factors are parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need, and social and emotional competence of children. Dr. Bower noted that the American Family Assets Study, conducted at the Search Institute (<http://www.search-institute.org/research/family-well-being>), identified similar factors, as did research from Child Trends (<http://www.childtrends.org/our-research/>). Dr. Bower described how legislators could evaluate policy through a family-impact lens by using questions outlined by the Family Impact Institute:

- How will families be affected by this policy?
- How do families already contribute to this issue, for better or worse?
- Would involving families in the development of this policy result in more effective policies and programs?



Dena K. Wise



Denise Brandon



Alex Tucker

—How will this policy reinforce family members' commitment to each other and the stability and growth of the family unit?

What Are the Consequences When Families Fail at Their Tasks?

The primary message of Robert Anda, M.D., senior scientific consultant to the CDC, was that when families fail at their tasks, there are not only serious social costs associated with behavioral and emotional issues, but costs related to poor physical health, as well. Anda and his colleague, Dr. Vincent Felitti, M.D., while conducting research at Kaiser Permanente, identified eight common childhood experiences that they termed Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). These experiences fell into two categories: (a) experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, and (b) living in a dysfunctional household (a household where a member was mentally ill, chronically depressed, or suicidal; an alcoholic or a drug abuser; a battered mother; incarcerated; or where a parent was absent because of divorce, separation, or for other reasons). Anda and his colleagues found not only that ACEs predict the social and emotional problems that might be expected when children experience trauma, but they also found a strong relationship to physical illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and cancers in adult victims of ACEs decades after childhood (<http://acestudy.org/>). They found that the average number of ACEs in a popula-

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tion was directly related to the prevalence of associated negative outcomes. Anda and his colleagues have concluded that chronic exposure to multiple ACEs results in huge costs to individuals, families, communities, and state and federal governments. Dr. Anda emphasized that if preventative measures are put in place to reduce the exposure of children to ACEs, governments can achieve long-term savings by reducing the need for medical interventions to treat chronic and serious health conditions and for social programs designed to repair or limit the damage from these experiences. In order to adequately address and prevent negative outcomes of ACEs, Anda suggested that public health policies address both short-term and long-term ACE consequences by strengthening families, particularly families of infants and young children.

How Can State Policies Strengthen Families?

Laura Porter, former director of the Washington State Family Policy Council, said that Washington was one of the first states to collect data on the prevalence of ACEs statewide by adding the ACE survey questions to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) used by their state department of health. Based on her work with the Council, Porter outlined strategies states might implement to address ACE issues. Once states have baseline data on ACE prevalence, Porter recommended employing a dual-generation approach to reducing ACEs, working with teens and adults who have high ACE scores to minimize the negative impact of those experiences while seeking to reduce infants' and children's exposure to ACEs. She recommended using research to learn how to better target the limited dollars available for program development and support. She also suggested that departments related to health, justice, social work, education, and workforce development work collaboratively to reduce their individual expenditures while providing more effective and comprehensive programs and services. Porter noted that the optimum venue for developing leadership in support of at-risk families is at the community.

According to researchers at Washington State Family Policy Council, expanding community leadership is the key to community development that successfully reduces rates of major social problems and the preva-

lence of ACEs with their attendant costs. Washington State communities that had high community capacity were able to reduce the rates of risky behaviors among their citizens, even when average ACE scores were high. The Council created a Community Capacity Development Model that put into place a results-focused partnership between funders and community leaders and required leaders to learn about local strategies to improve programming each year. As a result, the state saw reductions in caseloads for out-of-home placements of children, births to teens ages 10 to 17, school drop-out rates, and juvenile felony crimes, with an estimated long-term savings of \$296 million.

Implications

Families are the earliest and most critical influences on children. Thus, what happens in the families of young children has a great impact on the lives of children individually and on the communities in which they live and work. Policies designed to promote family strengths may be effective in preventing ACEs or reducing their impact.

As a first step, state policymakers might implement data collection on the prevalence of ACEs across the state to establish baseline data and identify areas of priority. Practitioners working with people who have issues such as addictions, obesity, or other behavioral or physical symptoms may want to investigate the childhood histories of their clients to ascertain if ACEs may be at the root of their problems.

Policymakers can encourage communities to develop local leadership and mobilize citizens to address ACE issues comprehensively at the local level. Effective treatment may involve not only addressing the physical and behavioral manifestations of individuals with ACE histories but also helping them to overcome the deeper emotional scars of their childhoods that may be at the root of the issue. Such an approach requires networks of support from a variety of community sectors. These networks may be formal, such as family-serving agencies, faith-based organizations, and educational institutions, or informal, such as families, friends, and neighbors.

... if preventative measures are put in place to reduce the exposure of children to ACEs, governments can achieve long-term savings by reducing the need for medical interventions to treat chronic and serious health conditions and for social programs designed to repair or limit the damage from these experiences.

At the state level, decision makers can enact policies to help strengthen families of young children, such as these recommended by CSSP.

—*Support Family Preservation.* In many cases, providing intensive support to struggling families can be both more cost-effective to states and more effective for children than removing children from their homes. Also, keeping institutionalized family members (whether for substance abuse, mental illness, or incarceration) in close proximity to their families encourages family contact. When child abuse within the household is substantiated, removing the perpetrator rather than the victim is recommended.

—*Encourage Use of Best Practices in Intervention Programs.* Programs to strengthen parenting and family relationships need to include evidence-based resources delivered by trained facilitators using proven practices.

—*Create Community Networks to Coordinate Support.* Often families in need of support find themselves in a maze of agencies and programs without the assistance of a navigator. Program leaders may not be aware of what other programs are doing and what additional supports are available. The “systems of care” approach allows agencies to work cooperatively to tailor supports for families that will best meet their needs and often result in cost savings and more effective outcomes.

—*Invest in Young Children.* Many policy and economic experts agree that investing in the lives of young children provides one of the best cost returns for state governments. One avenue is through provision of high-quality early childhood education programs that promote both the academic and the social-emotional developmental needs of young children and their families. CSSP researchers have identified program strategies that can be incorporated into existing programs with little or no cost to strengthen families and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. ■

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in preschools participating in an Early Reading First program. Our study was conducted in two Head Start centers of a mid-Atlantic state, one serving as a control group. The families in the control group received math activities because we did not want to compare families receiving literacy intervention to families receiving no intervention at all. The family literacy intervention consisted of two workshops, one focused on play for literacy development and another focused on reading books with children. The intervention also included a reading journal activity, as well as weekly supplemental family literacy activities adapted from the family literacy component of the Doors to Discovery curriculum developed by Wright Group/McGraw-Hill (2002). This curriculum was used in the centers as part of an Early Reading First project and included key elements of early literacy, such as oral language development, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. The control group received weekly math activities, such as puzzles, shape recognition, games with the clock, and counting for parents to do with their children at home. Our findings suggest that, despite our limited sample size, parents involved in family literacy intervention showed increased frequency of

reading to their children when compared to the control group. This finding adds to the existing body of literature on family literacy and emphasizes the potential of highly effective family literacy intervention when used in alignment with an evidence-based literacy curriculum in preschool.

Future Directions

Future studies should further examine the efficacy of implementing a high-quality curriculum aligned with family literacy interventions through strong research designs that incorporate control groups. Furthermore, researchers should examine potential mediators and moderators that may play a role in the efficacy of interventions, such as race and ethnicity. For instance, in our pilot study we found that Hispanic parents were more invested and eager to participate in the family literacy workshops; they had a 100% attendance rate at both workshops. With all the research supporting the importance of family literacy-based practices at home to children's future language and literacy development, it is imperative for the federal government and policy makers to encourage the development of early literacy programs that target not only center-based programs, but also families.

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their child's love tank. Create a parent group to help with special activities and events the center hosts.

Display a Collaborative Posture

Teamwork makes the dream work. In order for the center to be successful, everyone has to have the same mission. The flexibility that is required when working with children and families is immense. Working together on the common goal of improving the lives of children and families is imperative.

Use Community Representation

One ingredient for a strong foundation for success in school starts by creating a strong community bond. If we can demonstrate and exemplify what a wonderful community children are a part of, they will feel effectual. When children feel proud, they can accomplish more. Involving community members in the lives of young children introduces children to important and influential individuals

who can serve as models for them. Families feel appreciated by their community when those bonds begin and are strengthened.

Conclusion

Although the concept of school readiness is complex and multifaceted, parents, educators, and politicians alike understand the importance of high-quality early-childhood experiences. States can play a decisive role in the implementation of childhood education programs and the provision of resources. We need to provide our children with experiences to enhance their development. If every child has the right start we can eliminate the achievement gap. The future of America depends on the enhancement of early care and education programs for young children. Let's build a strong foundation so that we can guarantee a triumphant finish. ■

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