



- ◆ Expand parent education efforts to help them understand how best to support their children's early learning and development.

- ◆ Support professional development activities for child care professionals designed to enhance their skills.

To promote early learning:

- ◆ Review the public library system's budget and services to parents and very young children. Are there opportunities to streamline or reallocate existing funds to better meet the literacy needs of young children and their families?

- ◆ Promote early literacy skills by putting children's books (including board books for infants) in the waiting rooms of government offices that parents tend to visit (such as the WIC office, human services offices, or employment centers).

- ◆ Send a children's book to new mothers and fathers in the community.

To promote child health and safety:

- ◆ Partner with county, city, and state agencies to enhance the early identification of infants and toddlers with special needs or developmental delays.

- ◆ Involve stakeholders such as fire departments and law enforcement to launch a community-wide "Safe Kids" campaign that focuses on issues like the proper installation of car seats, fire safety, childproofing the home, or learning CPR and first aid skills for young children.

- ◆ Talk to members of the pediatric community to identify opportunities to improve the coordination of services to young children (like early intervention).

- ◆ Assure good nutrition for young children by encouraging child care providers to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

- ◆ Enhance training opportunities and incentives for accreditation of child care providers by encouraging partnerships between Head Start/Early Head Start and child care.

Conclusion

Early childhood programs are not a magic wand. They can, however, have a lasting impact on children and families, as well as on the entire community. But not every investment in early childhood will reap these rewards—only smart investments. And for local governments, investing smart means investing in high-quality programs. Quality makes the difference in the benefits that communities will see in the long-term.

Children are the most vulnerable members of any community. Local governments' commitment to infants and toddlers is an important investment not just for the future, but for the present, for the everyday lives of very young children. Say the editors of *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, a compendium of the most up-to-date research on early childhood:

"The charge to society is to blend the skepticism of a scientist, the passion of an advocate, the pragmatism of a policy maker, the creativity of a practitioner, and the devotion of a parent to ensure both a decent quality of life for all of our children and a productive future for the nation."

- Shonkoff, & Phillips, Eds., 2000

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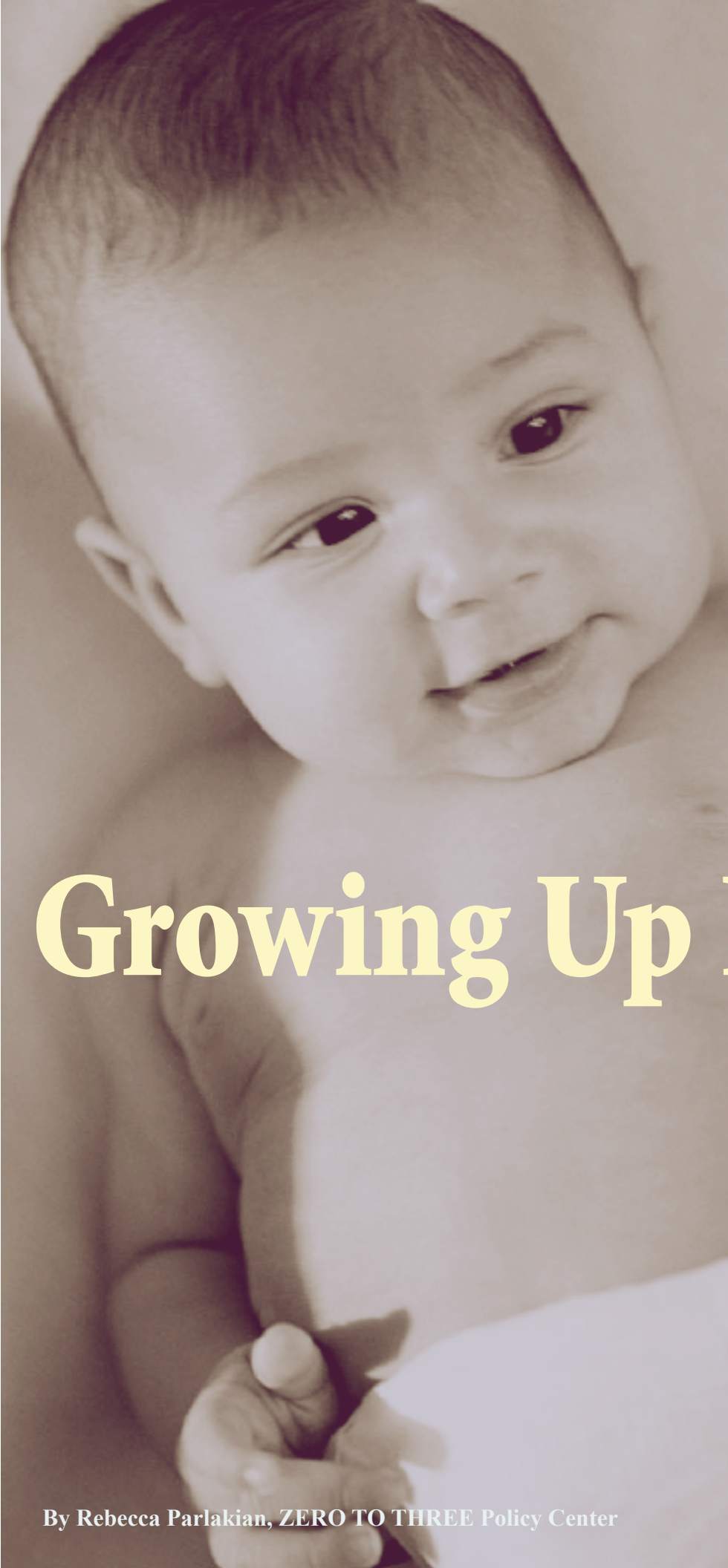
The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a research-based, non-partisan effort at ZERO TO THREE that is committed to promoting the healthy growth and development of our nation's babies, toddlers and families. The Policy Center brings the voice of babies and toddlers to public policy at the federal, state and community levels by: translating scientific research into language that is more accessible to policymakers; cultivating leadership in states and communities; and studying and sharing promising state and community strategies. For more information visit www.zerotothree.org/policy.



The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the voice of America's counties. It provides members with Legislative, research, and technical assistance. The County Services Department(CSD) assists counties on a range of issues including early childhood development and school readiness, access to health care, environmental issues, housing and more. CSD prepares best practice guides, training opportunities, research and other services to enable counties to provide the best services possible.



National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families
The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC), helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city council members, and other local leaders can play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth. Responsive to municipal leaders on a wide range of issues, the Institute focuses on five core program areas: early childhood development; education; youth development; family economic success; and the safety of children and youth.



[It is] in the first weeks and months of life that the foundations for later learning are laid down. Or are not.

- *Zero to Three*, 1992

Growing Up Healthy:

What Local Governments Can Do to Support Young Children and Their Families

By Rebecca Parlakian, ZERO TO THREE Policy Center

The first five years of life are a period of profound growth and change as children begin to speak, think, reason, and feel. Brain research has found that both children’s experiences and their relationships with others influence this early development in important and lasting ways. For local governments, the first five years represent a critical opportunity to support, promote, and enrich the health and development of very young children. These efforts have lasting consequences not just for children—but for their communities as well. Investment in early childhood pays dividends to local governments across time, and across systems as disparate as education, health care, and law enforcement. This paper examines the key areas in which local officials can have a measurable impact on growth and learning from birth to five.

Early Childhood Services: Investing Smart Means Investing Early

Nobody disagrees about whether services to infants and toddlers are important to families; they are. But how sound an investment are these programs for local governments? Research has found that high quality comprehensive services for higher-risk families with young

children can not only improve children’s life outcomes, but more than pay for their initial start-up and program maintenance costs in overall benefits to society (Bruner, Goldberg, & Kot, 1999).

One study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Ypsilanti, MI), which provided a high-quality preschool education to children of poor families, weighed the costs of the program against its economic benefits—including higher earnings by the children who attended, reduced incidences of special education services, welfare assistance, and crime. The analysis found that the return on investment was dramatic: every public dollar spent on the program saved \$7.16 (Schweinhart, 2002).

In the current climate of tight budgets and tough decisions, high quality early childhood programs are one of the few public investments that have been found to consistently provide a large positive return-on-investment for every dollar spent. Economic studies suggest that the overall return on investment for early childhood development is a huge 14 to 15 percent, after adjusting for inflation (Farrell, 2002). Compare this to the long-term real return on U.S. stocks—a mere 7% (Farrell, 2002). Investments in early childhood don’t just make sense for children and families, they are a sound fiscal decision for communities.

in arrest for violent offense among participants (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). These findings echo those of the Prenatal and Nurse Home Visitation Program in which adolescents whose mothers received a nurse home visitor over a decade earlier were 60% less likely to have run away, 55% less likely to have been arrested, and 80% less likely to have been convicted of a crime than their peers in the control group (Olds, Hill, & Rumsey, 1998).

Impact on Education

In the Chicago Longitudinal Study, research has found a 29% higher rate of high school completion, a 41% reduction in special education placement, and a 40% reduction in the rate of grade retention among participants (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001).

Impact on Health Care

In the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention, researchers found a significantly reduced rate of teen pregnancy among participants as they reached adolescence. As adults, research has found that participants were less likely to smoke (39% vs. 55% in the control group), resulting in health benefits and longer lives for a benefit of \$164,000 per person (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2002). The Abecedarian program was an experimental preschool program serving the children of low-income, African-American families in Chapel Hill, NC.

Impact on Social Services

In the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention, research has found a 51% reduction in child maltreatment for children who attended the program (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001). Home visiting programs (such as Elmira, NY’s Prenatal and Nurse Home Visitation Program) have also documented positive health findings—for participating children from birth through 15, the Elmira program reduced State-verified cases of child abuse and neglect by 79% among first-time, low-income mothers (Olds, Hill, & Rumsey, 1998).

The Science of Investing In Early Childhood

The benefits of investment in the first five years of life do not end when children turn six. Rather, communities that provide quality services to infants and toddlers have discovered that these programs offer important benefits across time, across generations, and across systems. Says James J. Heckman, Ph.D., Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences in 2000: “The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young” (Heckman, 2002).

Impact on Children’s Life Course

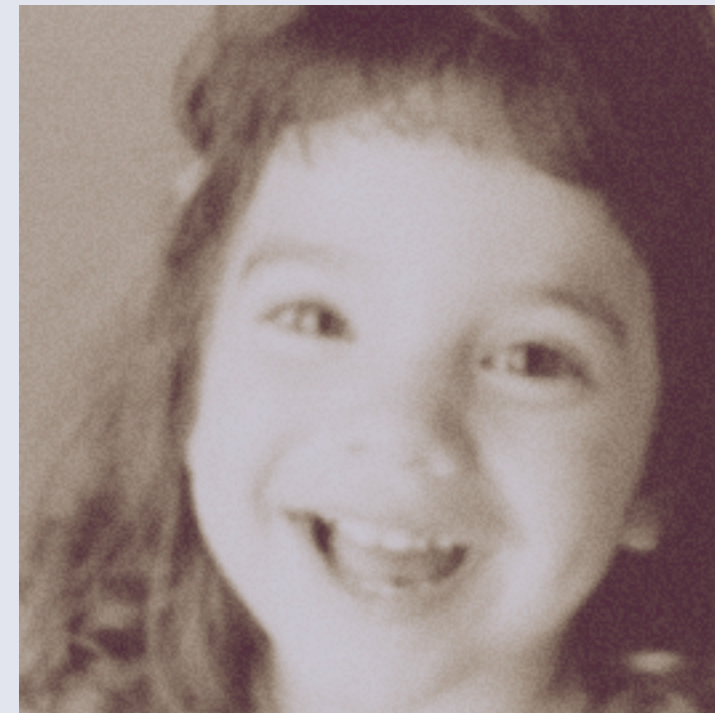
In the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, research has found that adults who participated in the program as children earned more than their peers, fewer of them utilized welfare assistance (59% versus 80%), and almost three times as many owned their own homes, versus their peers who did not participate in the program (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2002).

Impact on Parents’ Life Course

The Elmira, NY Prenatal and Nurse Home Visitation Program established compelling findings about how an ongoing home visiting relationship can influence not just children’s life outcomes, but those of participating parents as well. In the 15 years after the birth of their first child, research has found that mothers in the program had fewer subsequent children, longer intervals between births, and 30 fewer months on welfare than those in the control group (Olds, Hill, & Rumsey, 1998).

Impact on Law Enforcement

In the Chicago Longitudinal Study, which measured the effects of a publicly-funded early childhood education effort administered through the Chicago School District’s Child Parent Center Program, research has found a 33% lower rate of juvenile arrest among participants and a 42% reduction



Brain Development in Very Young Children: Why the Early Years are Important

Children are born with roughly 100 billion neurons (ABC’s of Early Childhood). Few additional neurons will be produced for the rest of their lives. At birth, the connections between these neurons are tentative. As the child grows, experiences the world, and establishes relationships with others, these connections are modified and “hardwired.” Hardwiring connections are responsible for all of a child’s major cognitive and emotional functioning—including vision, hearing, language, social-emotional development, and movement. This process of both discarding and establishing connections in the brain occurs rapidly: By age three, roughly 85% of the brain’s core structure is formed (Bruner, Goldberg, & Kot, 1999).

Children’s early experiences have a profound influence on which connections are hardwired and which are discarded. Positive, enriching, and nurturing experiences—with other people and within the environment—support children’s optimal development. Access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate services—whether child care, early intervention, or home visiting—is a protective factor for very young children. These programs help promote early learning and development.

Other variables can negatively influence brain development. The prenatal period is a time of massive brain organization and development, as well as increased vulnerability to prenatal stress or trauma, and environmental teratogens (e.g., drugs or alcohol). Once born, babies remain sensitive to the impact of stress, trauma, and environmental factors. For example, numerous studies have shown the devastating effects on intelligence and brain development of a lack of basic nutrients in the prenatal period, in infancy, and in early childhood. Risk factors such as these influence the connections made (or not made) in the brain, with lifelong results.

The development of very young children is also profoundly influenced by their relationships with others. Nurturing relationships with parents and other important adults—close relatives, child

care staff, pediatricians, early intervention professionals, and home visitors—support children’s cognitive and social-emotional development, and promote healthy brain development. Research shows that warm, loving relationships (“attachments”) with caring adults have a tangible and long-term influence on children’s lives, contributing to optimal social, emotional, and cognitive development for infants and toddlers (Zeanah & Doyle Zeanah, 2001).

School Readiness: Supporting Learning and Development from Birth to Five

The goal of ensuring that all children are “ready for school” is an important national priority. Preparing children for school requires two equally important sets of skills—the social-emotional skills necessary to communicate, cooperate, and cope with challenges, and the cognitive skills that provide children with specific subject-based knowledge (e.g., letters and numbers). The foundation for both sets of skills lies in the first five years of life.

Cognitive development—which includes the development of literacy and numeracy skills—is a crucial part of being “school-ready.” The everyday activities and interactions that young children experience provide many rich opportunities for infusing learning into play; in short, normal experience supports normal brain development. Cognitive development is the natural product of warm and loving families, experienced and well-trained early childhood professionals, and enriching programs, services, and environments.

Babies and young children with special needs are no different, in that their cognitive development grows in the context of loving and supportive relationships and stimulating environments. They do, however, have some distinct and important needs. Receiving high quality intervention services early—services that are tailored to the specific needs of the child—have been shown to be more effective in producing desired developmental outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, Eds., 2000). And there are positive benefits for all children when babies and young children with special needs are enrolled in early learning programs with their typically-developing peers.

Getting Started:

There is much that local officials can do to support birth-to-five initiatives and communicate the critical importance of the early years. The suggestions below provide some ideas on how to get started.

To ensure quality services for children and families:

- ◆ Learn more about what services to infants, toddlers, and their families are currently available in your community.
- ◆ Connect with other localities through the National League of Cities or National Association of Counties to share best practices in early childhood programs and services.
- ◆ Establish a special task force to assess community needs, identify any gaps in services, and plan for the future.
- ◆ Look for creative ways to support early childhood programs and services, such as by blending funds or partnering with other stakeholders in the community.

To promote healthy development in the first five years:

- ◆ Work to improve the quality and availability of infant-toddler care in the community.

