



Real Family Values: Child Care and Early Childhood Education

By Emily Baxter with Katie Hamm | April 17, 2014

This issue brief is part of a six-part series from the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative, which outlines value-based policies that benefit all American families. For more information on our Real Family Values series, visit our series page.

Whether bound by blood or by choice, families of all shapes and sizes are the fundamental building blocks of our communities and our nation. We strengthen our families by ensuring that our children—the youngest we protect, provide, and care for—have the opportunity to grow, learn, and flourish. All too often, however, there are great disparities in access to high-quality early childhood care and education that affect both children and working parents. For example, 48 percent of children from low-income families are not ready for school by age 5,¹ and these low-income children face a 15-month learning gap compared to their more affluent peers.² Generally speaking, the achievement gap between low- and high-income students has grown by 75 percent since the Baby Boom generation was in school.³

As such, many policy experts, educational and advocacy organizations, faith communities, and Americans of all political stripes—including the Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative—believe that equitable access to high-quality child care and early childhood education is a policy issue that embodies real family values. Americans hold few values dearer than equality, fairness, and opportunity, and high-quality early education is a key tool that helps level the playing field for children from low-income families. Access to high-quality child care and early childhood education has been shown to set children on a path to success,⁴ and it is one of the most important tools we have to break the cycle of poverty that exacerbates inequality in the United States. Early learning is also known to prepare children for school, but studies of Head Start participants have also shown that children who receive quality childhood education are healthier, stay in school longer, and earn more in their futures.⁵

Furthermore, investing in continuous access to high-quality early childhood programs from birth will help the United States become more competitive in the global economy; it will allow us to invest in tomorrow's workforce and allow parents to better

provide for their children by placing them in safe, nurturing, and enriching environments while they work. President Barack Obama, policymakers, and advocacy organizations have increasingly called for action and legislation—namely, the Strong Start for America’s Children Act,⁶ which is an important step toward providing all children with quality child care and early education.

Disparities in child care and early childhood education

Equality of opportunity is a core American value that helps strengthen families by giving people a fair shot to provide for themselves and those they love. After all, few things are more important in shaping the courses of children’s lives than a high-quality education.

Early childhood education refers to care and learning opportunities that are available for young children, particularly from birth to age 8.⁷ Children’s learning experiences begin at birth, and the first five years are a particularly critical time for socioemotional and cognitive development, as 85 percent to 90 percent of brain development takes place before age 5.⁸ The federal government has two major investments in early childhood education: the Child Care and Development Block Grant and the Head Start program, which includes Early Head Start and is targeted to infants and toddlers.⁹ Many states also fund preschool programs, most of which target 4-year-olds.¹⁰

Unfortunately, current federal and state investments in early childhood care and education are underfunded, and, in some cases, they lack the quality standards linked to positive outcomes for children. In addition, many programs are not set up to meet the needs of working families, especially low-income working families.¹¹ Early learning programs and child care options for young children can raise a host of barriers and complications, from parents’ work schedules not matching child care schedules, to fair labor practices for paid child care workers, to the affordability of informal familial care or home-based care versus center-based child care. These issues can raise serious questions for all parents—whose primary concern is that their children are safe and, eventually, ready to begin school. Low-income parents face even greater concerns, as they have fewer resources to care for their children and prepare them for school.

Current child care structures do not meet the needs of working parents. Just a generation ago, it was economically possible for one parent to remain at home while the other worked. In fact, more than half of children had a parent at home in 1975.¹² Today, however, more families require incomes from both parents to stay afloat: In 2010, 44.8 percent of U.S. families with children included two working parents, and single parents headed another 26.1 percent.¹³ In addition, although mothers have worked throughout history—particularly women of color and immigrant women—their numbers have grown by huge margins in recent years. Today, 70.5 percent of mothers with children under age 18 work outside the home either out of necessity or by choice.¹⁴

This growth means that more and more families are relying on child care, which can be found in a range of settings, including relatives, home-based providers, child care centers, and programs such as Head Start and state-funded preschool programs. Yet our laws and businesses have failed to keep pace with the realities of today's families. Women—who often leave the workforce because it is the expected, best, or only option to care for their children—can suffer career ramifications or exacerbate the gender wage gap if they choose to spend time with their kids.¹⁵ Meanwhile, some working mothers' and single parents' inflexible schedules leave an estimated 15 million school-aged children unsupervised every afternoon before parents arrive home, according to a recent Center for American Progress report.¹⁶

On top of this, the cost of child care can be staggering: In nearly half of American states, child care can cost more than the average rent payment and total up to 35.9 percent of a low-income family's monthly budget.¹⁷ Yet access to federally subsidized child care is still too limited, reaching only 22 percent of low-income families.¹⁸

As for early childhood education beyond child care alone, programs such as Head Start can provide a lifeline for working parents. But due to the radical budget cuts enacted by sequestration, 57,000 fewer children were cared for at Head Start programs in 2013 compared to 2012.¹⁹ The fiscal year 2014 budget restored funding to these programs,²⁰ but they already lack the capacity to meet need: Only 4 percent of eligible children receive Early Head Start education, and just 41 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds had access to Head Start programs in FY 2012.²¹

States vary greatly in the quality and extent of the preschool programs they offer. Nationally, only 28 percent of 4-year-olds and 4 percent of 3-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded preschool,²² and 10 states do not have any sort of publicly funded preschool.²³ There are also grave quality issues: 50 percent of Texas 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool,²⁴ but the state does not meet the benchmarks for class size or student-teacher ratio set by the National Institute for Early Education Research.²⁵ While Florida enrolls more 4-year-olds in preschool than any other state, it meets only 3 of the 10 quality benchmarks.²⁶ Similarly, 63 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds in the United States were enrolled in some sort of early learning program in 2009, but the quality of these programs and the benefit that children received from them varied greatly, especially along socioeconomic lines.²⁷ The United States trails behind most other developed countries in this area, ranking 21st in early education investment relative to country wealth, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development.²⁸

Children from low-income families are among those who most need access to high-quality early learning programs. Very early in life, differences between children from low-income families and their higher-income peers emerge. For example, the average 4-year-old from a high-income family has a vocabulary that is twice as large as that of the typical low-income 4-year-old.²⁹ Such disparities persist throughout children's lives,

culminating in the achievement gap realized in elementary and secondary school. High-quality child care and early learning programs can help narrow this gap. Low-income families and children of color who receive high-quality early care and education have been shown to have less need for special education and grade retention, and they are more likely to graduate from high school.³⁰

Ultimately, both federal and state-level governments are responsible to all its citizens—including the youngest. In fact, according to the Public Religion Research Institute and The Brookings Institution, 54 percent of Americans believe that investing in education is our biggest opportunity for economic growth,³¹ a sentiment backed up by economists³² Another poll commissioned by the First Five Years Fund and conducted by a bipartisan team of researchers found that 89 percent of voters say that early education and child care should be more affordable, and 86 percent support federal assistance to help states and local communities improve services and access to early education and care.³³ Yet for many working families, options for high-quality, affordable early childhood education and child care remain sparse.

Fixing the problem by ensuring fairness

Justice and opportunity for all citizens is a closely guarded American ideal, and it is callous to suggest that such opportunity cannot be extended to all our children and their families. Improving early education and child care in the United States requires recognizing certain factors that lead to inequality and working to change policy so we can better invest in our children's futures. Most Americans already know this: Two thirds of Americans believe that government or business should be doing more to fund child care.³⁴

Some states are already doing more. Oklahoma, for example, made voluntary preschool free for all 4-year-olds in 1998, and today, 99 percent of Oklahoma school districts offer a preschool program, and 74 percent of 4-year-olds are enrolled. In fact, the National Institute for Early Education Research ranked Oklahoma number two in a state-by-state comparison of access to preschool, and the state's programs meet 9 of the institute's 10 quality benchmarks, including class size, level of teacher education, and learning standards.³⁵

In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama affirmed his commitment to early childhood education and access to child care for all children. His proposed plan ensured that “a zip code [would] never predetermine the quality of any child's educational opportunities.”³⁶

In November 2013, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), Rep. Richard Hanna (R-NY), and Rep. George Miller (D-CA) introduced the Strong Start for America's Children Act, a bill that mirrors the president's plan to expand access to high-quality preschool for all 4-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families. Many advocacy and education organizations, including the Center for American Progress Action Fund, have supported the proposal.³⁷ The bill would increase access to preschool and early learning and child care programs for children under age 5 through state and federal partnerships. Funds would be targeted at 4-year-olds whose families are at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.³⁸ States could also grant funds to community-based providers who meet high-quality standards, such as bachelor's degree requirements for teachers, small teacher-class size ratio, and teacher salaries comparable to salaries for K-12 teachers. Over the first 10 years, states would match increasing amounts of federal funding.

In addition to funding preschool for many 4-year-olds and some 3-year-olds, the bill also allows up to 15 percent of the funds granted to states to be used to improve infant and toddler care, giving states the flexibility to choose how to improve access for very young children based on their unique needs. Moreover, funds could be reserved to improve child care and early education options through "training, licensure and professional development" opportunities.³⁹

Last year, The Child CARE Act, introduced by Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD), and the Right Start Child Care and Education Act of 2013, introduced by Rep. Albert Ruppertsberger (D-MD) and Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), sought to amend the federal Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit by allowing more families access to it.⁴⁰ This would particularly help low-income families cover the cost of child care.⁴¹

Legislation such as the Strong Start for America's Children Act requires investments in our future. Just as great progressive achievements such as Social Security and Medicare keep millions of people out of poverty, so too can investments in children reap important benefits for years to come. Beyond the imperative of progressive values, such expenditures can also have a remarkable return on investment: Starting children from all backgrounds on an even footing can reduce our nation's income inequality,⁴² help the United States compete globally, and create a more just society. Moreover, legislation that ensures quality care for our nation's children can also improve the quality of our workforce, making it easier for workers to be responsible parents with fewer missed work days, fewer lost jobs, and fewer difficulties arranging adequate child care.⁴³

The perspective of faith communities

How we care for and prepare our children for the nation they will one day inherit is a deeply shared family value. From education pioneer Jane Addams to the long history of Lutheran and Catholic schools teaching low-income children, faith communities have been critical educators and proponents of education throughout American history.⁴⁴ Today, faith-based organizations often partner with the government to provide early education and child care—by administering Head Start programs, for example.⁴⁵

In her book *Educating All God's Children*, Nicole Baker Fulgham notes that if people of faith—she speaks specifically to Christians—were more aware of the inequalities in our education system, they would see the moral imperative of education reform and be much more adamant about making it happen. To her, fewer things are more Christian than a commitment to justice and helping humans flourish.⁴⁶

Baker Fulgham highlights organizations whose faith-based perspectives lead them to fight for more equitable public education, including her own Expectations Project,⁴⁷ a network of advocates; the Memphis Teacher Residency, a program undergirded by Christian values that trains teachers to work in Memphis public schools;⁴⁸ and the Children's Defense Fund, a policy advocacy group that has long partnered with faith-based organizations.⁴⁹

There is also Shepherding the Next Generation, a faith-based, nonpartisan, and nonprofit organization that equips faith leaders and clergy to speak, write, and promote awareness on a variety of issues for at-risk youth, including early childhood education. With alliances of faith leaders in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Memphis, Tennessee, Shepherding the Next Generation recognizes that early education is one of the first components of strengthening families and giving children an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty.⁵⁰

Real family values are reflected in the work of faithful advocates who recognize that access to early childhood education and child care is a justice issue that has long-lasting effects on children and their families. Furthermore, real family values are brought to the forefront in legislation that expands access to early childhood education and child care for all families, particularly low-income families. Because we value opportunity and equality, we must work to level the playing field for all children by supporting their education from the very beginning. And because we value fairness, we must support working parents in their efforts to provide and care for their families.

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Endnotes

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