Giving Society’s Youngest Members a Strong Start

Discussion Starter

Young children change rapidly during the first five years of life. Many changes are easy to see – for example, when a baby learns to roll, then crawl and then walk, or when a baby’s babbling becomes familiar sounds, then words and then sentences. What may not be quite as obvious are the changes happening inside the baby’s brain as these outward changes are occurring.

Scientific study of early brain development has found that the brain of a newborn baby develops with amazing speed. In fact, most of our basic “wiring” takes place during the first five years of life. How does healthy and stable early brain development come about? Much like building a home, the type of care that goes into the initial structure will set the framework for what’s being built on top. Even though the human brain will continue to grow and change into old age, it is easier to build it right from the beginning than to remodel it later.

While nothing is ever set in stone, studies of human development show that without a strong foundation in healthy brain development, children are more likely to be at risk for having difficulty learning or getting along with others. It turns out that what young children know and can do is important not only for the children they are, but also for the adults they become.

Given how important the earliest years of life are, how can we make sure that children benefit from the growing body of knowledge about early childhood development and get the best start in life? To help you and your neighbors think about these issues we offer three approaches for your consideration.
Approach A: Parents as Primary
Parents and families should remain primarily responsible for their children’s development before they reach school age

Nobody knows better than parents how to care for their young, and therefore no government agency or local community organization should play a significant role in the lives of children before they reach school age. Childhood development is strongly influenced by the relationships that young children have, and there is no more important relationship than that of the parents to the child. Parents who need extra help should look to other family members instead of looking to public institutions or charities for support.

Therefore, to help our young children have a strong start we should do things like:

- Encourage employers to create family-friendly work policies that allow working parents more flexibility in their schedules so that they can spend more time with their very young children.

- Spend limited funds where they are needed most. For example, all parents can nurture their young children, but not all parents can teach their children subjects like higher level math and science.

- Let parents have more of their income so that they have more flexibility to care for their young children.

People who like this approach might say,

“Very young children need their parents, not outsiders, in order to get the strongest start in life— and parents should prioritize their young children.”

But others might say,

“Wishful thinking like this won’t get us anywhere—the reality today is that most parents have to work and our society will pay the price later if we depend too much on parents to address the developmental needs of children under the age of 5.”
Approach B: Communities Coming Together

Communities should come together to play a larger role in providing care of their youngest members before they reach school age

Given all the pressures facing families today, and given the strains placed on government institutions already, local communities must work together to provide for the needs of very young children. Community relationships and neighborhood conditions like housing quality, access to healthy food, exposure to violence and the stress associated with poverty have an impact on even the youngest baby’s development. When neighbors work together, communities can provide greater opportunities to more children than parents can provide alone.

Therefore, to help our young children have a strong start we should do things like:

- Empower faith communities and other social networks to support parents and families in caring for the needs of society’s youngest members.

- Help parents and neighbors band together to create simple systems like email list-serves to share information about early childhood development and to organize cooperative childcare arrangements.

- Give local communities and neighborhoods more control of how they use public funds to create better experiences and opportunities for their youngest members. Examples might be investing in family mental health services or a more stable and well-trained childcare workforce.

People who like this approach might say,

“We cannot rely on government policies nor can we expect parents to carry the full responsibility for our society’s youngest members; neighbors need to form support networks and communities need to create healthy, safe, and stable conditions so that babies can grow up in environments that support rather than damage their development.”

But others might say,

“This is a nice approach for organizing a block party, but we need to make sure that all children have a fair shot in life regardless of which neighborhood they live in.”
Approach C: Commitment to All Children

We need to make sure that all children have the high quality opportunities for early childhood development

We understand that our society has a responsibility to all children, regardless of circumstance. That is why our states and nation provide support for children once they reach school age. Setting the age for public support at 5 instead of at birth suggests we are using an outdated view of how children develop. Instead, we should provide high quality support for all very young children to have an equal chance at a strong start. Providing support for very young children is an investment in our society’s future prosperity. The investments we make in early childhood development will pay off for all of us because a child with a strong foundation becomes part of a solid community and contributes to our society.

Therefore, to help our young children have a strong start we should do things like:

- Provide families with options for quality childcare and early learning.

- Invest only in programs that are proven to provide young children with the support they need for healthy development and that can be replicated across communities.

- Target public investments to give the greatest support to those children living in poverty who are most at risk for problems later in life.

People who like this approach might say,

“Given what we know about early childhood development, we can’t afford to ignore our children’s needs before they reach school age—if we don’t invest now, we’ll definitely pay for it later.”

But others might say,

“We can’t even fund our schools properly—we can’t afford to dedicate public resources to doing parents’ jobs for them.”
The Choices in Brief

Approach A: Parents as Primary
Parents and families should remain primarily responsible for their children’s development before they reach school age
Therefore, we should do things like:

- Encourage employers to create family-friendly work policies.
- Direct limited funding to those things that parents are not able to do.
- Let parents have more of their income so that they have more flexibility to care for their young children.

Approach B: Communities Coming Together
Communities should come together to play a larger role in providing care of their youngest members before they reach school age
Therefore, we should do things like:

- Empower faith communities and other social networks to support parents and families in caring for the needs of society’s youngest members.
- Help parents and neighbors band together to create simple support systems for information sharing and arranging childcare.
- Give local communities and neighborhoods more control of how they use public funds to create better experiences and opportunities for their youngest members.

Approach C: Commitment to All Children
We need to make sure that all children have the high quality opportunities for early childhood development
Therefore, we should do things like:

- Provide families with options for quality childcare and early learning.
- Invest only in programs that are proven to provide young children with the support they need for healthy development and that can be replicated across communities.
- Target public investments to give the greatest support to those children living in poverty who are most at risk for problems later in life.