

4. School “Unreadiness” Is Expensive

School “unreadiness” is costly—not only to the children who start behind but to society as a whole. When children’s essential needs are not met in the early years and they do not start school well-prepared, they are prone to a wide array of future problems and needs that relate both to school success and to success in life in general.

In fact, an extensive research base has established cause-and-effect relationships between failures to meet young children’s essential needs (competent and confident parenting; health and nutrition; guidance and instruction; and constant, stable, appropriate supervision) and future problems and costs to society. In particular, when children’s early needs aren’t met, society incurs an accumulating heavy price through:

- Health care costs to address chronic conditions throughout life
- Special education and grade retention costs in the early elementary years
- Juvenile delinquency and remediation costs in the middle and high school years
- School failure, reduced earnings and taxpaying, and increased dependency costs in the early adult years
- Crime and criminal justice system costs in adult years

As shown in the chart below, the child and society pay the cost of poor early childhood outcomes arising from child abuse and neglect, preventable health care problems, absence of developmentally appropriate guidance, and poor-quality supervision. Child abuse, for instance, increases the cost of health care (for treating depression and other mental health issues),

children’s special and remedial education, and other human services related to delinquency and child welfare. It also leads to reduced earnings and increased welfare dependence. Other costs are generated by lack of preventive health care services, absence of developmentally appropriate guidance, and poor-quality supervision. In the case of each of these problems, the costs can be substantial and lifelong.

Some of the areas of most rapid growth in state budgets—corrections and prison costs, special education expenditures, and Medicaid expenditures (particularly behavioral health services for children)—are connected to failures in meeting children’s needs in the earliest years.

While most children start school “ready to learn” on most dimensions of school readiness, research has shown that a significant proportion start school sufficiently behind to be at risk of one or more of these poor outcomes and societal costs. Poverty, parental education and stability, parental depression, and other conditions represent risk factors related to school readiness and future success. Research suggests that the “achievement gap” faced by poor and minority students is evident at the time of school entry. Research also has shown that as many as one-third of children start school behind on more than one dimension of school readiness, and that as many as 1 in 10 is very substantially behind and likely to incur the future social costs described above.

School “unreadiness” is expensive to society, and strategies that improve school readiness can help to avoid those future costs.

Established Research Links Between Failure to Meet Child Needs and Public Costs

	Parental Abuse/ Neglect	Preventable Health Problems	Inadequate Guidance	Poor-Quality Supervision
Child Health Costs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child Education Costs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Child Human Service Costs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Costs in Adulthood	✓	✓	✓	✓

Sources for More Information

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