



## Early Child Development Toolkit: Case Study #3, Kids Count State Report

This annual publication reports on the well-being of a state's children, using a set of data indicators. This case study looks at the document before and after implementing reframing recommendations and illustrates the importance of using simplifying models and contextualizing data.

### **BEFORE (report introduction):**

#### CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING IN NORTH DAKOTA

This 2008 Overview of Children's Well-Being in North Dakota encourages citizens of North Dakota to consider how children's well-being is vital to the future of our state. We draw your attention to the following trends and encourage all North Dakotans to reflect on how our state can support policies and programs that will help create a future for North Dakota that encourages population growth and more economically viable families.

#### Trends in the Well-Being of Children Ages 0-5

##### Population

- North Dakota has experienced an upturn in births since 2002.
- Census estimates predict a continued decline in the number of children in North Dakota.
- Racial and ethnic minority children are becoming a larger segment of the child population in North Dakota.

##### Family Composition

- Living arrangements of North Dakota infants and preschoolers vary greatly, depending on the child's race.
- The majority of North Dakota children who live in households headed by a grandparent are infants and preschoolers.
- Infants and preschoolers who are racial minorities are much more likely to be in foster care placement.

##### Economic Condition

- Most mothers of infants in North Dakota are in the labor force.
- Children ages 0-5 in North Dakota have the highest rates of poverty in the state.

- Half of all North Dakota children ages 0–5 who live with a single parent are poor.
- Most (58%) American Indian children ages 0–5 in North Dakota are poor while only 11% of white children ages 0–5 are poor.

#### Educational Experiences

- North Dakota children are much less likely than children in the nation to attend nursery school, preschool, kindergarten, Head Start or Early Head Start.
- Current funding of Head Start allows for only 3,353 poor children to participate in Head Start.
- Most North Dakota parents are employed. Child care is an important concern for many North Dakota families.
- Parents whose work hours extend beyond 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. have few options for licensed child care in North Dakota.
- Child care is a significant family expense.
- Child care workers' wages are low compared with other workers' wages in North Dakota.

#### Health

- North Dakota has one of the most restrictive income eligibility guidelines in the U.S. for our State Children's Health Insurance Program.
- About 10% of North Dakota children remain uninsured.

#### *Analysis:*

While the original draft of the report introduction points to the importance of child well-being for the future of the state, the rest of the report is essentially lists of uninterpreted data, which are likely to trigger default ways of thinking about children's development – namely, that children's well-being is the responsibility of parents, not the larger community/state. In contrast, the revised title and introduction use simplifying models from the research (brain architecture, "serve and return") to explain why improving child well-being is so important for the state. The data is placed after this message, and contextualized to support it.

#### **AFTER REFRAMING:**

##### Foundations for Successful Development of Children Ages 0–5

##### FOUNDATIONS ESSENTIAL FOR BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the construction of the maturing brain. As the brain develops, it establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows. Scientists now know that the interaction of genes and children's experiences shape developing brains. For example, like the process of "serve and return" in games such as volleyball and tennis, infants naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by gesturing and vocalizing, the child's learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

Because relationships are essential to the development of children’s brains, educational experiences and child-care experiences of North Dakota children are important to examine so that we can further strengthen children’s opportunities for healthy, productive lives and thereby enhance the economic and social well-being of our state. In addition, giving children positive experiences before they enter school is likely to lead to better outcomes than will remedial programs at a later age – and will be more cost effective (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University).

## **BEFORE (Report Chapter Introduction):**

### **ECONOMIC CONDITION OF CHILDREN AGES 0–5**

- Most mothers of infants in North Dakota are in the labor force.
- Children ages 0–5 in North Dakota have the highest rates of poverty in the state.
- Half of all North Dakota children ages 0–5 who live with a single parent are poor.
- Most (58%) American Indian children ages 0–5 in North Dakota are poor while only 11% of white children ages 0–5 are poor.

#### *Analysis:*

This section uses a “just the facts” approach to making the case for economic supports for families. The revised report incorporates a new title that directs the readers’ attention to environments surrounding children, and uses the “toxic stress” simplifying model to explain how development can be harmed. Further, it links data about problems to policy solutions, avoiding overwhelming the reader or communicating that the situation is hopeless or intractable.

## **AFTER REFRAMING:**

### **ENVIRONMENTS ESSENTIAL FOR CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT**

Stable, healthy environments are essential for children’s successful development. Environments provide children with resources and stimulation. Environments also entail stressors. There are different kinds of stress in children’s lives. There is “short-lived stress” that is really beneficial for them, such as getting immunized. “Tolerable stress” occurs when the presence of supportive relationships, such as a strong family, enable a child to cope and learn to deal with sadness and loss, for example. A third type of stress, known as “toxic stress” damages a developing brain and leads to problems in learning, behavior and increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time. Scientists now know that “toxic stress” in early childhood is associated with such things as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression and damages the developing brain. Environmental supports should be free of toxic stressors.

## Economic Environments of Our Children

### Current trends:

- Children ages 0–5 in North Dakota have the highest rates of poverty in the state.
- Half of all North Dakota children ages 0–5 who live with a single parent are poor.
- Most (58%) American Indian children ages 0–5 in North Dakota are poor while only 11% of white children ages 0–5 are poor.

### *Improving Family Environments in Our State*

#### Because stressful environments are harmful to children's development:

- Supporting education and job skills training for parents will help children in households with low incomes avoid poverty and the stressors that accompany it which damage a developing brain.
- Making transitional benefits more available and accessible will help parents remain employed while developing financial stability and avoiding poverty.
- Promoting economic development on American Indian reservations will provide opportunities for self sufficiency for many families with low incomes who have young children in North Dakota.
- Expanding and promoting asset-building programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) will enable young families and families with low incomes (including grandparents who are raising their grandchildren) to develop financial stability for their children.
- Expanding parent education programs will help parents develop caregiving and coping skills that can deter abusive behaviors.
- Expanding foster care parent-support programs will help foster parents create more nurturing and stimulating environments for children who have been harmed by stressors that impede their development.

(Thanks to Dr. Polly Fassinger, Program Director, North Dakota Kids Count, for permission to use this example.)