

1. The Earliest Years Count.

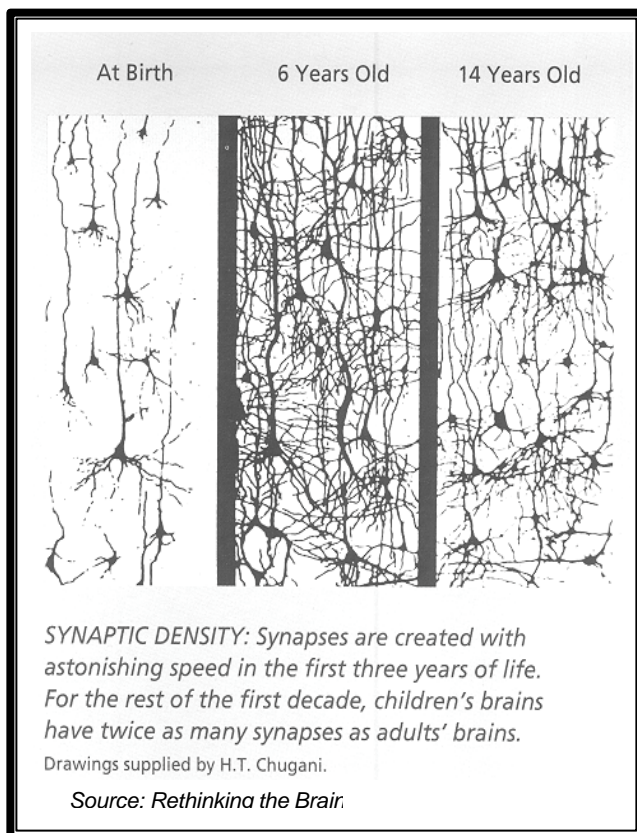


Research into brain development, coupled with child development research, has shown the critical importance of the first few years of life to lifelong development.

At birth, there are roughly 100 billion neurons in a child's brain; few will be produced for the rest of the child's life. At birth, connecting a newborn's neurons are 'tentative connections' which, through the child's experiences, will become the brain's hardwiring. Hardwiring connections are responsible for all of a child's major cognitive and emotional functioning, including vision, hearing, language, emotions, and movement.

Stimulation and interactions are crucial to the development of these connections and the brain's hardwiring. These are produced at their highest rate in the first few years of life. By age three, roughly 85% of the brain's core structure will be formed.

The three pictures of a neurons and synaptic links (hardwiring) are shown for three ages – at birth, at age six, and at age fourteen. As the pictures show, synapses are created with astonishing speed in the first six years of life. For the rest of the first decade of a child's life, a child's brain has twice as many synapses as an adult's brain, attesting to the rapid learning during the early years.



Brain research has shown nurturing is crucial for emotional, social, and intellectual development. In particular, children develop their sense of trust and attachment very early in life, as well as beginning to develop their cognitive and pre-literacy skills. Severe abuse and neglect early in life can produce nearly irremediable damage, including a predilection to violence and specific psychological disorders.

While there is a great deal of plasticity in brain development, there is no doubt that the earliest years of life, during which the brain is developing its hard-wiring, are those of greatest growth and those most subject to influence by external factors.

The following chart provides a very basic overview of the changes in thinking that have occurred as a result of brain research.

Rethinking the Brain	
<i>Old Thinking:</i>	<i>New Thinking:</i>
How a brain develops depends on the genes you are born with.	How a brain develops hinges on a complex interplay between the genes you are born with and the experiences you have.
The experiences you have before age three have a limited impact on later development.	Early experiences have a decisive impact on the architecture of the brain, and on the nature and extent of adult capacities.
A secure relationship with a primary caregiver creates a favorable context for early development and learning.	Earl interactions don't just create a context; they directly affect the way the brain is "wired."
Brain development is linear; the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses toward adulthood.	Brain development is non-linear; there are prime times of acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.
A toddler's brain is much less active than the brain of a college student.	By the time children reach age three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults.

Source: Rethinking the Brain

Sources for More Information:

Karr-Morse, R., & Wiley, M.S. (1997). *Ghosts from the nursery: Tracing the roots of violence*. New York, NY: The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Nelson, C.A. (2003). Neural development and lifelong plasticity. In R.M. Lerner, F. Jacobs, & D. Wertlieb (Eds.), *Handbook of applied developmental science, Vol. 1 Applying developmental science for youth and families: Historical and theoretical foundations* (pp. 31-60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

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2. Nurture (as well as nature) Matters.



Children do not grow up in a vacuum nor are their abilities entirely set genetically. Both nature and nurture are involved in what children are able to do and attain.

All children have essential needs that must be met from the outside to ensure their early years provide them with a good start in life.

The research in the field is very consistent with common sense on several fundamental and universal needs of children for healthy growth and development:

- ✍ *Competent and confident parenting* that is constant and consistent through the early years (at least one, and preferably two, parent figures who provide nurturing, protection, and stimulation and with whom the child bonds and forms attachments);
- ✍ *Health and nutrition* (adequate food and exercise for physical and mental growth, protection against and response to disease and injury, and early identification and treatment of special health care needs);
- ✍ *Guidance and instruction* (help and practice in developing large and small motor skills, pre-literacy cognitive development, and socialization with adults and other children);
- ✍ *Constant, stable, appropriate supervision* (continuous adult oversight and support that enables the child to safely explore the environment).

Failure to meet any of these needs puts a child at risk. The more severe, the greater duration, or the greater the number of unmet needs, the greater is the risk to the child.

Fortunately, most children have most of their needs met most of the time. At the same time, these needs are not met for all children. Further, in many instances it is possible to identify where these needs are not being met and to devise strategies for better meeting them. The program or service strategies associated with these needs are shown below:

- ✍ *Confident and competent parenting ...* general child development information – in the media, in the hospital and doctor's office, and in other places parents go to receive information; home visiting, parenting education, family support programs and family resource centers providing supports to parents in understanding and supporting their child's development; income supports to insure stability in family home life (including housing subsidies, welfare reform, and the earned income tax credit);
- ✍ *Health and nutrition ...* health insurance coverage, prenatal care, primary and preventive (well child) health services, nutrition programs, early identification and treatment of developmental needs and other special health care needs;

- ✍ *Guidance and instruction* ... pre-school programs that are developmentally appropriate and enable pre-school children (3-5) to interact and learn through some formal guidance and instruction, including enriched services available through Head Start and other programs targeted to disadvantaged children;
- ✍ *Constant, stable, and appropriate supervision* ... affordable and accessible child care that provides developmentally appropriate care and supervision, available for families who need child care from birth through age five; child care standards, training, technical assistance, and financial support to reduce turnover and help ensure the quality of care in formal settings, and information and supports to informal caregivers (grandparents, relatives, and friends) who serve as caregivers for young children; family leave programs and policies that enable parents to stay at home with their children when their children are very young.

Research has shown that the effectiveness of each of these programmatic efforts to achieve gains in school readiness is dependent upon several important factors:

- ✍ their ability to identify and serve those children (or their families) at risk of otherwise not having their needs met;
- ✍ their effectiveness in meeting those needs; and
- ✍ the extent to which they serve all children with those needs.

There is a growing body of research on what are effective practices and policies in meeting each of these needs.

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- Groark, C.J., Mehaffie, K.E., McCall, R.B., Greenberg, M.T., & the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative. (2002). *From science to policy: Research on issues, programs and policies in early care and education*. Prepared for the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.
- Kagan, S.L., & Rigby, E. (2002). *Policy counts: A project to track and set benchmarks for family-strengthening state policy. Children ready for school*. New York, NY: National Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Vandell, D.L., & Wolfe, B. (2000). *Child care quality: Does it matter and does it need to be improved?* Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

3. School Readiness is Multidimensional.



Currently, there is a great deal of attention paid to language and literacy development in very young children. The *No Child Left Behind Act*, proposed by President Bush and enacted by Congress in 2002, has strong accountability standards, with students reading at grade level by third grade, as a key measure. This is because research has indicated that much of a child's success in school can be predicted by third grade test scores measuring reading comprehension.

At the same time, educational success, and even third grade reading comprehension, is dependent upon more factors than those related simply to language development and emerging literacy. Children need to be able to follow directions, be attentive and stay on task without great frustration, and get along with their teachers and peers. They need to be healthy and well-nourished.

The National Education Goals Panel, based upon child development and early education research, developed a broad definition of a child's readiness for school that includes five domains, described in the Chart below. The evidence is clear that all contribute to a child's readiness for school and likelihood of school success.

Five Dimensions of Child's School Readiness

Physical well-being and motor development. This dimension includes health status, growth, and disabilities. It also includes physical abilities like gross and fine motor skills, as well as conditions before, at, and after birth, such as exposure to toxic substances.

Social and emotional development. Social development refers to children's ability to interact socially. A positive adaptation to school requires social skills such as the ability to take turns and to cooperate. Emotional development includes a child's perception of him/herself, the ability to understand the emotions of other people, and the ability to interpret and express one's own feelings.

Approaches to learning. This dimension refers to the inclination to use skills, knowledge, and capacities. Key components include enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence in completing tasks, as well as temperament and cultural patterns and values.

Language development. This dimension includes verbal language and emerging literacy. Verbal language includes listening, speaking, and vocabulary. Emerging literacy includes print awareness (e.g., assigning sounds to letter combinations), story sense (e.g. understanding that stories have a beginning, middle, and end) and writing process (e.g., representing ideas through drawing, letter-like shapes, or letters).

Cognition and general knowledge. This dimension includes knowledge about properties of particular objects and knowledge derived from looking across objects, events, or people for similarities, differences, and associations. It also includes knowledge about societal conventions, such as the assignment of particular letters to sounds, knowledge about shapes and spatial relations, and number concepts (e.g., one-to-one correspondence of numbers and objects, and the association of counting with the total number of objects).

Source: *Child Trends*

Each of these domains represents something that can be measured, and used, for diagnosis and early intervention, for instructional guidance and support, and for tracking trends in school readiness for the population as a whole (it is not recommended that assessment of young children be used to determine whether they should start school, as research has shown that there is educational harm to holding children back from entering school).

In addition to the child's readiness for school (what children know and can do), the National Education Goals Panel also has emphasized two other components of school readiness – a school's readiness for children, and family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness. Schools can and should take actions to improve children's learning, at whatever developmental level they are in starting school, and can narrow gaps that exist. Families are the most important figures in their child's life, and this applies to educational support. Community supports are needed to support families.

Still, it is important to recognize that what children know and can do, at the time they enter school, affects what they are likely to learn and achieve in the future. Some studies have indicated that half of school dropouts are the result of actions that occur even before the child first enters the school building.

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4. School Unreadiness Costs.



The failure of society to insure that children start school ready to learn has substantial consequences and costs to society as well as to the child. When children's essential needs are not met in the early years, children are prone to a wide array of future problems and needs that relate both to school success and to success in life generally.

In fact, there is an extensive research base that has developed cause-and-effect relationships between failures to meet young children's essential needs in the earliest years and future costs to society. These include costs related to additional health services, to additional expenditures for special education, to additional human and juvenile justice costs, and to costs related to dependency or criminal behavior as an adult. They also include lost economic activity as a result of fewer workforce skills and earnings capacity. Finally, there even are losses in the workforce productivity of parents of young children as a result of failures to have their children's school readiness needs met. The chart below shows some of the cause-and-effect relationships between failures to meet essential needs in the early years and associated problems and social costs.

Research-Based Relationships Between Failures to Meet Young Children's Essential Needs and Related Costs to Society				
Problems/Costs to Society	Failure To Meet Essential Need			
	Competent Parenting	Health & Nutrition	Guidance & Instruction	Consistent Supervision
<u>Child health costs</u>				
Neonatal intensive care		?		
Chronic and severe conditions	?	?		?
Mental retardation		?		
Developmental disability	?	?	?	
Neurological/mental health	?	?		
<u>Child education costs</u>				
Special education	?	?	?	?
Grade retention	?	?	?	?
School dropout	?	?	?	
Aggressive behavior/suspension				
Expulsion and damage/injury	?		?	?
<u>Child human service costs</u>				
Child abuse/neglect	?	?		
Foster care	?			
Juvenile delinquency	?		?	
<u>Adulthood costs</u>				
Adolescent parenting	?		?	
Welfare dependency	?	?	?	
Criminal behavior/incarceration	?		?	
Institutional/disability care	?	?	?	
Lost economic activity/tax base	?	?	?	
<u>Parent costs</u>				
Workforce absenteeism		?		?
Workforce productivity		?		?
Welfare dependency		?		?

Source: Allegheny Study

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) – appear on this chart and are connected, at least in part, to failures in meeting children’s needs in the earliest years.

Sources for More Information:

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. (2000). *America's child care crisis: A crime prevention tragedy* (2nd edition). Washington, DC: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids.

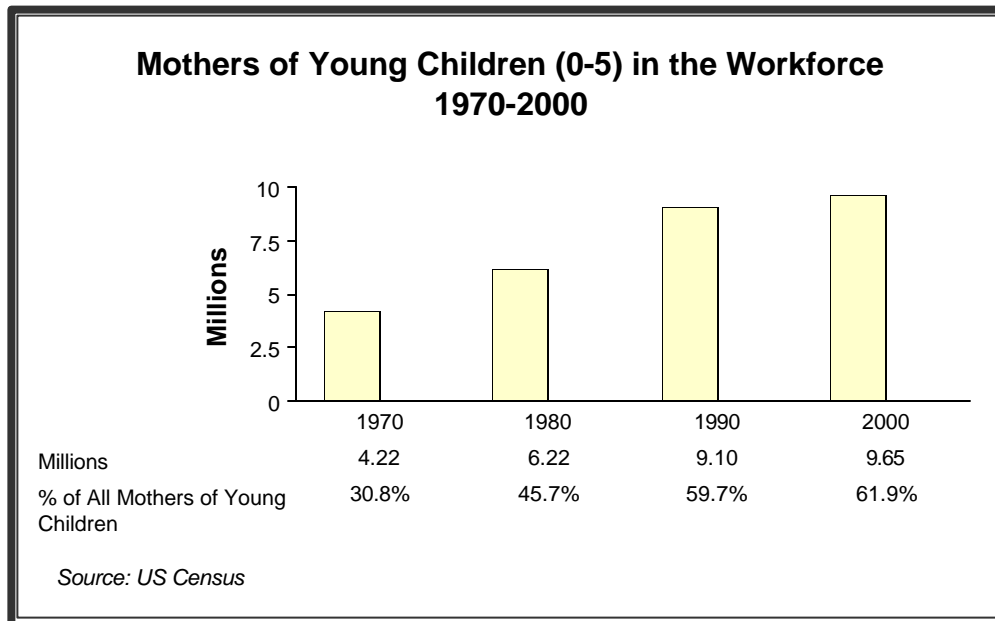
Haveman, R., & Wolfe, B. (1994). *Succeeding generations: On the effects of investments in children*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

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5. Parents Work.



Economics has changed the structure of family life, particularly for families with young children. Over the last thirty years, the percentage of mothers of very young (0-5) children who are in the workforce has doubled, from 30.8% in 1970 to 61.9% in 2000. The entry of women into the workforce over this period has contributed dramatically to the growth in the American economy, accounting for 23.6% of overall growth in American employment (almost all of the rest being the



result of total population growth). For nearly six in ten families with pre-school children (0-5), both (or the only parent) worked in 2000. The table below shows this census information for the United States as a whole, but this information also is available by individual state.

In some measure, this growth is the result of a decline over this period in real (inflation-adjusted) male wages, with families now needing the additional employment to provide for themselves and their family. Public opinion polls show that the majority of families would like to be able to have a parent stay at home, at least when their children are very young (0-2), but work because they feel they must to provide economically. In fact, families with very young children generally have lower incomes than families with older children, as they are starting careers or at starting levels in jobs.

Nationally, 36% of families with at least one child 0-4 earns less than 185% of the federal poverty level (or \$26,200 for a family of three in 2000), much higher than the 26% of families with only older children. Recent efforts to establish self-sufficiency standards for families with young children (the amount of resources families need to provide the basics for themselves) have placed these standards at least at 200% of the federal poverty level and often well above that, with generally higher standards required for families with very young children.

These economic changes to family life create new challenges and demands for young children and their development. At a minimum, there is a much greater need for child care arrangements. Further, since children spend more time in such settings, it is increasingly important that those child care arrangements provide care that is sufficient to address the child's developmental needs.

Sources for More Information:

Mishel, L., Bernstein, J., & Schmitt, J. (2001). *The state of working America 2000-2001*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wider Opportunities for Women's project "Six Strategies for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency" provides information about self-sufficiency standards in several states. Information can be retrieved from their website: <http://www.sixstrategies.org>.

6. Quality Matters.



There is increasing knowledge of “what works” to support young children and their families in meeting essential needs and therefore starting school ready to learn.

Whether for parenting education, enriched pre-school, health and nutrition services, or child care, program quality is critical to effectiveness. The research generally shows that only high quality programs produce significant or lasting effects upon children. Moreover, programs are most effective when they are not stand-alone efforts but the young children and families they serve as connected to other needed supports. When serving vulnerable young children and families, quality includes the ability to effectively identify and connect up with those children and sufficient intensity of services to address those vulnerabilities. There is no magic bullet – no single program or intervention – that can ensure school readiness, but quality programs addressing all young children’s needs can make major differences.

While different programs must address different needs and do different things, there also is a growing recognizing of common elements of quality across effective programs, which are shown below:

Components of Effective Early Childhood Care and Education Services: Research Conclusions

- ✍ well-educated staff, trained and knowledgeable about child development
- ✍ caring staff, able to connect with children and families and build on strengths
- ✍ consistent staff, able to build relationships and maintain continuity with children and their families, characterized by very low staff turnover
- ✍ supportive and regular supervision of staff, providing continuous training and development
- ✍ clear and reachable goals and objectives regarding growth and development, flexibly applied to address individual strengths and differences
- ✍ adequate staffing to provide the duration and intensity of involvement required to affect development
- ✍ a child and family focus, stressing family involvement both within and beyond the specific program
- ✍ comprehensive approaches, insuring that essential needs of children are met, either directly or through referral
- ✍ systematic monitoring and evaluation, benchmarking progress to improve practice.

While there are a growing number of programs that have been evaluated and shown to produce positive results, the practices within these programs and their attention to quality are common elements. Programs which do not incorporate these practices or stand up to measures of quality

have not shown significant, or lasting impacts. Due to limited funding or to efforts to serve a broad population, programs can easily lose the elements of quality that are needed to produce real gains for the children and families they serve.

Research on child care is very clear that high quality care (as measured by staffing ratios, teacher qualifications, and curricular/activity features) improves child development, while poor quality care is harmful to children. This evidence is particularly strong for poor children.

Unfortunately, research on child care also is clear that only a small percentage of current child care is of high quality, and a significant portion is of poor quality that can actually do harm. A four-state study of child care centers showed seven in ten provided mediocre care, and one in eight was so inadequate it threatened the health and safety of children. Different studies of family child care homes have shown that substandard care ranges from one in eight to one in two programs. Providing quality child care at affordable rates remains one of the biggest challenges in developing an overall early care and education system.

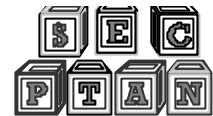
Sources for More Information:

Groark, C.J., Mehaffie, K.E., McCall, R.B., Greenberg, M.T., & the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative. (2002). *From science to policy: Research on issues, programs and policies in early care and education*. Prepared for the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

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Kagan, Sharon Lynn and Cohen, Nancy. (1997). *Not by chance: Creating an early care and education system for America's children*. New Haven, CT: Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy.

7. Investments Pay Off.



Investments in the early years can produce lifelong effects, with gains to society, as well as the child, that pay for themselves many times over. A handful of high quality programs have tracked the children they served over a number of years and identified the gains those children have made as a result of their programs. A few of these have gone a step further in estimating the financial benefits that have resulted to society and compared those with the program costs.

The results of the cost-benefit, or return on investment, analysis from four early childhood programs is shown in the Table below:

<i>Program</i>	<i>Per Child Program Cost (Today's \$)</i>	<i>Per Child Economic Gain to Society</i>	<i>Return on Investment</i>
Perry Pre-school	\$12,148	\$49,972	\$4.11:\$1
Chicago Parent-Child Centers	\$6,692	\$46,002	\$6.89:\$1
Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (high risk group)	\$6,083	\$30,766	\$5.06:\$1
Abecedarian	\$33,000	\$123,000	\$3.72:\$1

Source: UCPC

These studies are not strictly comparable, as each looked at different measures for economic gain (e.g. reduced special education use, reduced welfare dependency, reduced juvenile delinquency, improved adult earnings, and reduced criminal activity and costs to victims of property crimes) and tracked children for different periods of time. Still, they are impressive in economic terms.

The programs also represent a diverse set of approaches to addressing early childhood needs, suggesting there is no single program to address the range of issues and needs to improve school readiness but that individual programs can have strong and lasting impacts on school readiness. Importantly, however, each focused upon very high quality services and sought to ensure that the full range of the young child's needs were addressed, even if the program did not explicitly provide all services. The Perry Pre-School was an enriched pre-school program for three- and four-year olds that incorporated strong parental involvement and long-term contact and tracking of families. The Abecedarian project started with infants and provided parent-child care and instruction, as well as providing child development services through the early years. The PEIP program was a structured nurse home visiting program that addressed mother's, as well as children's, needs. Chicago Parent Child Centers provided pre-school programs with strong parental involvement that then extended their work into the early elementary years. All sought to identify health and special developmental needs of the children they served and ensure that young children received essential health and nutrition services.

While a strong case can be made for investing in early childhood programs in cost-benefit terms, current investments in very young children and their development lag far behind those made for school-aged children and college-age youth. On a per child basis, investments in developmental supports for very young children are as little as one-tenth as much as for school aged-children in many states.

Increasingly, however, the economists and the business community are pressing for increased attention to and investments in early childhood. Brad Butler, former Chief Executive Officer of Procter and Gamble, has been among a number of national corporate leaders championing increased attention to early childhood, stating, "It is not whether we can afford to invest in early childhood; it is whether we can afford not to invest." Nobel laureate economist James Heckman, reviewing investments in early childhood in comparison with other public investment opportunities (particularly those in employment and training programs), has concluded, "The prescription is clear. Invest in the very young." While there are not magic bullets, the potential for substantial returns to society, as well as the individual child, from early childhood investments is clear.

Sources for More Information:

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Heckman, James. (2000). *Policies to foster human capital*. Center for Poverty Research Northwestern University and University of Chicago. Chicago, IL.

Committee for Economic Development. (2002). *Preschool for all: Investing in a productive and just society*. Washington, DC.

About the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network

Legislators and other state decision-makers face awesome challenges in developing public policies. They must balance competing demands across broad issue areas, with finite resources. They must respond to diverse political pressures while seeking solutions that best reflect societal values. They must be good stewards of public resources, requiring accountability based upon efficiency and effectiveness. They must do all this under time and resource constraints that often make securing credible information to inform their decision-making problematic.

The State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network was created to assist legislators and other state decision-makers in accessing the best available information and evidence about effective policies and practices on early childhood issues.

Three national foundations – the Ford Foundation, the Kauffman Foundation, and the Packard Foundation – joined together to support this Network. The Network is committed to providing technical assistance that is:

- ✍ timely (providing technical assistance on executive and legislative time frames and deadlines, which often requires the best available evidence within days, and scheduling presentations and consultations on short notice);
- ✍ policy directed (providing assistance that draws specific connections between available evidence and specific policy and budgeting options);
- ✍ consumer driven (focusing upon issues that are identified by executive or legislative branch officials as important to the state);
- ✍ evidence based (drawing upon the best available research and evidence and grounded in experience rather than philosophy);
- ✍ individually tailored (designed to address the specific needs of the state, recognizing the state's political culture and early childhood policy context).

The Network coordinates its work with the State School Readiness Indicators Initiative also funded by the three foundations and through partnerships with national organizations representing state decision-makers, including the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Education Commission of the States, and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Technical assistance means different things to different people, and the Network uses the term broadly, to refer to any form of “evidence-based help” that can better inform state decision-making. The Network will offer help in the form that best meets state decision-makers’ needs. This will include, but is not limited to, the following:

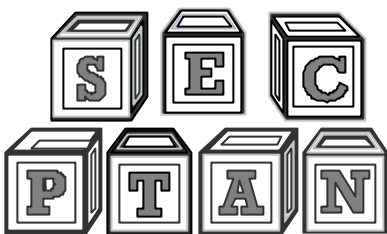
- ✍ rapid research response activities (contracting for and producing short and timely issue briefs on questions raised by state decision-makers, representing summaries of the current evidence in the field on the question and identification of persons with expert knowledge on the subject);
- ✍ consulting arrangements (contracting for an individual or individuals to provide hands-on assistance, sometimes in a confidential and behind-the-scenes manner, to a state decision-maker or team in developing policy options around early childhood and school readiness);

- ✍ testimony, workshops, and presentations (contracting for an individual or individuals to present specific information on a topic of concern to state decision-makers, in a forum to provide exposure to the current evidence in the field and dialogue on policy options); and
- ✍ research design and secondary analysis (contracting for an individual or individuals to assist decision-makers in developing information gathering strategies to assist in making decisions on early childhood policy issues or conducting secondary analysis on existing information available in the state to address specific policy concerns).

Initially, the Network will focus its work in the states that are part of the State School Readiness Indicators Initiative: Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The Network is administered by the Child and Family Policy Center, which also is the clearinghouse for the National Center for Service Integration and has a long history of working with states and foundations on developing policies and practices to improve results for children and families.

Seven Things Legislators (and Other Policy Makers) Need to Know About School Readiness was developed by staff at the Child and Family Policy Center, in response to a request for basic school readiness information for new legislators. Partner organizations, including NCSL and NGA, contributed to the development of these materials.



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