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## Families And Communities Together Coalition

Meeting the needs of Michigan families  
through research, Extension & outreach

# The Early Years:

Research on Early Childhood,  
Implications for Policy and Practice





Michigan State University  
Families And Communities Together Coalition

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Implications for Policy and Practice

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# Michigan State University Families And Communities Together Coalition

## About FACT:

*Families and Communities Together (FACT) is Michigan State University's research, Extension and outreach coalition. We focus on Michigan families, including children and youth and the communities in which they live. Our purpose is to:*

- *Facilitate research and outreach efforts that meet the needs of Michigan families*
- *Foster innovative collaborations between MSU and communities*
- *Support and develop the capacity of communities to serve their citizens*

*FACT is a multidisciplinary coalition of MSU faculty, MSU Extension staff from on campus and across the state, and professionals from community organizations such as government agencies, nonprofits and foundations. It is a collaborative effort of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, MSU Extension, and the Office of the Provost.*

*We maintain a web site that serves as an information hub for children, youth and family issues where professionals can learn about research and outreach, and find partners and funding for their work. To find out more, visit: [www.fact.msu.edu](http://www.fact.msu.edu).*

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# Contents

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<b>Preface</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Investing in Early Childhood</b> <i>Summarizes what we know about early childhood and where young children currently stand in relation to this knowledge.</i>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Early Years are Critical</b> <i>Overviews research on the physical growth of young children, healthy childhood development, and early brain development.</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>Well-Being of Young Children</b> <i>Presents indicators of child well-being and discusses their implications.</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>Room for Improvement</b> <i>Identifies investments that can improve the lives of young children and their families, including a focus on supporting parents, quality child care, and health and nutrition.</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>Creating a Culture Change</b> <i>Highlights a current Michigan early childhood initiative that is creating a culture change in the state.</i>	<b>16</b>
<b>Resources and References</b> <i>Lists selected print and Internet resources for further inquiry.</i>	<b>17</b>

# Preface

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*The Michigan State University (MSU) Families and Communities Together (FACT) Coalition has identified young children as one of its priority research and outreach areas. FACT is committed to informing community leaders and policymakers about the critical issues facing children, youth and families today.*

*As part of FACT's focus on early childhood, this document provides an overview of key issues that affect our youngest children. The report:*

- *Summarizes recent developmental and brain research*
- *Presents indicators of child well-being*

- *Identifies areas for improvement, such as supporting parents, quality child care, and health and nutrition*
- *Includes examples of programs and initiatives that are working*

*Since this report necessarily conveys ideas in broad strokes, we have provided a final section on references and resources for further inquiry.*

*The first edition of this report was originally prepared in response to a request from Senator Beverly Hammerstrom to provide information on early childhood for participants of the Women In Government Sixth Annual Midwest Regional Conference, at Mackinac Island, August 1999.*

# Investing in Early Childhood

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In recent years, national attention has been drawn to the importance of early childhood and its influence on children's educational achievement and healthy development. Issues like the child care crisis, school violence, and young children's lack of access to health care have not only fueled media coverage and policy debates, but have highlighted the fact that Americans are failing to meet the physical and emotional needs of many young children.

## What Do We Know?

A growing body of research from diverse disciplines such as developmental psychology, neuroscience, social work, and education empirically demonstrates what parents have always recognized, that the early years build the foundation for a child's success in life. The environment in which young children are raised, and the quality of early experiences help to shape their intellectual curiosity, social empathy, and self-confidence.

For healthy development, young children require stable, loving relationships with parents and caregivers, good nutrition and health care, and a secure, stimulating environment.

A key research finding is that the early years are critical years for developing basic cognitive, language and social skills that pave the way for school readiness and forming healthy relationships with others. There are critical time periods during early childhood for achieving these developmental milestones. Once these windows for optimal development start to narrow, however, it takes a great deal more effort for children to catch up. Some of these developmental skills include:

- **Acquiring language**
- **Developing secure attachments with caregivers**
- **Improving basic motor skills**
- **Building a sense of self-esteem**
- **Developing a sense of intellectual curiosity**

Recent research also shows that timely investments in young children can play a role in preventing future youth problems like juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy.

## Where Do Young Children Stand?

Unfortunately, this scientific evidence and growing public awareness about early childhood have not yet led to substantive investments in improving young children's lives. There is still a wide gap between what is known about the importance of healthy childhood development and the conditions in which many of the nation's youngest children are being raised.

Some of the disturbing trends that put young children at risk, showing that the reality of life for many kids woefully falls short of the mark include:

- **Unchanging rates of child poverty**
- **Abuse and neglect of infants, toddlers and preschoolers**
- **Growing numbers of children in foster care**
- **Increasing numbers of low birth-weight babies**
- **Infant mortality rates that remain twice as high for the poor and some minorities as for the general population**
- **Substantial numbers of children in high-risk environments who experience the compounded effects of poverty, lack of access to health care and household instability**

Other factors that also increase the risk for poor childhood development include:

- **A high teen birth rate**
- **High divorce rates and an increase in single parent households**
- **Women receiving inadequate prenatal care, especially among teen mothers and the poor**

## Starting Points

In the 1994 seminal report, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*, the Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children brought national attention to the “quiet crisis” facing children under the age of three and their families.

They began by describing a widespread “pattern of neglect” and identifying several major risk factors that make healthy development more difficult for young children.

Factors included: changing family structures, isolated parents, young children in poverty, work/family conflicts, discouraging health trends, and abuse and neglect.

In face of these facts, they put out a call to action to reverse these patterns and create a better future for our youngest children.

These are their recommendations:

- **Promote Responsible Parenting**  
First by making family planning widely available and educating young people about parenthood, the decision to bear children becomes a deliberate, conscious one, and is more likely to produce the best results for children. The task force also recommended an emphasis on universal prenatal care and providing opportunities for parent education and support.
- **Guarantee Quality Child Care Choices**  
Knowing that parents are the most important influence on young children, the task force recommended strengthening current parental leave policies. Ensuring quality child care by improving training, increasing wages, and enforcing high licensing standards is also a priority. Finally, making affordable child care options available and developing networks of family centered programs would help to guarantee quality care.
- **Ensure Good Health and Protection**  
A task force priority was ensuring access to and availability of health care services for all infants and toddlers. Other recommended steps included protecting young children from injury, promoting their health, and creating safe environments for learning and playing.
- **Mobilize Communities to Support Young Children**  
The first three steps can be best implemented within the context of strong community commitment to young children. The task force challenged government officials, business leaders, educators and parents to take leadership for building a culture of responsibility toward kids, and creating family centered communities that would be responsive to the needs of the youngest children.

Finally, even in stable families who are committed to their children’s well-being, parents are struggling to balance work and family obligations and are often isolated from community networks of social support. With the hectic pace of today’s workplace and about 60% of mothers with children under six in the labor force, parents are struggling to spend time with their children. They are finding it difficult to balance the heavy demands of working in a global marketplace with their children’s need for sufficient attention.

These work-family conflicts are compounded by child care options that are often of poor quality and/or are unaffordable.

### The Challenge

It seems then, that the challenge is not so much in recognizing that young children are important as in translating this knowledge into practices and policies that will improve the lives of young children and help families to provide the best environments for them.

# The Early Years are Critical

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In recent years, educators have been noticing patterns of underachievement in America's schools. About one-third of children entering kindergarten are needing extra support to keep pace with their class mates; and as they proceed through school, they continue to lag behind in reaching required goals.

The Carnegie Foundation National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers revealed that children are having "serious problems" with language proficiency, emotional maturity, social confidence and physical well-being, and over 40% of teachers say that students are less ready to learn than ever before.

One surveyed teacher remarked, "It's terribly discouraging to see children come to school who don't know where they live, can't identify colors, and are unable to recite their full name."

Many children are also coming to school undernourished and in poor health. Another teacher explained, "Too many of my children come to school hungry. They are tired or in need of much love and attention."

These teachers' remarks reveal that investment in children needs to begin before they enter kindergarten, so they can develop the basic skills they need to succeed in school, build healthy relationships with others, and face life's challenges.

A key survey finding was that children who enter school with adequate preparation, from engaged responsive parents and high-quality preschool or child care programs, have a much better chance of achieving educational goals like high school graduation and attending college. Prepared children are also more likely to be employed, stay off welfare and not be arrested.

By the time children enter kindergarten, they have already attained a high degree of proficiency in key developmental areas. The foundation has already been laid for their physical growth, social competency, and intellectual vitality.

The following three sections highlight the physical, social and cognitive aspects of children's development in the earliest years.

## Physical Growth in Young Children

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The patterns of physical growth in very young children have been documented in a 24 year study at Michigan State University (MSU). The MSU Motor Performance Study's purpose was to determine the percentage of adult growth achieved during childhood on selected growth dimensions, such as height, shoulder and hip width, and arm length. The research team collected longitudinal data semiannually from 101 female and 79 male children in the Mid-Michigan area.

The research results indicate that half (50%) of physical adult growth status is already attained by girls who are between 18 months to 2.5 years old, and by boys who are 18 months to 3 years old. This data clearly shows that the first three years are critical for physical growth and development.

The research team also found that 75% of adult status was attained by girls between 7.5 and 9 years old, and boys between 8.5 to 10 years old.

Crystal Branta, associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at MSU and a member of the research team, says that their results reinforce

the importance of early prevention and intervention strategies that support children's growth.

"These data offer clear support," she explains, "that programs providing prenatal, early childhood and early elementary medical care, nutrition, and physical activity would be important for the optimum physical development of young children."

**The MSU Motor Performance Study found that in certain growth dimensions**

**50% of adult growth is achieved by:  
Girls between 1.5 to 2.5 years old  
Boys between 1.5 to 3 years old**

**75% of adult growth is achieved by  
Girls between 7.5 and 9 years old  
Boys between 8.5 and 10 years old**

*Source: MSU Motor Performance Study.*

## Important Milestones for Healthy Development

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During the first five years, children develop fundamental cognitive and social skills which lay the foundation for their future health and well-being. It is critical that children reach these milestones at developmentally appropriate times; intervening later is a much more costly endeavor, both for the child and for society.

Marguerite Barratt, director of the Institute for Children, Youth and Families at Michigan State University, summarizes some of these skills below, along with the environment and adult engagement children need to achieve them.

### Strong Attachment and Social Empathy

Secure, ongoing relations with parents and other caregivers form a foundation for connecting well with others, and can be a key predictor of good social skills and positive behavior patterns. Children who build strong attachments have more empathy toward others and develop a sense of social responsibility. On the other hand, children who receive erratic care are put at emotional risk.

#### *Children need adults who*

- **Respond to vocalizations and gestures**
- **Are responsive to children's distress**
- **Are warm, positive, sensitive and not detached or depressed**

### Using Language to Communicate

Although babies first communicate through cries and gestures, by age three, children learn to verbally exchange ideas and feelings with others and can use language to resolve conflict and frustration. Early language proficiency is a key to future learning and literacy. Also, children who develop an early interest in print can learn to read most easily.

#### *Children need a language-rich environment in which adults*

- **Speak to children frequently and expand on what they say**
- **Read to children, make books and magazines available, and make reading fun**
- **Respond when children speak and answer their questions**

### Self Esteem and Confidence

Children need to develop a good image of themselves and feel that they are important. They also need to build self-efficacy-- a sense of competence, knowing that they can affect the world around them and make a difference. Experiencing small successes prepares a child for later learning.

#### *Children need adults who*

- **Praise success and speak positively to and about children**
- **Use kind words and restrict them only when necessary**
- **Keep them safe from abuse and neglect**

### Emotional Regulation, Delayed Gratification

Children who can express their feelings appropriately are more prepared for social interaction. Children need to learn to wait for what they want, regulate their own impulses, share/take turns, and be aware of others' needs.

#### *Children need adults who*

- **Express a full range of feelings appropriately**
- **Talk to children about feelings and label feelings**
- **Set limits, expect children to wait, and respect the needs and rights of others**

### Intellectual Curiosity, Creativity, Logic

Children learn best when they are curious about the world, and children who know about the world have a basic framework for learning more. They need to be exposed to a beginning knowledge of numbers and understand basic logic/math concepts. Children also need to have their imagination stimulated and learn how to solve problems logically and creatively.

#### *Children need adults who*

- **Give reasons for what they do and explain aspects of the world around them**
- **Expose them to basic concepts like more, less and putting things in order**
- **Engage them in imaginative play and creative pastimes**

## Early Experiences Impact Brain Development

In 1996, Families and Work Institute convened a conference on brain development that focused on how knowledge about the developing brain can inform efforts to improve the lives of young children and their families. The following summarizes their key findings which were published in *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*.

Technological breakthroughs in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans have made it possible to examine both the structure and the activity levels in the brain. These new tools have revealed that a child's earliest experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain.

The relationship between early nurture and brain development can be described as follows:

### Human development hinges on the interplay between nature and nurture.

Recent brain research shows that human development is affected by both genetic endowment and the influence of environmental conditions, like nutrition, surroundings, care and stimulation. "The impact of the environment is dramatic and specific, not merely influencing the general direction of development, but actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the brain is wired."

### Early care and nurture have a decisive and long-lasting impact on how people develop, their ability to learn, and their capacity to regulate emotions.

Warm, responsive care is not only critical to healthy development, but can also play a role in protecting the child against later stress or trauma. Secure attachment to parents and caregivers is important for healthy development.

### The human brain has a remarkable capacity to change, but timing is crucial.

"While learning continues throughout the life cycle, there are "prime times" for optimal development--periods during which the brain is particularly efficient at specific types of learning." Once this critical period or "prime time" is passed, it becomes much more difficult to develop certain types of neural pathways.

There are times when negative experiences or the absence of appropriate stimulation are more likely to have serious and sustained effects.

The impact of negative experiences in early childhood, like trauma and neglect, maternal depression, exposure to nicotine, alcohol, drugs or lead may be more serious and sustained than once thought. In addition, poverty exacerbates and compounds the impact of the above risk factors.

Substantial evidence amassed by neuroscientists and child development experts over the last decade points to the wisdom and efficacy of prevention and early intervention.

Well-designed prevention and intervention strategies that foster healthy cognitive, social or emotional development have been shown to improve young children's quality of life and their chances for future success.

### Brain Activity Surges in Early Years

*A newborn's 100 billion neurons begin to branch out and connect with each other as the baby receives stimulation. The density of these neural pathways is very high by age three. In the preadolescent years, we begin to consolidate these pathways and prune out excess connections. By the time we are adults, brain activity stabilizes.*

Age	Brain Activity
Birth	The cerebral cortex, responsible for complex cognitive functions, is relatively dormant
One	Brain qualitatively resembles that of a normal young adult
Two	Toddler's brain is as active as an adult's
Three	Brain is two and half times more active than an adult's

Source:  
*"Rethinking the Brain," Families and Work Institute, 1997.*

# Well-Being of Young Children

Developmental and brain research clearly shows what children need to thrive. Yet, there is still a wide gap between what is known about the importance of early experience and the real conditions of young children's lives. Although there have been improvements in recent years in areas like overall rates of infant mortality and the number of children receiving immunizations, the "quiet crisis" persists. This section overviews some basic indicators of young children's well-being. (See Figure 1)

## Unchanging Rate of Child Poverty

The poverty rate is a powerful indicator of child well-being because the conditions of poverty compound and exacerbate other risk factors. Children living in poverty are more likely to lack nutrition and health care, good housing and geographic stability. They are also more likely to drop out of school, become teenage parents, and become unemployed.

## Poverty Affects Young Children

For nearly two decades, there have been no significant changes in child poverty in the U.S. Currently, 14.7 million children, or about 21%, live in poverty. In families headed by a single female, the rate jumps to 59.1%, which is over five times the rate for children in married couple families (10.6%). Even though children comprise only 25% of the general population, they represent 40% of those living in poverty.

## Widening Gap between Rich and Poor

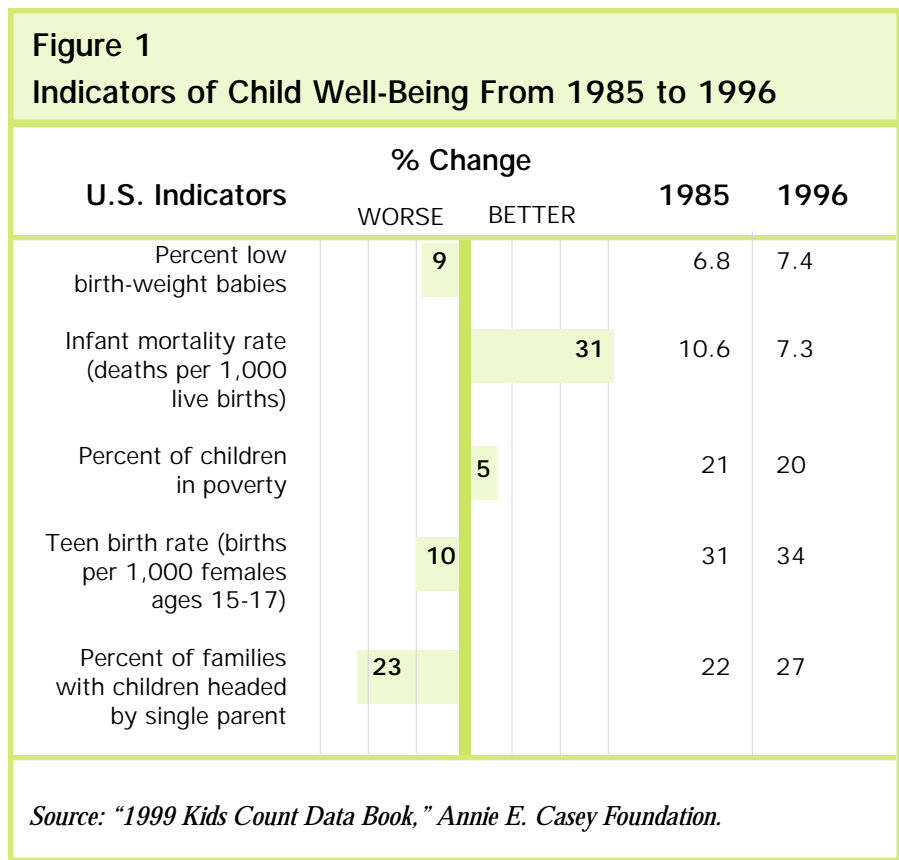
Recent data show a growing income disparity among children. Despite a booming economy and low unemployment rates, which have benefited children in the highest income brackets, there are growing numbers of children living in extreme poverty and in working-poor families.

From 1980 to 1997, the proportion of children living in extreme poverty increased slightly from 7% to 8%, while children in families with high income increased from 17% to 25%. In addition to the

children living in welfare-dependent families (12%), there were 5.6 million children in 1997 living in working families whose family income was below the poverty line--a significant increase from 4.3 million in 1989.

## U.S. Lags Behind other Developed Countries

A 1995 study of child poverty showed that the U.S. not only had the highest rate of child poverty among seventeen developed nations, (22% in 1991) but that it was also 50% higher than the next highest rate.



### Infant Mortality

Although there has been an overall improvement in this area, mortality rates for black children and for babies born in poverty remains over 50% higher than for whites and for children living above the poverty line. And, although the national rate has decreased from 10.6 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1985 to 7.3 deaths in 1996, there are still areas of the country with high rates, like the District of Columbia with 14.9 deaths per 1,000 live births.

### Low Birth-Weight Babies

Babies who weigh less than 5.5 pounds at birth are at greater risk for developmental problems than those who are born larger. In 1996, the percentage of low birth-weight babies (7.4% of all births) showed an increase of 9% since 1985. Also, the current federal interagency report, "America's Children," documents that the 1997 percentage (7.5% of all births), was the highest in over 20 years.

### Teen Birth Rate

The teen birth rate in the U.S. is much higher than that of other developed countries and is twice the next highest rate. Teenage childbearing often adversely affects both the mother and the child. Teenage mothers are less likely to have health insurance and obtain adequate prenatal care, and they often lack the financial and emotional resources to provide a healthy environment for their children.

Most mothers under 18 are unmarried and have not finished high school. And, research shows that children born to single mothers are more likely to drop out of school, depend on welfare, divorce or separate, and give birth out of wedlock.

### Children Living at High Risk: "Cause for Exceptional Alarm"

In the 1999 Kids Count Data Book, the Annie E. Casey Foundation chose to highlight six risk factors that affect a family's capacity to provide the best environment for children. (See Figure 2) "Income, savings, the amount of parental time that is spent with children, the ability to secure health care and a parent's connections to the world of work and earnings all play a major part in how well a family can secure the

Figure 2  
Percent of Children in U.S. Living with Certain Risks

<p><b>14%</b> <i>of children in the U.S. are considered to be at "high-risk" as they are living in families who have four or more of these risk factors.</i></p>	Child is not living with two parents	32%
	Household head is high school dropout	19%
	Family income is below the poverty line	21%
	Child is living with parent(s) who do not have steady, full-time employment	28%
	Family is receiving welfare benefits	12%
	Child does not have health insurance	15%

Sources:  
March 1998 Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.  
"1999 Kids Count Data Book," Annie E. Casey Foundation.

well-being, development and success of its children."

The foundation reported that 14% of children in the U.S. are living with four or more of these risk factors and are at special risk for poor outcomes. They noted that each individual factor such as the absence of one or both parents, low educational levels, the security of parents' employment, dependency on welfare, and lack of health insurance contributes to family fragility. A combination of several risk factors, is however, "cause for exceptional alarm and merits special attention and intervention." The impact of combined risks is multiplicative, not additive, and each factor mutually reinforces others to create a destructive, high-risk environment.

Data suggests, for example, that 4-year olds who live with four or more risks often have difficulty concentrating, communicating and are often in poor health. Also, youth with four or more risk factors drop out of high school at a rate of 26%, and become teenage parents at a rate of 16%.

## More Children in Foster Care

*Starting Points* reported that in the four years from 1987-1991, the number of children in foster care rose from 300,000 to 460,000, an increase of more than 50%. They also noted that infants under the age of one are the fastest growing group of children entering foster care.

Today, the situation is not much better as there continues to be dramatic growth in the number of children, especially infants and toddlers, entering foster care. There are also fewer children leaving the system. In addition, minority children are significantly overrepresented and tend to have longer stays.

## Abuse and Neglect Adversely Impact Healthy Development

More than 1 million children were identified as victims of abuse and neglect in 1995. About 80% of this child maltreatment was perpetrated by parents of the victims, about 10% by relatives, and 2% by others in caregiving roles.

Not surprisingly, then, when young children are abused and neglected by the adults they depend on for nurture, their ability to form secure attachments is jeopardized and they are less likely to develop a sense of trust in others and the world around them.

If children fail to form strong attachments and reach other developmental milestones, they are at risk for long-term social and emotional problems.

Violence that affects pregnant women can also

### *Every day in America*

81	babies die
781	babies are born at low birth weight
1,403	babies are born to teen mothers
2,430	babies are born into poverty
8,470	children are reported abused or neglected
11.3 million	children are without health insurance
14.5 million	children live in poverty

Source:  
"1998 United States Profiles," *Children's Defense Fund*.

## ***Abuse and Neglect Affects Youngest Children***

***"In 1995, more than one million children were identified as victims of abuse or neglect. Nationwide, the rate of victimization of children was approximately 15 per 1,000 children younger than 18 years of age.***

***More than half of all victims were 7 years of age or younger, with about 26 percent younger than 4 years old.***

***One of the most severe consequences of child maltreatment is child death. Forty five States reported that 996 children were known by the child protective services (CPS) agency to have died as a result of abuse or neglect. The majority of these deaths were children 3 years of age or younger."***

Source:  
"Child Maltreatment 1995," *The Administration for Children and Families*.

lead to severe risks for infants, such as birth defects, low birth-weight and even stillbirth. In addition, if the abused woman experiences postpartum depression, her infant will not receive the responsive care and stimulation needed to thrive.

## Improving the Odds

Taken as a whole, these indicators paint a picture of a nation that is failing to meet the urgent needs of many of its youngest children. However, they also offer concrete opportunities for bettering young children's lives. A positive change in any one of these areas can help us to improve children's prospects for future success.

### ***Data Sources***

"1999 Kids Count Data Book" *Annie E. Casey Foundation*.  
"1998 United States Profiles," *Children's Defense Fund*.  
"Child Maltreatment 1995," *The Administration for Children and Families*.  
"America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 1999," *Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics*.

# Room for Improvement

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*“The stakes are highest in the earliest years--the stage in life when children are at their most vulnerable, and a stage when it has proven difficult to build public support for investment. . . Every child needs intellectual stimulation, trained caregivers, emotional support, a safe and healthy environment, and active parental involvement. We must work to ensure that every child lives in that kind of environment.”*

*Richard W. Riley  
U.S. Secretary of Education*

As Secretary Richard Riley points out, and the previous sections show, the stakes are indeed high in the early years. By neglecting to invest in our youngest children, we not only jeopardize their healthy development and school readiness, but we also risk the civic and economic strength of the entire nation.

Although there are many laudable initiatives underway to address specific aspects of the “quiet

crisis,” researchers, professionals who work with young children, and child advocates agree that there needs to be a more comprehensive approach to early childhood issues-- an approach that provides a framework for action, encourages collaboration and coordination between programs and services, and empowers all sectors of American society, from policymakers to parents, to act on behalf of young children.

Perhaps, most importantly, experts emphasize that real change will require a synchronization between national policies and local initiatives. Federal and state level policies can provide a framework to guide local action, but each community must decide what will work best for itself.

As a starting point, research has shown that positive changes in some key areas, like parenting, child care and health and nutrition, can lead to better outcomes for children. This section identifies places where there is room for improvement.

## Supporting Good Parenting

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Parenting is at once an intensely private enterprise and one that significantly influences society as a whole. In order to negotiate the public and private facets of parenting, we need policies and practices that empower parents and give them the information and resources they need to make their own choices about the best ways to raise their children.

### Promote Family Planning and Prenatal Care

Over half of all pregnancies in the US are unintended-- one of the highest rates among developed countries. Research has shown that women with unplanned pregnancies are less likely to obtain adequate prenatal care, or take health precautions during pregnancy (like quitting smoking). Once these children are born, they are also at greater risk for low birth-weight, lack of immunizations, and abuse or neglect.

Among teens, not only is the rate of pregnancy high, but the majority of these pregnancies are

unplanned--compounding other risks teens face such as lacking financial and emotional resources to raise a child.

Clearly, policies that support family planning and that teach people from an early age to take responsibility for raising children can help to reduce early risks for babies.

Ensuring prenatal care is also a strong preventative strategy that supports the health of both mothers and babies. Teen mothers and women who are poor or uninsured are less likely to get adequate prenatal care. Health care and good nutrition during pregnancy increase the chances for delivering a normal weight, full-term baby, as well as positively influence a child’s later development. Also, educating pregnant women about risks such as smoking, alcohol, and exposure to lead, and early assessment of conditions like maternal depression can lead to future savings in health and social services.

## Provide Information and Support for Parents

Today's new parents often cannot turn to the extended family and community networks of the past for help with raising their children. Surveys indicate that parents often lack information and skills that can help them to fulfill their caregiving roles.

Programs that build parenting skills, educational materials on parenting practices, parenting networks that provide social support, and parenting resource centers have all been shown to improve parents' abilities to provide nurturing environments for their children.

The demanding job of raising a young child can often overwhelm or isolate parents. Families can benefit from programs that facilitate interaction with other parents, help them to develop supportive networks and provide them with access to community resources. The most successful programs are responsive to individual families' strengths and needs. They enhance parents' understanding of their child's physical emotional and cognitive development, and help families to develop positive parenting skills. This strengths-based approach is exemplified in a successful parenting support program developed at Michigan State University (see box below).

### MSU Extension Program Builds Strong Families, Supports Good Parenting

*"Building Strong Families: Parenting Young Children" is a comprehensive parenting program developed at Michigan State University. Since 1989, the program has successfully improved the childrearing knowledge and skills of parents with children aged 0 to 3.*

*The Building Strong Families curriculum is geared toward family strengths and is designed to meet the unique needs of parents with limited incomes and low-literacy levels. Using a format that is multicultural and inclusive, the program empowers parents to positively influence their young children and helps them build their parenting knowledge and skills.*

*The program was developed in response to a grassroots request for research-based materials that are appropriate for families with limited resources. The resulting curriculum does not assume the ability to read, is delivered by trained paraprofessionals from the community, and includes cartoon style flip charts, real-life videotapes, and experiential learning activities.*

*The curriculum stresses the importance of parenting to a child's early development, and is divided into four learning modules:*

- *How Kids Develop: to learn about healthy child development*
- *Helping Kids Behave: to learn how to discipline effectively*
- *Playing to Learn: to focus on positive interactions through play*
- *Smart Living: to set realistic goals*

*The program has been very well-received by 99% of participants surveyed. A recent evaluation from the 1998-99 program year showed that 77% of parents completing the program showed improved parenting practices.*

*Participants improved their ability to facilitate their child's cognitive, social, physical and language development, to foster a child's independence, and to use discipline positively.*

*The curriculum has been broadly disseminated and is currently conducted in 46 of Michigan's 83 counties, in 41 other states as well as in 3 foreign countries.*

*Source:  
MSU Extension, Children, Youth and Family Programs  
Building Strong Families Program.*

## Establish Family-Friendly Work Policies

Families and Work Institute has recently published conclusions from two national studies on employees and employers in *Ahead of the Curve: Why America's Leading Employers Are Addressing the Needs of New and Expectant Parents*.

In this report, they document dramatic rises in the numbers of employed parents with children under the age of six, and in the numbers of employed parents with young children reporting significant work-family conflict.

These trends point to the changing realities of the workplace, in which employees require support to balance the demands of work and family and in which employers need to become more responsive to employees' needs in order to stay competitive.

Instead of family friendly work policies being a drain on company resources, leading companies are finding that investing in employees' family needs actually boosts productivity and contributes to the company's competitive edge. According to Families and Work's survey of employees, workers in supportive work environments "are less stressed, feel more successful meshing work and family life, are more loyal to their company, are more committed to their employers, are more satisfied with their jobs, and are more likely to want to remain with their employers."

Their survey also reveals that in today's service-oriented marketplace, businesses are finding they need to invest in company morale and "acknowledge the importance of empowering employees to work with full concentration and peace of mind."

Policies that can promote this new family friendly workplace include:

- **Strengthening parental leave options**
- **Flexible scheduling and working from home**
- **Assistance with child care**

## Support Prevention Programs That Work

Although parenting resources and supportive workplace policies can be useful for many families, those experiencing serious economic hardship and other pressures need support that goes beyond parent education and responsive employers.

To address the high risk for child abuse and neglect in families facing extreme hardship, *Starting Points* recommended that support services be linked and coordinated with other services like health care, child care, literacy classes and job training that can help improve a family's economic security, health,

and sense of well-being.

One type of support service that has been initiated in several states is the home visiting program, in which as many as 550,000 children are currently enrolled. Instead of seeking out community resources, families have services brought to them through a series of home visits that promote good parenting skills, healthy child development and school readiness, and that attempt to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Although recent evaluations of these programs had mixed results, and show that it is hard to generalize from one model to the next, there are proven successes with this approach, especially if it is seen as one aspect of a range of services offered to families.

### Home Visitation Program Improves Outcomes in Oakland County, MI

*Initiated in 1994, the Healthy Start/Healthy Families Oakland program, which does home visits, is a community based prevention strategy used to reduce child abuse and neglect, improve child health, promote positive parenting and foster improved child development among young children.*

*The program has served over 300 families in a five year period, with a majority of mothers who were young, single, not yet graduated from high school, and had limited financial resources. Compared to those not enrolled in the program, Healthy Start participants had:*

- **Significantly lower rates of child abuse and neglect**
- **Significantly lower rate of emergency room use**
- **High rates of immunization**
- **Significantly higher child development outcomes, increases in quality of parenting, quality of social support and knowledge of child development**

*Source: Healthy Start/Healthy Families Oakland.*

## Ensuring Quality Child Care

The full time care of infants and toddlers has historically been the responsibility of mothers-- in 1940, for example, 87% of children under the age of six had a non-employed parent, usually the mother, who provided care. Today, over 60% of mothers with children under 6 work outside the home, often returning to work during the first three to five months. In addition, the numbers of single parents, mainly mothers, are rising.

These realities have created a high demand for non-maternal care. But, as more parents search for reliable, affordable, nurturing care for their young children, they have been stopped short by the lack of uniform standards, high costs, and poor quality of available child care choices.

Over the past decade, research has confirmed parents' experiences. (See box) There is growing evidence that the nation's young children (who critically need nurturing, responsive care at this early stage of life) are spending most of their waking hours in poor quality settings, some in unsafe environments. In addition, care providers are leaving the field in huge numbers, and parents are struggling to locate quality options.

Early education experts have pointed out this crisis in child care and are urgently calling for reform. One of the key elements of addressing the crisis is ensuring high-quality care.

### Ensure High Quality Care

Researchers and early childhood educators have long identified the elements that constitute quality child care and education:

#### Quality environments

- Have low child-adult ratios
- Have small group sizes
- Are safe, clean and stimulating

#### Quality depends on caregivers who

- Have a formal education in early childhood
- Have opportunities for specialized training and professional development
- Earn a livable wage and have adequate benefits
- Can provide sensitive, responsive, cognitively stimulating care

### Child Care Facts

- 74% (6.8 million) of 3 to 5 year-olds receive some type of regular child care
- 80% of the nation's children spend up to 50 hours per week in poor to mediocre child care settings
- 40% are in settings that jeopardize their health and safety
- 40% of center-based care, and up to 90% of family care providers are legally exempt from regulation
- 40% of child care providers leave the field, compared with a 6% turnover rate for public school teachers
- In 1996, the average wage for workers in child care center was \$6.12 per hour (\$12,730 per year)

#### Sources:

*"Not By Chance," Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy.  
Annie E. Casey Foundation.  
"NICHD Study of Early Child Care."*

Research results from major studies like the "NICHD Study of Early Child Care," which has been analyzing data since 1991 on 1,364 children from 10 communities across the country, and the "Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes" study, which has followed 800 preschoolers since 1993, demonstrate that quality care is linked to positive developmental outcomes for children.

The NICHD study, for example, found that higher quality of care is related to better mother-child relationships, fewer reports of children's problem behaviors, higher cognitive performance, higher language ability and higher levels of school readiness. They also found that the converse is true: inferior quality care predicted poorer outcomes in the above areas.

The Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study also found that quality care can lead to improved school readiness: children in high quality programs scored better on math, language, and social skills development through the early elementary years than

children in poor quality care.

These research findings show that high quality child care can help children be ready to learn when they enter school, and promote their healthy development. The following are some ways to develop quality.

### Strengthen Standards and Regulations

At present, there is not only a great deal of variability and inconsistency in standards for child care programs, but many programs are legally exempt from state regulation. Also, current licensing practices do not always address staff qualifications and other indicators of quality. Establishing, monitoring and enforcing consistent standards, like group sizes and child-staff ratios, can go a long way toward improving the child care experience.

### Improve Training and Compensation for Early Child Care Professionals

Experts know that well-trained and well-compensated child care providers are more likely to remain committed to their careers, and give responsive, stimulating care to children. However, child care providers remain among the worst paid sectors of the labor force, and they tend to leave the field in high numbers. Professionalizing the field will help to ensure quality care. Providers need opportunities for professional development through training and formal education, as well as adequate recognition and compensation for their work.

### Make Child Care Affordable

Child care costs average about \$4,000 per child per year, and are often higher. This is a considerable expense that many families simply cannot afford. As a result, many children spend time in mediocre or poor quality arrangements that hinder healthy development.

In addition, research shows that children from low-income families stand to make the biggest gains from good quality programs and are most likely to feel the impact of poor care. So, unless child care becomes more affordable, these children who could potentially gain the most from high-quality care will be the least likely to receive it.

### Develop Networks of Child Care Programs

Community based networks of child care programs can benefit both parents and providers. Parents are often confused by the variability of child care options, and need objective sources of information on the quality of different programs. In addition, many child care providers that work from their homes (most children are in family and relative care arrangements) are isolated from other providers and lack access to resources and materials that could improve their work. Locally built networks in several cities around the country are already coordinating resources among child care providers, raising consumer awareness among parents, and helping to professionalize the field.

### Head Start: An Exemplary Program for Early Childhood Education and Care

*In 1965, the national Head Start program began providing comprehensive developmental and social services to low-income, preschool children and their families. Over three decades, it has served more than 15.3 million children and families and has proven to be one of the most successful preschool programs in the country.*

*Key components of the program that have contributed to its success include its focus on:*

- *Parent involvement in parent education, program planning and operating activities*
- *Community involvement and volunteer involvement*

- *Early childhood development that emphasizes children's educational and health needs.*

*In 1994, bipartisan legislation was passed to reauthorize the program into an improved 21st Century Head Start. The new program emphasizes: excellence in quality, expanding the number of children served and being more responsive to families' needs, and forging partnerships with key community and state institutions.*

*Also in 1994, the new Early Head Start program was established to expand services to low-income families with children under three and to pregnant women.*

*Source: The Head Start Bureau.*

## Ensuring Good Health and Nutrition

Investing in the good health of young children is one area in which we can clearly see that the long term benefits of early prevention far outweigh the short term costs. Immunizing children, ensuring they get adequate nutrition and preventative health care, and keeping them safe from harm, are basic strategies that can lead to savings in later medical costs and social services.

Yet, as the indicators of child well being showed, there are too many children who are at risk for poor health, from being born at low birth-weight, living in poverty, and not having access to health care. Poor health early in life has been shown to have serious consequences like lack of school readiness,

and increased chances for physical and learning disabilities. The following are some areas for improvement.

### Increase Access to Health Care

The U.S. is one of the few developed countries which does not provide national health insurance for children. In 1996, about 15% of children did not have health insurance. Research has shown that children who have health insurance use health care services more often and as a result tend to remain healthy and productive into their adult years.

### MSU Extension's EFNEP Improves Michigan Families' Health and Self-Sufficiency

*The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program is celebrating 30 years of educating families about health and nutrition. EFNEP partners with state and community agencies to help families with limited resources, pregnant women, and school-age youth learn practical skills to enhance family nutrition. EFNEP is a federally funded program conducted through the Cooperative Extension Service in every state and U.S. territory.*

*The program has a research-based curriculum and includes hands-on activities to help families stretch their food dollars, learn to prepare healthy meals, and learn how to be physically fit. Participants are taught either in their homes or in small groups by trained instructors from their own communities. A recent cost-benefit analysis conducted in Virginia shows that for every \$1 spent on the program, \$10.64 will be saved in future health costs.*

*In Michigan, through MSU Extension, EFNEP helped more than 5,000 adults and 19,000 family members improve their nutrition knowledge and behaviors in 1999 alone. In addition to nutrition skills, participants gain a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence that*

*enables them to become more self-sufficient and improve their lives in other ways. In 1998, for example:*

- *3,554 homemakers graduated from the program*
- *92% of graduates make significant improvements in their diets*
- *542 enrolled homemakers sought and obtained employment*
- *118 enrolled families no longer received major support from public assistance.*

*Other outcomes of the program include:*

- *Increased knowledge of nutrition, food safety and physical fitness*
- *Significant improvements in diet, such as increases in intake of fruits, vegetables, and milk and reductions in dietary fat*
- *Improved planning and budgeting practices to stretch food resources.*

*Source:*

*MSU Extension Children, Youth and Family Programs  
Expanded Food Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)*

### Ensure Prenatal Care

Positive developmental outcomes for babies are dependent on the mother receiving good health care and nutrition during her pregnancy. However, in 1998, about 20% of women did not receive adequate prenatal care. The case for prenatal care is strengthened by medical findings on how a pregnant woman's exposure to substances like nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs adversely affects fetal development.

### Ensure Children are Fully Immunized

Immunizing children against communicable diseases is a low-cost preventative measure that results in great health benefits. "Starting Points" cited that every \$1 spent on immunizations resulted in a savings of \$10 in future medical costs.

Despite these facts, there are still outbreaks of childhood illnesses and communities are put at risk by being exposed to dangerous diseases. A program that is addressing this problem is the Childhood Immunization Education Initiative, a partnership between MSU Extension and the Michigan Department of Community Health. The initiative provides training and tools to create awareness about the importance of immunization and facilitates community involvement in the fight against childhood illnesses.

### Promote Good Nutrition

Nutrition education programs like the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and supplemental food programs like WIC have proven that nutritious food and nutrition education can lead to positive health outcomes for women and children (see boxes).

### Promote Breastfeeding

The American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends breastfeeding for at least the first year because it has healthy consequences for both the mother and her baby. Breastfeeding can help women recover from the stress of labor and delivery, lose weight from the pregnancy, and even reduce future risks of some forms of cancer. Breast-fed babies tend to be healthier than babies who drink formula--they have fewer ear infections, allergies, stomach problems and colds.

Currently in Michigan, MSU Extension's EFNEP and WIC have formed a partnership to develop a breastfeeding peer counseling program.

The purpose is to increase breastfeeding among low-income women and provide support and encouragement to the breastfeeding mothers.

Evaluations have been positive. Results from 1993-96 show that 88% of women enrolled in the program chose to initiate breastfeeding, compared with 32% of the general Michigan WIC population. And, 54% of enrolled women continue to breastfeed two months later, compared with 18% of the general Michigan WIC population.

### WIC Has Positive Impact on Child Growth and Development

*The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federally-funded preventive nutrition program that provides nutritious foods, nutrition education, and access to health care to low-income pregnant women, new mothers, and infants and children at nutritional risk.*

*In addition to nutrition education, WIC offers referrals for health care, which includes preventative care, immunizations, substance abuse, counseling and treatment, prenatal smoking cessation and lead screening. WIC also offers support for mothers who are breastfeeding.*

*WIC has proven to be a cost-effective program that has had a positive effect on pregnancy outcomes and child growth and development. Research indicates that every WIC dollar spent on a pregnant woman saves \$3.13 in Medicaid costs during the first 60 days of an infant's life. Other benefits include:*

- *Increase in number of women receiving adequate prenatal care*
- *Lower infant mortality rates*
- *Improved diets for pregnant women, mothers and children*
- *Higher rates of immunization*
- *Decreased incidence of low birth-weight babies and pre-term births*

*Source: The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).*

# Creating A Culture Change

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The ideas summarized in this report about the importance of the early years and the urgent need to invest in young children have been taken to heart by many. There are already initiatives in several states, like Oregon, North Carolina and Colorado, that prioritize young children and address parenting needs, child care issues and health care.

Currently, in Michigan, there is an initiative to establish a universal early education and care system in the state. The Ready to Learn Leadership Summit recently brought together top leaders from diverse sectors of business, government, education, health, media, faith, labor, and philanthropy. The goal was to stimulate dialogue on the importance of the early childhood years and to encourage strong leadership in each sector for a high-quality early education and care system. Community forums were also held in 19 communities throughout the state to

gather local input on these ideas.

Ready to Learn has successfully engaged leaders in the Michigan legislature, business community, the media and others, and has encouraged them to mobilize their sectors on behalf of young children. A work group of Michigan leaders from the summit is currently collaborating with experts on early childhood issues to develop a plan for future action.

The goal of this initiative is to achieve a culture change in the state around early childhood education and care. A successfully implemented universal system of care will require guidance from state leaders as well as grassroots support from local communities. If Ready to Learn can mobilize each segment of society to do its part to prioritize young children, the return on the investment will be immeasurable.

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