



Early Childhood Development Toolkit: Talking Points

The following are talking points to use as a reminder during media interviews or when writing. Specific policy proposals can be introduced after the value and appropriate model.

The future prosperity of our community/state/nation depends on our ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. Innovative states and communities have been able to design high-quality programs for children. These programs have solved problems in early childhood development and shown significant long-term improvements for children, and are the kind of innovations we need.

We now know that the basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. When you are building a house, you go step by step, beginning with a strong foundation. Just like a house, a strong foundation in children's early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

We know how to create stronger foundations for children's development. One active ingredient is the "serve and return" relationships that children have with their parents and other caregivers in their family or community. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis and volleyball, young children naturally reach out for interaction. When adults respond by mirroring back those interactions in a consistent way, the child's learning process is complete. We also know that all parts of a child need attention – cognitive, emotional and social capacities affect each other in the developing brain. Early childhood programs must reflect this understanding.

Chronic stressful conditions such as extreme poverty, abuse or severe maternal depression – what scientists now call "toxic stress" – can disrupt this developing brain architecture. This can lead to lifelong difficulties in learning, memory and self-regulation. Children who are exposed to serious early stress develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their defense system against diseases, from heart disease to diabetes and depression. We must take steps to minimize children's exposure to toxic stress and offer help to children in these situations to buffer this stress and make it more manageable.

When we don't attend to these important aspects of development now, there are serious consequences later. Trying to change behavior or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is less effective. This means we need to invest in the kinds of programs that affect child well-

being early on, because remedial education, clinical treatment and other professional interventions are more costly and produce less desirable outcomes than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life.

We can take what we know from science about children's brain development and combine it with what we know from measuring "effectiveness factors" to learn the difference between programs that work and those that don't to support children's healthy development. In addition, we can evaluate the efficiency of programs for young children by comparing the benefit of the investment to the cost. This allows a reliable comparison between programs that don't improve child development and those that show real results.

When we invest in the kinds of programs that actually support healthy brain development in children, we will see the results in a more prosperous future. When we make investments in children and families, the next generation will pay it back through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.