



Center for Urban Child Policy

Advancing Public Policy to Improve the Well-Being of Children

A CHILDREN'S AGENDA FOR TENNESSEE

Why is it important to improve the well-being of the youngest children in Tennessee?

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The first years of a child's life are critical to their social, emotional and cognitive development.

Early experiences have a direct and critical effect on a baby's development. A child's earliest experiences are responsible for literally wiring the brain for future use, building its basic architecture. Most aspects of our personalities—the things that make each of us who we are, what we think, and how we feel—are reflections of these early developments in our brains. As a child learns to crawl, speak, and interact with others, for example, specific areas of the brain are stimulated, develop, and grow.

In many important ways, recent advances in neurobiology are confirming what we have long suspected. We know, for example, that the human brain changes dramatically during the first few years of life. At birth, a baby's brain is only about a quarter the size of an average adult's. But it soon begins an impressive growth spurt, reaching 80 percent of adult size by around age three. During its period of greatest growth—from before birth to around age three—the cerebral cortex adds an astounding 40,000 synaptic connections every second. Virtually everything experienced by a child—both positive and negative—influences the development of the child's brain and their subsequent development and life chances.

Source: National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Perspectives: What Science Is Telling Us*. (2006). Retrieved January 31, 2007 from <http://www.developingchild.net>.

There are dramatic economic and social returns on investments in early childhood.

Careful academic research demonstrates that tax dollars spent on early-childhood provide extraordinary returns when compared with other investments. The most obvious gain comes in the form of higher wages later in life. Additionally, individuals who participate in high-quality early-childhood-development programs have greater skills than they otherwise would, and they're able to contribute productively to their local economies.

A child's quality of life and the contributions that child makes to society as an adult can be traced to his or her first years of life. From birth until about the age of 5, a child undergoes tremendous development. If this period includes support for growth in language, motor skills, adaptive abilities, and social-emotional functioning, the child is more likely to succeed in school and to later contribute to society. Conversely, without support during these early years, a child is more likely to drop out of school, depend on welfare benefits, and commit crime—thereby imposing significant costs on society. Early-childhood-development programs recognize this potential—and this risk—and seek to nurture healthy development from the earliest years.

Several longitudinal evaluations all reach essentially the same conclusion: Early-childhood-development programs that focus on at-risk families are cost effective economic development policies. Cost-benefit analyses of the Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project showed returns ranging from \$3 to \$17 for every dollar invested. This implies an annual rate of return, adjusted for inflation, of between 7 percent and 18 percent

Source: CED. 2006. *The Economic Promise of Investing in High-Quality Preschool*. New York: Author; Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, 2007. "Early Intervention on a Large Scale." *Education Week*. January 4.



Children from vulnerable, low-income families reach school at a disadvantage, and continue to trail behind their middle-class peers in academic performance and lifetime well-being.

Low Socio-Economic Status has more impact on academic readiness and success than factors such as race, ethnicity, home reading, and a family's educational expectations (Economic Policy Institute 2002).

Before entering kindergarten, children from affluent families already have cognitive scores that are 60 percent above the average scores of children from poor families (Lee, V. E. & Burkam, D. T. (2002). *Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.)

By 4 years of age, children who live below the poverty line are 18 months below what is normal for their age group; by age 10 that gap is still present. For children living in the poorest families, the gap is even larger (Layzer, J. (in press). *Project Upgrade in Miami-Dade County, Florida*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.)

By the time children from middle-income families with well-educated parents are in third grade, they know about 12,000 words. By comparison, third grade children from low-income families have vocabularies of around 4,000 words, one-third as many words as their middle-income peers (Snow, C. (2005). "From literacy to learning." *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August.)

Low Socio-Economic Status also influences basic measures of intelligence, which long had been thought to be solely a product of genetics. Recent studies have shown that environment matters, and growing up poor can account for a 12 – 20 IQ point deficit vs. a middle class upbringing (David Kirp 2006. "After the Bell Curve." *The New York Times*. July 23).

In Tennessee, the percent of students in a school who are from low-income families is one of the strongest predictors of the percent of students who will earn scores of proficient or advanced on the TCAP (Center for Urban Child Policy, 2006. Memphis: The Urban Child Institute).

Many young children in Tennessee grow up in vulnerable, low-income families.

There are 1,383,323 children in Tennessee. 1 in 5 children in Tennessee lives in Shelby County. Child poverty remains high. Across the state, 19% of all children live in poor families. (An additional 23% of children in Tennessee live in families that are low-income.) In Shelby County, 28% of children live in poverty.

Many children (32%) in Tennessee are growing up in single-parent families which are particularly vulnerable. In Memphis, for example, single-parent families earn 1/3 the income of families headed by married-couples (Databook 2006. Memphis: The Urban Child Institute).

Full-time work is not always enough to provide for a family. A full-time job at low wages is often not enough to support a family. In Tennessee, 29% of children live in families with at least one parent who is employed full-time, year round, and yet the family remains in poverty.

Many families do not have access to critical supports and services, such as child care, paid sick leave, and mental health services. Many families lack access to affordable, high-quality child care. Nationwide, nearly 76% of low-income workers do not have any paid sick leave to care for themselves or a sick family



member. And an astounding 75% to 80% of children and youth in need of mental health services do not receive them.

Many Tennessee children lack health insurance. In Tennessee, 9% of all children are uninsured. Health insurance coverage is critical to improving children's access to care as well as to ensuring good health. Too few young children have access to quality early experiences. Programs like Early Head Start can prepare young children for a productive life, but only a fraction of eligible infants and toddlers are currently served. Low-income 3- and 4-year-olds are less likely to have access to preschool programs than their more well-off peers.

How can the General Assembly work to improve the well-being of all children in Tennessee?

View the legislative agenda in terms of its ability to make a positive influence on children:

Remember that early experiences matter most, and early interventions are likely to make the most positive difference in the lives of Tennesseans.

Ask what influence will a proposed bill have on the well-being of our earliest children? Ask for child impact statements for all bills that come before the legislature.

