

## Research Studies and Task Force Reports Can Help You Advocate for High-Quality Early Childhood Education

More and more frequently, policy makers at every level are using the phrase “research based” as they consider public investments in and policies for early childhood education. For example, you may have been asked many of these questions:

- What are the conditions in programs that help children be ready for school success?
- What kinds of benefits—economic and social—do certain models or services bring to children, families, and communities?
- What policies and financing create conditions for children’s positive learning and development?
- What do individuals who teach and nurture young children need to know and be able to do, and what public policies promote or advance those skills?
- As the public provides greater funding for programs outside of the home, how can policy makers and the public know that those funds are having the desired results?

You may find the studies described below useful in your policy discussions and advocacy. Many are familiar within the field for their recommendations on classroom, program or school practice. This article highlights their public policy recommendations

### Using these studies in your public policy advocacy

Advocates should be familiar with these studies and their recommendations. Using this research in your advocacy at the federal, state and local levels will bolster your requests for policy changes. As you read the summaries, ask yourself:

- Do my state’s policies support and promote the recommendations of these reports?
- How can my state’s policies promote:
  - More resources and professional development to provide high quality care for infants and toddlers?

—Providing high-quality, comprehensive programs for children and families most in need of additional supports?

—Support for teachers to use appropriate curricula and instructional assessment to improve learning and practice?

—Support for professional development, including higher education degrees and better compensation?

—Appropriate policies for public funding of accountability that will lead to program quality improvement?

### The importance of the earliest years

#### From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development (2000)

The National Research Council report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* has been a touchstone for explaining the importance of children’s health, social and emotional development from birth and the importance of an integration of physical health, emotional development, early screening and interventions, child-adult relationships, and family involvement and education. The study emphasizes that the context in which children’s development is supported—in the home and in programs—is important to their success. The report is also a valuable resource on why advocates and policy makers need to pay attention to high quality early childhood programs, parent education and involvement, and health and mental health services beginning at least as young as birth.

For advocates and policy makers, *Neurons to Neighborhoods* underscores the importance of promoting children’s development, starting prenatally, through resources and policies that provide a range of child and family supports.

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**Key public policy recommendations include:**

- Increase resources targeted to promoting children's social-emotional development
- Focus school readiness efforts on reducing disparities between children's skills at school entry
- Increase attention to and investment in young children's mental health
- Promote policies that allow parents access and flexibility in choosing child care
- Create a public health campaign targeting threats to brain development starting prenatally, including environmental toxins, mental health problems, substance abuse and violence
- Increase compensation and qualifications of caregivers
- Encourage Congress and the President's Council of Economic Advisors to ensure that tax, wage, and income support policies make sure that children with working parents do not live in poverty, and that no child lives in deep and persistent poverty
- Improve linkages between early childhood programs and services, including developmental screening and protective services agencies, and early intervention, mental health services, and welfare reform
- Convene a working group to analyze professional development challenges in the field

**Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of early head start (2002)**

In 1994, Congress added Early Head Start for infants and toddlers as part of the Head Start Act. Like Head Start, Early Head Start programs serve children from families with low incomes, are guided by federal standards for the quality of care, and provide comprehensive services including home visiting, parent education and family involvement. In 2002, Mathematica Policy Research began an evaluation of Early Head Start programs delivered in centers and family homes.

The study found that Early Head Start as a whole had several positive effects on the participating children and families. As a result of participation in Early Head Start, parents read more to their young children, and children measured higher on cognitive, language and social-emotional development measures than the control group. Families' home environments scored higher on a measure of quality cognitive stimulation for children, child-parent attachment increased, and the use of physical discipline declined. Economic self-sufficiency of the families improved.

**Key public policy recommendations include:**

- Comprehensive programs which focus on families as well as children provide positive effects to both. Early Head Start increased parents' participation in education and the workforce, while also improving outcomes in children.
- Comprehensive program standards, such as the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and regular program monitoring are important to ensure that programs have the greatest positive effect on children and parents.
- Programs which provide services through multiple or flexible approaches may be more effective than those which provide only in-home or center-based services
- Parents whose children participated in Head Start were less likely to use physical punishment, and more likely to read to their children and provided more support for their children's language development

**Curriculum, assessment, and teacher knowledge and qualifications**

**Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers (2001)**

A year after the release of *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, the National Research Council released the report *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*. This report came at a crucial time of increased federal and state policymaker attention to "school readiness" for all children. The report's panel of experts examined issues of curriculum, assessment, teacher qualifications and professional development, and program evaluation for programs serving children ages 2 through 5 (kindergarten).

The report has been the foundation for many policy decisions over the last eight years. Among the most notable, *Eager to Learn* was the impetus for a call for Head Start and state-funded prekindergarten programs to require a Bachelor's degree for teachers, as well as the termination of the Head Start National Reporting System as an inappropriate assessment for young children

**Key public policy recommendations include:**

- All states should develop program standards that recognize the variability of development and adapt pre-school and kindergarten programs to this variability. Kindergarten programs must be ready for young children by paying attention to smaller class size, professional development, and program standards that create the conditions to further young children's development
- States should develop content standards (sometimes referred to as early learning guidelines) and have them regularly evaluated to assure they are reflecting current research on children's learning

- States should develop a single career ladder for early childhood teachers, teacher assistants and supervisors with differentiated pay
- Federal responsibility includes funding for well-planned, high quality center-based preschool programs for all children at high risk of school failure.
- Government at all levels should promote public understanding of the importance of quality in early childhood education programs

### **Taking stock: Assessing and improving early childhood learning and program quality (2007)**

*Taking Stock*, published in 2007, is the project report of a task force convened by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Foundation for Child Development, and the Joyce Foundation. Following *Eager to Learn* and the Head Start National Reporting System debates, as well as the growing interest at the state level in school readiness assessment and accountability for state funding for preschool, the task force looked at assessment in the context of state accountability and improvement systems for preschool linked to K-3.

The task force provides four approaches to quality improvement and accountability: (1) sampling children across the state (child population), (2) evaluating all types of early childhood education programs and the workforce (program population), (3) evaluating specific state-funded programs (state program evaluation), and (4) examining program quality at the level of a local agency such as a school district or nonprofit agency (local agency quality). In addition, the report urges creating a continuum of improvement and accountability from preschool through the third grade.

#### **Key public policy recommendations include:**

- **Governors and State Legislators:**
  - Invest in the infrastructure needed for an early childhood accountability system
- **State agencies:**
  - Develop and implement a plan for a coherent early childhood accountability and improvement system
  - Support partnerships and alignment between preK-grade 3
  - Promote a positive culture for early childhood accountability efforts
- **Federal agencies:**
  - Integrate data systems from all early childhood programs
  - Invest in research and development to support state accountability and program improvement systems

- **Local early childhood agencies:**
  - Create opportunities for teachers and managers to review and discuss child and program assessments, and to use these data to make improvements
  - Collaborate with local school districts on assessment, preK-grade 3 alignment, demographic trends and learning opportunities

### **Early childhood assessment: Why, what, and how (2008)**

In 2006, growth of state-level desire for accountability measures of publicly funded preschool programs, debate about the Head Start National Reporting System, and issues raised by *Eager to Learn* led Congress to request a study specifically focused on assessment in early childhood. The National Research Council published the resulting report, *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How* in 2008 with funding from the Office of Head Start.

The report identifies two principles of early childhood assessment: different purposes require different assessments, and assessments should be conducted as part of a coherent and well-resourced system of health, early education, professional development, and family support services.

The report includes a rich discussion of different assessment purposes, the status of assessment, and the areas in which further research and development are needed. The report concludes with an extensive agenda for future research into assessment instrument development, assessment processes, the use of assessments with special populations, and accountability.

#### **Key public policy recommendations include:**

- A system of assessment must be part of a larger system for early childhood education that includes clear and comprehensive standards, multiple approaches to measuring learning and program evaluation, a database of assessment instruments and results, professional development, conditions conducive to learning and development, inclusion of all children (differing language, culture and abilities), and resources for system components
  - The domains should be expanded beyond cognitive areas when assessing child outcomes and the quality of programs
  - Assessment in an accountability system needs to be weighed with other indicators and factors
  - Decisions should be made cautiously and publicly, especially when high-stakes assessment is being used, and those making decisions should be well-informed
- The burden of assessment on programs should be minimized.

- Services should be available for those identified through developmental screenings; if services are not available, results of these screenings should be used to push for an expansion of services
- Assessment system should be part of a coherent early childhood system including standards, assessments, reporting, professional development, opportunity to learn, inclusion, resources, monitoring an evaluation
- While accountability is an important purpose of assessment, assessment should be used for high-stakes testing only after all resources for program improvement have been exhausted

### **Mathematics learning in early childhood: Paths toward excellence and equity (2009)**

The National Research Council, with funding from the Office of Head Start, created a committee to examine early childhood research on mathematics for children ages 3 to 6. The committee's charge was to provide recommendations for learning objectives, curriculum, instruction, and teacher education, and to identify the implications of current research on policy and practice, as well as future research. The committee report highlights the importance of mathematics for a comprehensive and integrated early childhood curriculum, and the link of mathematics to success in reading.

#### ***Key public policy recommendations include:***

- A national initiative to improve early childhood mathematics learning for children 3-6 should be developed, including professional development for early childhood teachers
- Mathematics curricula in early childhood should focus on the concepts of number, and geometry, spatial relations, and measurement
- Every program for young children should have a high-quality mathematics curriculum
- Learning standards or guidelines should be designed around teaching-learning paths
- Teacher preparation programs should include coursework in early childhood mathematics
- Family and community programs should form partnerships to promote mathematics learning in young children
- Young children should have access to informal mathematics learning materials and programs in the home, and in public centers such as libraries, museums, and community centers

### **Comprehensive approach for children and families**

Abecedarian, High/Scope Perry Preschool, and Chicago Child Parent Centers address the needs of children and families with low incomes with a comprehensive, intensive intervention similar to Head Start and Early Head Start. Studies of these three programs are cited often by advocates and experts for the comprehensive elements of high quality programs and the benefits to the participating children and to society as a whole.

#### **Abecedarian project**

The Abecedarian Project provided families with low incomes in North Carolina with a comprehensive early childhood program from infancy through age 5. Of the 111 children studied, 57 attended the program while 54 children did not attend, but could receive child care and services through other programs. The Abecedarian program included an individualized curriculum, well-educated and -compensated teachers, high adult-child ratios, and ongoing professional development for staff.

In a follow-up study conducted when the children reached age 21, the young adults who had participated in the programs as children showed lasting developmental differences compared to those who had not participated: they had higher scores on reading and math tests, and were more likely to be enrolled in higher education, to be employed, and to have delayed parenthood. These grown-up children who had been continuously enrolled in the comprehensive, high-quality program showed significantly better outcomes, even though some members of the control group had as children attended alternate child care programs and received additional services from other sources.

#### ***Key public policy recommendations include:***

- Children in poverty should have access to comprehensive, high-quality programs starting in infancy
- All families should have access to affordable, high-quality childcare
- Staff should be trained in early childhood development and education, and be well-compensated to reduce turnover
- Programs should intentionally address cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills
- Sufficient resources should be provided to ensure high quality and support staff

## HighScope Perry Preschool

The HighScope Perry Preschool Study is one of the longest-running studies of early childhood education. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers randomly divided a group of 123 children from low-income families at high risk for school failure into a preschool group and a non-preschool group. The preschool group attended a high-quality preschool program at ages 3 and 4, while the comparison group did not. Researchers then followed up with both groups of children every year from ages 3 to 11, at 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40.

In 2005, HighScope released the study report, *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*. This latest follow-up shows significant lasting advantages in education, employment, and social outcomes for the children who attended the preschool program over 35 years after the program ended. At 40, participants who had attended the preschool program as children were more likely to be employed, had higher earnings, were less likely to have committed a crime, and had graduated from high school in greater numbers than adults who had not attended the program.

Several aspects of the study speak to future policy directions and recommendations for future programs. The teachers were well qualified—all had bachelor's degrees with certification in education and received ongoing training and support. Preschool class sizes were kept small, and families were involved in the program through weekly visits with teachers.

### ***Key public policy recommendations include:***

- All young children in low-income families should have access to high-quality preschool programs
- Providing high-quality early education programs to at-risk children yields social and economic benefits

## Chicago child-parent centers

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers program is modeled on Head Start and designed as a birth-to-third grade continuum of comprehensive services and strong family involvement. The funding source is Title I of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act.

In 1986, researchers began the Chicago Longitudinal Study to examine the impact on children participating in the Child-Parent Centers. The study focuses on 1,539 children from low-income families, 989 who attended the Chicago Child-Parent (CCP) Centers for preschool and kindergarten and 550 who did not attend but enrolled in alternative public kindergarten. The study followed both groups of children through age 21. Participants in the CCP Centers were more likely to complete high school, less likely to be arrested for juvenile crimes or to need special education services, and had lower rates of grade retention. A cost-benefit analysis of the program showed that the eventual savings to society from participation in the program far outweighed the initial cost of the program.

### ***Key public policy recommendations include:***

- Greater investment in programs that span the early childhood period, from preschool through the early primary grades
- Support programs that provide comprehensive services  
Provide opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's programs
- Review the use of grade retention for young children  
Promote collaboration between school and community

## Online resources

Each of these reports is available online, most with an executive summary.

### ***From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development***

Full report for purchase and downloadable executive summary at [http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=9824](http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9824)

### ***Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start***

Volume I downloadable at [www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol1.pdf](http://www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol1.pdf)

Volume II downloadable at [www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol2.pdf](http://www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol2.pdf)

Volume III downloadable at [www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol3.pdf](http://www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalvol3.pdf)

Summary downloadable at [www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalsumm.pdf](http://www.mathematicampr.com/publications/PDFs/ehsfinalsumm.pdf)

### ***Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers***

Full report available for purchase or executive summary downloadable at [www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=9745](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=9745)

### ***Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality***

Full report downloadable at [www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Prek\\_education/task\\_force\\_report1.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Prek_education/task_force_report1.pdf)

Summary at [www.pewtrusts.org/our\\_work\\_report\\_detail.aspx?id=30962&category=358](http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=30962&category=358)

### ***Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How***

Full report available for purchase and downloadable executive summary at [http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12446](http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12446)

### ***Mathematics Learning in Early Childhood: Paths Toward Excellence and Equity***

Full report available for purchase and downloadable executive summary at [http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=12519](http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12519)

### **Abecedarian Project**

More information and video at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc)

### **HighScope Perry Preschool Study**

More information at [www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219](http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219)

### **Chicago Longitudinal Study**

More information at [www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls](http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls)

For more information on finding and using early childhood research, visit the NAEYC Office of Applied Research at [www.naeyc.org/resources/research/overview](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/research/overview)