

Early Childhood Development:

The Building Blocks of Health and Well-being

From birth to age five, a child's brain develops at a rapid pace. As the brain's foundation is laid, the presence or absence of critical developmental building blocks can profoundly influence a child's cognitive, emotional, and social potential. Brain and body development are inextricably intertwined; any assessment of a child's health must consider that a strong foundation in early childhood can foster achievement and success throughout the lifespan.

Because early childhood is a time of astounding and dynamic growth, this period represents a vulnerable period in children's lives, and the vulnerability of children in low-income families is particularly great. A wide variety of risks – impaired access to health care, exposure to environmental contaminants, and even the stressful circumstances facing parents and other caregivers – can jeopardize a child's long-term health status, educational progress, and economic future. In the short term, health problems and developmental delays can directly affect a child's readiness to enter school. For example, lead poisoning and certain mental disorders can decrease cognitive function, just as pain from untreated dental caries can distract a child from learning (Currie 2005).

All spheres of children's lives influence development. A stable family, appropriate social interaction, a healthy environment, and safe places to learn are especially important to a child's well-being and optimal development. The link between childhood health and lifelong achievement is a compelling reason to invest in children's development. Along with the potential to improve an individual family's economic status, early childhood intervention programs may also benefit society as a whole. Well-designed programs can prevent children from entering expensive special education programs, reduce the number of children who must repeat a grade, reduce juvenile crime, and reduce the number of children who receive welfare benefits as adults.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2004).

FEDERAL EFFORTS TO SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Childhood development is a multifaceted concept that cannot be addressed through any single program. Because many determinants, including income, race and ethnicity, and education, affect health status and developmental outcomes, successful programs will address a variety of these factors across a number of populations.

Two pivotal federal programs, Head Start and Medicaid's Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT), have played important roles in protecting children from developmental risks. Head Start was designed to increase the social and academic potential of low-income children from ages three to five by providing early education programs, health and dental care services, meals, and nutritional counseling, and linking families with social services. The EPSDT benefit serves 25 million children per year and is intended to provide children with comprehensive health and developmental assessments along with vision, dental, and hearing services up to age 21.

Both of these programs are administered by the federal government, yet fragmentation often prevents families from getting the services they need. Each program is financed separately, and communication between them is rare. State and local policy decisions vary across the nation and play a large role in how funds are distributed in health care and education programs.

Head Start, EPSDT, and other federal programs focused on early childhood development, such as the Maternal and Child Health block grant, are being squeezed by budgetary constraints. Since 2003 Head Start funding allocations have failed to keep pace with inflation, and programs have had to make tough decisions about reducing the number of staff, cutting back on health benefits, increasing class size, expanding waiting lists, and eliminating transportation benefits. Similarly, states are using the flexibility provided by the Deficit Reduction Act of 2006 to constrain growing Medicaid costs by reducing the benefits provided through EPSDT, imposing copayments on beneficiaries, and tailoring services to specific populations.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

There are many opportunities for health grantmakers to invest in early childhood development by supporting low-income

families, promoting school readiness, and advocating for policy and system change.

► **Supporting Families** – The Mary Black Foundation in Spartanburg, South Carolina is committed to improving the healthy development of young children. The foundation adheres to three grantmaking strategies in its early childhood development program including encouraging advocacy for local policy change, increasing and developing the workforce engaged in children’s development, and strengthening family support programs. For example, the foundation provided a three-year grant to support Parent University, an intensive 18-month program for parents of children up to age five that provides parenting education and workshops on a variety of topics including encouraging reading in families, parenting basics, computer skills, and personal finance. Another grant supported Family Connections, a family literacy program that serves parents and preschool children. Parents can work on basic reading, math, and writing skills as well as GED preparation and parenting tips. Families receive free transportation and meals.

In 1999 The Annie E. Casey Foundation launched the Making Connections initiative based on the notion that the best way to improve outcomes for vulnerable children is to strengthen their families’ connections to economic opportunity. Operating in 10 sites throughout the country (Denver, Colorado; Des Moines, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Oakland, California; Providence, Rhode Island; San Antonio, Texas; and Seattle, Washington), Making Connections aims to provide quality employment opportunities to families, offer access to financial planning and asset-building services, ensure children’s school readiness, and strengthen social connections within communities. For example, each of the grantee sites has increased residents’ access to federal earned income and child care tax credits, resulting in over \$9 million in refunds. To ensure sustainability of the projects, grantees have been working with the foundation to gather data, convene partners in the community, strengthen resident leaders, and provide technical assistance and other infrastructure needed to carry the work forward. In addition, grantees are working toward influencing the policy agenda through data collection and evaluation efforts.

► **School Readiness** – The W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched the national Securing Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) initiative in 2003 to empower communities and combine resources to better prepare children entering school. As its name suggests, the program was developed to spark or catalyze a community’s existing resources rather than create a new program. By aligning school systems with health and other critical services, SPARK aims to improve the quality of early childhood experiences necessary for

educational achievement. Grantees in seven states and Washington, DC focus on developing partnerships among stakeholders such as families, elementary schools, and early education providers as well as partnerships among government agencies, child advocacy organizations, and businesses that help bring about system change. For example, SPARK grantee Smart Start has been successful in preparing young children for school throughout North Carolina. Participating children have better language skills and fewer behavioral problems when entering kindergarten than children not participating in the program.

► **Policy and System Change** – The George Gund Foundation supports groundWork™, a project of the Ohio Early Care and Education Campaign, which aims to ensure that public resources are available to provide families with support to help their children enter school ready to learn. groundWork™ has identified four goals: increase access to early childhood behavioral health services, create a more effective early care and education system, offer a full-day kindergarten option for all, and improve children’s access to primary health care. By reaching out to local political leadership, the program has been successful in increasing the amounts appropriated for prekindergarten programs and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). To ensure future successes, groundWork™ continues to organize advocates to testify before the legislature, perform outreach to local media, and work on developing proposals that will increase the quality of early childhood education and behavioral health treatment.

The Build Initiative, supported by the Early Childhood Funders’ Collaborative, which includes The George Gund Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and The Irving Harris Foundation, is a multistate partnership that aims to construct comprehensive systems for early care and education. The program currently operates in Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Each grantee state received a \$350,000 grant for the first 18 to 24 months of implementation as well as technical assistance to develop their programs, which involve infrastructure development, quality improvement, evaluation, financing, and public engagement. In Illinois, the Birth to Five Project succeeded in advocating for the passage of legislation that secured funding for prekindergarten and childcare programs as well as convincing the governor’s office to invest \$90 million in funding for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

SOURCES

Currie, Janet, “Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness,” *The Future of Children* 15(1):117-138, Spring 2005.