



# 5 IDEAS FOR CHILDREN FIVE YEARS AND YOUNGER

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## Why Are States Interested in the Birth to Age 5 Years?

A child's experiences in the first five years build the critical foundation for future success in school and later life. It's a fact that children who enter kindergarten ready to meet the academic, social and emotional demands are more likely to become economically productive and engaged citizens. Likewise, the majority of children who begin school at risk often continue to struggle, and remediation of learning difficulties becomes increasingly challenging in later years.

More than half the achievement gap found between children from economically advantaged and disadvantaged families in later school years is already present when children first walk through the kindergarten classroom door. Indeed, the early years of life mark the greatest period of brain development in the lifespan. Strong relationships and enriching experiences during this period greatly increase the likelihood that children will be ready for formal learning opportunities and on the road to developing critical non-cognitive skills (e.g., perseverance, motivation).

If early experience is critical to academic success and productive adulthood, the public has a large stake in ensuring that children's first five years build a strong foundation for learning. What sorts of policies will ensure the best chances of a strong foundation? Presented below are five suggested areas of focus, why they're important, and state examples to illustrate what can be done.

### 5 Policy Options

- Ensure that the children to be served drive program decisions.
- Promote early learning and development in child care and preschool.
- Build the skills of teachers and caregivers.
- Support effective parenting.
- Strengthen birth-to-five infrastructure.

## 1 Ensure that the Children to Be Served Drive Program Decisions

**Why?** Certain children—for example, those who are in poverty or experiencing abuse and neglect—are at risk for poor developmental and educational outcomes. Many states currently are implementing a mix of strategies—such as prekindergarten, higher quality child care and parent support—aimed at improving child development and early learning for these children. As state lawmakers consider next steps in their efforts to give young children who are at risk a great start, they can assess whether programs are reaching the children at risk, identify gaps in eligibility and services, and direct policies and funding to fill those gaps.

**State Example.** Pennsylvania is mapping the location of the state’s at-risk children and the service availability in each county. By examining both where the children are and where funding for services is targeted, the state can better understand the effectiveness of its investments and precisely direct allocation of future funds. Factors used to analyze who is at risk include the number of low-income families with children, the percent of children who receive TANF funds, and the percent of third graders scoring below proficient in reading and math.

**Basic Considerations.** Determine the population to be served by the state’s early childhood development, child care and early learning strategies; many eligibility approaches are appropriate and, in some cases, universal services may be ideal. Once determined, consider how needs are addressed within the full developmental range, from pre-natal to kindergarten.

## Promote Early Learning and Development in Child Care and Preschool

**Why?** More than half of children age 2 or younger are in some form of non-parental care, and a full three-fourths of children under age 5 with working parents receive non-parental care. The full range of care settings—from neighbors’ homes to prekindergarten classrooms—provides opportunities to enhance development and learning. A National Institutes of Health longitudinal study found that children in higher quality care settings scored higher on fifth grade vocabulary tests than those in lower quality settings. In addition, a wealth of data indicates that quality prekindergarten results in higher student achievement, reduced grade retention, and other positive outcomes.



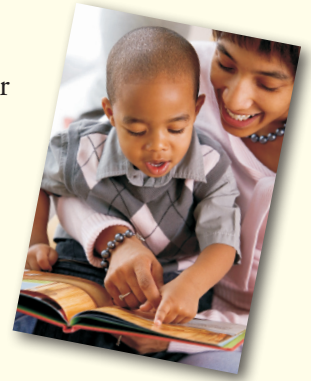
State policymakers can promote child development and early learning by creating state-specific standards based on current research concerning program quality, or by adopting existing standards such as those in Head Start and Early Head Start. High-quality standards exist in many state prekindergarten programs, including those in Alabama, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Tennessee, among others. States also could employ program quality rating systems (QRS) to promote strong learning environments for young children. Currently, these systems are in 16 states and are under consideration or implementation in 23 additional states.

**State Example.** In 2007, following a year-long pilot program in nine counties, Ohio implemented *Step Up To Quality*, a voluntary rating system for state-licensed programs that assesses three levels of quality above Ohio’s basic licensing standards. Rating benchmarks include caregiver-child ratios, staff education and qualifications, and early learning curriculum, among other items.

**Basic Considerations.** Implement high-quality standards that span multiple programs and funding streams. States that wish to create a quality rating system will need to address the following elements: Defined standards; accountability and monitoring measures; outreach and technical support for programs; incentives or support for programs that are meeting higher standards; and parent education and outreach.

## Build the Skills of Teachers and Caregivers

**Why?** Caregivers and teachers are a major influence on a child's development. Provider education levels correlate with program quality; stronger learning experiences and more responsive teacher-child interactions are found with preschool teachers who have bachelor's degrees and training in early childhood. Professional development and higher wages also lower teacher and caregiver turnover rates. At least 20 states require a bachelor's degree for state-funded prekindergarten programs and a handful have similar requirements for child care settings. Education and training standards for all care settings can be promoted through scholarships, professional development opportunities and career wage ladders.



**State Example.** North Carolina has long been a leader in strategies to encourage skill building. Birth through Kindergarten (B-K) licensure is required for teaching in the state's More at Four prekindergarten program, and many options are available to complete the licensure process. A 2007 pilot program was introduced to allow teachers who work in nonpublic schools to complete a lateral entry teacher program and the beginning teacher support program concurrently. The state's child care providers also can receive scholarships to cover expenses such as tuition and books for either bachelor's degrees or Infant-Toddler Certification through the T.E.A.C.H. program. Twenty-two states now provide T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to child care providers. The Child Care WAGES program, which began in North Carolina and has now expanded to three additional states, supplements salaries in the field, based on increased training and education.

**Basic Considerations.** Explore skill building and compensation for all settings (e.g., family child care), evaluate capacity of higher education and various training locales and opportunities (e.g., teacher mentors), align elements of early childhood curriculum standards, provider credentialing, and education and professional development curricula.

## Support Effective Parenting

**Why?** Parents have the most significant influence on a child's later life success. Learning begins well before formal schooling and the living room, not the classroom, marks the start of a child's educational journey. Quality home visiting programs and other supports give parents tools they can use to promote their child's healthy development and early learning. Some programs show a net return on investment of more than \$15,000 per family through decreased use of the child welfare system and other public benefits.

**State Example.** Virginia's new Smart Beginnings initiative uses public and private matching funds to award community grants focused on parent support and education, among other goals. In 2007, grants to communities included coordinating systems of services between schools and home visiting programs; focusing family supports in the most challenged school districts; providing an increased range of parent meetings and workshops; and collaborating with pediatricians to promote programs such as Reach Out and Read.

**Basic Considerations.** Evaluate the efficacy of current home visiting and family support programs; explore service coordination across departments and through the continuum of development (e.g., prenatal to preschool); reserve funds for monitoring and program evaluation; and evaluate all possible points of access with families to ensure that those who need the most support are aware of services.

## Strengthen Birth-to-Five Infrastructure

**Why?** A strong infrastructure is necessary to achieve quality and produce and maintain gains in child development. Important infrastructure elements include higher education curriculum and articulation to support training and credentialing providers; compensation for qualified teachers and caregivers; service coordination; program monitoring and evaluation; financing decisions; and data systems to track progress and results. By focusing on infrastructure, the state can ensure efficiency across programs and meet goals for service delivery and quality.

**State Example.** In 2007, Washington enacted legislation requiring the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges to inventory and survey all campus-based early learning programs and services. The findings will be used to create a coordinated system of course offerings and early learning education opportunities. The State Board and Department of Early Learning also will collaborate on articulation standards for early childhood development course work and training.



**Basic Considerations.** Understand the state barriers to implementation of quality early childhood and early learning programs. Often, these barriers reveal infrastructure weaknesses. Where possible, implement strategies that supersede a single program and instead support multiple programs.

## Conclusion

States can choose from a myriad of options to support young children's development and early learning. The five ideas presented focus on key spheres of influence for children's early experiences—parents and families, caregivers and teachers, and early care and education settings. These spheres also are supported by infrastructure, which in large part determines the capacity of the state to meet its goals for children birth through five years.

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