



Right From the Start

What Should We Do To Help Our
Youngest Children Thrive?

An Issue Guide for Community Dialogue

..... Welcome to the Discussion

This issue guide was designed for people who are concerned about the development of our youngest children, as well as its ripple effects on our communities and nation. The guide focuses on the first four years, before most children begin their formal education. We'll examine what can and should be done to help them grow during this critical time and start school ready to learn.



During the forum, we'll work together to:

- Better understand the various factors that shape the development of very young children.
- Consider different perspectives on how we can ensure healthy development and school readiness.
- Make choices together about the best options for moving forward.
- Identify actions that are likely to make a positive difference and are doable in terms of time, resources, and public will.
- Examine the roles of families, schools, businesses, and community and faith-based organizations in supporting early childhood development.
- Explore potential actions and next steps.

This work is the result of a research exchange with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Any interpretations and conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, its staff, its directors, or its officers. Kettering research is done from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do about issues that concern them.

A national team of people from the following institutions and organizations participated in the research and framing of the guide, and conducted interviews, surveys and focus groups with diverse people in their communities to capture different perspectives on the issue.

Center for Civic Life at Ashland University (Ohio)
Central Michigan University, Citizen Engagement and Public Service Division
Colorado State University, Center for Public Deliberation
Gulf Coast State College, Civic Engagement Program and Social Sciences Division (Florida)
Indiana University, Political and Civic Engagement Program
Kansas State University, Institute for Civil Discourse and Democracy
League of Women Voters of Pahrump County, Nevada
Maricopa Community Colleges, Center for Civic Participation (Arizona)
Portland Community College (Oregon)
St. Edward's University, Center for Ethics and Leadership, and New College (Texas)
Tulane University, Center for Public Service, Dialogue Collaborative (Louisiana)
University of Illinois at Chicago, Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement
Utah Valley University, Utah Center for Public Deliberation
West Virginia Center for Civic Life



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The most critical time in a child's life is the first four years. Brain development in infants and toddlers is more rapid and far-reaching than at any other time. A child's experiences during these early years have lasting effects on their ability to learn, interact and succeed. Yet our youngest children are largely an "invisible population" in terms of public attention and priorities. By the time they enter school and the public's eye, many have fallen far behind – physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally.

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From this perspective, we all have a stake in – and responsibility for – how children develop during their earliest years. The rapid growth of body and mind during this period sets the stage for later success in school and adult life. We must, as individuals and as a society, invest the time and resources necessary for high-quality early care and education in order to protect our collective future.

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From this perspective, parents are the first and most important caregivers in their children's lives. Nothing affects early development more than the bond between parent and child. We must respect the role of parents to raise their children in accordance with their values and beliefs and encourage the kind of natural support provided by their personal networks of other parents, relatives and friends.

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From this perspective, reducing inequality is essential to helping young children develop their full potential. Social, economic, and racial disparities undermine healthy development and cause many children to enter school unprepared to learn. While remedial programs help, the best way to help all young children succeed is to ensure equal opportunity for their families in education, jobs, housing and public life.

Think. Talk. Reflect. Act.

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After considering different perspectives, what insights did we gain about the issue? Where do we have common ground for action? Which actions will make the most difference, now and in the future? What steps are the most doable in terms of time, resources and public will?

Introduction

**“Even though you can’t see or hear them at all,
a person’s a person, no matter how small.”**

— Dr. Seuss

This was the conclusion of Horton the Elephant after discovering a microscopic community of Whos living on a speck of dust, as told by Dr. Seuss in *Horton Hears a Who*. He agrees to protect them, but is persecuted by fellow jungle animals for hearing things that none of them can hear or see. In the end, all the Whos come together to make enough noise to be heard. Convinced then that Horton was right all along, his neighbors agree to help him protect the tiny Whos.

This guide was developed to give voice to the issues facing our youngest children. Sometimes called an “invisible population,” we tend to view children from birth to age four as the responsibility of their parents. They exist under the radar for the most part in terms of public attention and priorities. By the time they enter school and the public’s eye, many have fallen far behind physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

The guide is based on interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted with a variety of people in a dozen states, coupled with what the latest research says about early child development. It provides an overview of key concerns from a public perspective and three options for how we might address these concerns.

The guide is a starting point only. Additional concerns and ideas for action will surface as we deliberate about the issue. We invite people to consider different perspectives and to wrestle with the trade-offs of potential actions. Our ultimate goal is to discover areas of common ground for moving forward.

Early Brain Development: A Critical Window

“Our society and school systems actually have it backwards,” said a man from Ohio. “We should be supporting education from birth to five even more than the other years because it occurs during a critical window for brain development, one that sets the stage for the remainder of childhood and adult life.”



Brain development in infants and toddlers is more rapid and far-reaching than at any other time. The plasticity of a baby’s brain makes it highly susceptible to the effects of environments, experiences, and relationships. Positive experiences, such as nurturing caregivers, good nutrition, and engaging toys, contribute to healthy brain development.

On the other hand, negative early experiences, such as hunger, trauma, and neglect, interfere with the developing brain. These events trigger high levels of stress and anxiety that can disrupt normal brain development, according to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The developmental damage caused by these early experiences affects children’s health, school performance, and relationships. As adults, ACE victims have higher rates of chronic diseases, mental illness, substance abuse, job problems and premature death.

To make matters worse, our youngest children are the ones at greatest risk for abuse and neglect. Nearly 700,000 children were abused or neglected in 2010, according to state child protective services reports compiled by the US Department of Health and Human Services. The highest rate of maltreatment was among children under one year old. Deaths of children under age four constituted nearly 80 percent of all child fatalities due to abuse and neglect.

Another source of trauma that impacts early childhood development is the absence of parents for extended periods of time, such as some single-parent homes, military families, and families with a parent in prison.

“When one or both parents are serving in Afghanistan, who cares for the small child?” was a concern raised by two grandparents in Florida. There are 1.76 million children living in military families, according to a 2010 report published by the National Center on Children in Poverty. Nearly a half million of them are children under the age of six, and most have had a parent deployed for some period of time.

More and longer prison terms present another type of loss for young children. The incarceration rate in the United States has quadrupled since 1980 and is now the highest in the world. About 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars, according to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center’s Economic Mobility Project. Two-thirds of these children’s parents were incarcerated for nonviolent offenses.

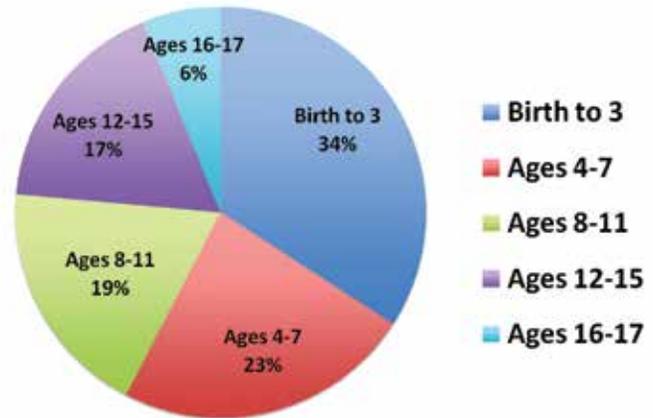
Young Families: More Work, Less Time, Growing Disparities

“As a society we have to let go of the 1950s-style model of the American family, where mothers can afford to stay home and care for children,” said a woman from Texas. “We have to acknowledge today’s economic realities and shifting gender roles.”

The television show *Father Knows Best* stands out as an example of the 1950s idealization of the American family as white and middle-class, with a stay-at-home mother and problems that could be resolved in each 30-minute episode. Though unrealistic even at the time, the show and others like it created a subconscious standard that permeated the post-World War II culture.

Today, the true face of American families is much more complex. We are a more diverse nation, racially and culturally. Women have entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. And television shows today include families with single parents, stepparents, same-sex parents, foster parents and grandparents raising grandchildren.

Figure 1
One-third of all abused children are under age 4



Source: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Child Maltreatment 2010

Figure 2
More working mothers and single parents

Family structure and employment (families with children under age 18)	1975	2008
Married, with only father working	44.70%	20.70%
Married, both parents working	31.10%	43.50%
Married, only mother working	3.00%	3.80%
Married, both parents unemployed	5.10%	2.10%
Total families with married parents	83.90%	70.10%
Single parent, employed	8.80%	22.10%
Single parent, unemployed	7.30%	7.80%
Total families with single parents	16.10%	29.90%
TOTAL	100.00%	100.00%

Source: US Bureau for Labor Statistics, cited in *The Shriver Report* (2008), by Maria Shriver and the Center for American Progress

Having enough time is a common concern across all types of families. Nearly two-thirds of children under the age of six live in households where both or single parents are employed. Parents today have less time with their infants and toddlers, and the quality of that time is compromised by the stress that comes with juggling the demands of work and caregiving. Having capable and reliable childcare is high on their list of concerns.

“We depend on child care for our one-year-old son while my husband and I work,” said a mother from West Virginia. “Our community lost a quality childcare center in the past year, which has had a profound effect on our family. Having a consistent caregiver for my son allows him to build a bond with that person of trust and security when he is in their

care. Having trained staff in appropriate child development is also a huge concern for me."

The cost of child care is another big concern for working families, according to Child Care Aware of America. This is especially true for infant and toddler care, where higher staff-to-child ratios result in higher costs. In 2011, the average annual cost of center-based infant care exceeded 10 percent of the state's median income for a two-parent family in 40 states and exceeded annual median rent payments in 22 states.

Even with more mothers working, high child poverty rates persist. We've done a remarkable job of reducing poverty among our elders through programs like Social Security and Medicare. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for our youngest children, who are now the poorest Americans of all. In 2010, one in four children under age six lived below the federal poverty level, compared to one in five school-age children and one in almost seven adults.

"With growing poverty among children, more and more of them are faced with multiple risks to their development," said a woman from Ohio. "Many don't even have access to proper nutrition, let alone an enriched environment in which to develop. The result is an embarrassing gap between the development of low-income children compared to their higher income peers."

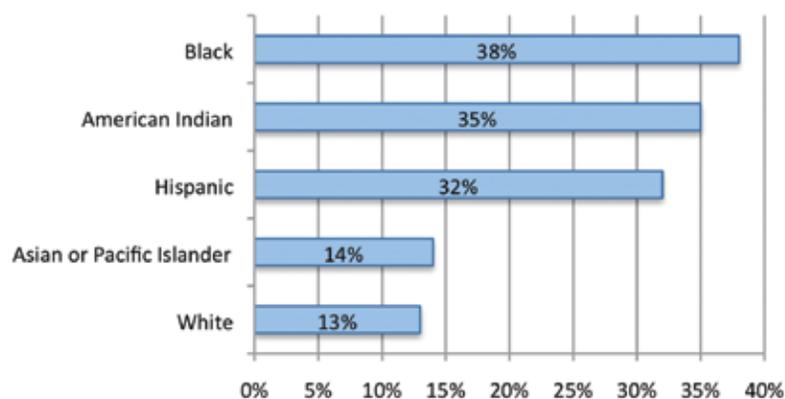
Children of color fare worse economically than white children. Nationally, the poverty rate for black children is nearly triple the rate for white children.

"I think economic inequality is a huge problem and an area that seems to be getting worse rather than better," said a man from Texas. "The kind of world in which kids grow up matters deeply to what kind of people they'll become. Will they have a basic sense that the world is a fair place? Will they have confidence that their parents will be able to support them, or will that confidence be undermined by economic insecurity?"

Communities: An Extended Family, for Better or for Worse

"Won't you be my neighbor?" Fred Rogers sang at the beginning of each episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The television show for young

Figure 3
Young children of color have highest poverty rates



■ Percent of children under 6 years old living in poverty, 2010

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center

children aired for more than 30 years on public television (until 2001). One regular feature was a puppet segment from the imaginary "Neighborhood of Make-Believe," but Rogers also talked to his young audience about real-life issues, like dealing with anger in constructive ways, always reinforcing the importance of relationships and community.

"Communities are the extended family," said a woman from West Virginia. "They're a key part of the child's environment. The things children see and hear around them – whether it be people who drink, use drugs, work or are unemployed – are all things that children start relating to at a young age and shape the activities they engage in as they grow older."

While many young parents would prefer a Mister Rogers's neighborhood for their children, this is far from the actual experience of most families. For some, the community is a dangerous place for residents of all ages.

"I'm concerned about the culture of violence in my city," said a woman from Louisiana. "So many very young children witness violence and/or are victims of it themselves."

The effects of neighborhood conditions on child development are complex and not fully understood from a research perspective, according to the Institute of Medicine, in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. But the authors conclude that "for children living in dangerous environments, neighborhood conditions may matter a great deal.

Such neighborhood conditions as crime, violence, and environmental health hazards constitute potent risk factors for children."

Early Education and Society: Dollars and Sense

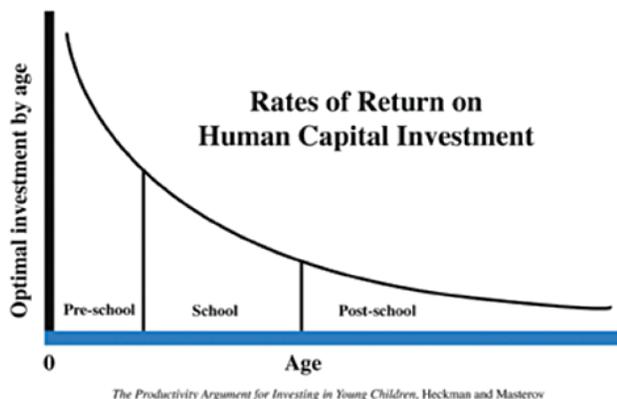
"We can pay now or pay a lot more later," said a woman from Ohio. "It costs money to provide quality early learning. We have to invest now to realize the long-term payback. Sometimes we're impatient and want short-term results only."

For many years, programs have been available to specific groups of young children who meet certain eligibility criteria. For example, early intervention programs for infants and toddlers with developmental delays are offered in every state under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Head Start programs for three- and four-year-olds are also funded by the federal government and have been expanded in some areas to include Early Head Start for infants, toddlers and pregnant women.

Substantial progress has been made in recent years to expand public pre-kindergarten programs for all young children, without special eligibility requirements.

"Pre-k is available to more than one million children today, driven by program growth in many states," according to a report from the Pew Center on the States. "By 2010, 21 states and the District of Columbia at least doubled their enrollment of three and/or four-year-olds, and an additional three states offered pre-k for the first time."

Figure 4
Highest rates of return are for investments in infants and toddlers



While most early childhood experts are encouraged by the pre-k movement, many believe that waiting until age three or four is too late if we want to have the greatest impact on child development. Nobel-winning economist James Heckman agrees. His research found that the highest rates of return on investments in education were those made in programs for infants and toddlers.

How Can We Give the Best Start to Our Youngest Children?

To start the deliberation, this guide poses three options for giving young children a good start, with potential actions and trade-offs for each. While not mutually exclusive, each represents a distinct perspective and different underlying values. The goal is not to choose one option, but to weigh the advantages and drawbacks of each and consider other possibilities as well.

OPTION 1
Share the responsibility for early child development

OPTION 2
Uphold the rights and responsibilities of families

OPTION 3
Ensure equal opportunity so that all children thrive

Many of us will see at least some value in each of the options. The challenge lies in coming to agreement on priorities and being willing to act upon them. This forum is the beginning of that process. We hope it leads to further discussions involving wider circles of people who are concerned about the development and well-being of our youngest children.

Option 1

Share the responsibility for early child development



“In childcare, if you can afford to be home and provide that child with great early care, you do. If not, it’s your problem. Unfortunately, the individualist argument breaks down when, years from now, the same kids who didn’t have these opportunities struggle in school, don’t vote, or end up unemployed or in prison. This hurts us collectively and ends up costing far more.” — A woman in Texas

From this perspective, we all have a stake in — and responsibility for — how children develop during their earliest years. The rapid growth of body and mind during this period sets the stage for later success in school and adult life. We must, as individuals and as a society, invest the time and resources necessary for high-quality early care and education in order to protect our collective future.

This option emphasizes the importance of early childhood programs — from childcare for working families to libraries with special programs for infants and toddlers and their parents. It encourages businesses, civic organizations, and faith-based groups to pay closer attention and be more responsive to the needs of families with young children. It asks and sometimes requires individuals to report suspected child maltreatment to local child protective services agencies.

1. **Adopt and enforce higher standards for childcare for infants and toddlers.** Rate and publicize the quality of child-care programs, and encourage parents to use the information to make wise choices for their children. For example, the child-care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is used by 18 state governments to assess and publicize the quality of childcare programs (<http://qrisnetwork.org/>).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that higher standards would require more public subsidies to enable families to purchase quality care and could result in more standardization and less individualization of care.

2. **Expand parenting education and support programs, including family planning, prenatal care, health care, nutrition, and activities that promote child development.** For example, early childhood home visiting programs provide voluntary, in-home services to families and connect them to resources that support prenatal, infant, and toddler development (<http://mchb.hrsa.gov/programs/homevisiting/>).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that professionalizing services for infants and toddlers could further erode the natural support that parents traditionally received from extended families.

3. **Require libraries, parks and other public facilities to be inclusive of infants and toddlers.** For example, the Family Place Libraries network includes more than 300 sites in 23 states. These are libraries that have redesigned their environments to be welcoming and appropriate for children beginning at birth, connect

parents with the resources offered at the library and other agencies, and reach out to nontraditional library users (www.familyplacelibraries.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that creating special areas and activities for infants and toddlers might reduce or limit opportunities for older children using those facilities.

- 4. Require businesses that are open to the public to provide accommodations for families with infants and toddlers, including lactation stations, stroller-accessibility, and family restrooms with changing tables.** For example, the US Breastfeeding Coalition works to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding and has an online directory of breastfeeding coalitions in every state (www.usbreastfeeding.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that, in some cases, these accommodations could mean a significant investment that would benefit a small number of people.

- 5. Expect everyone to play a more active role in preventing and reporting child abuse and neglect, especially among infants and toddlers, who are at greater risk for maltreatment than any other age group.** For example, Prevent Child Abuse America has chapters in 47 states that engage people in local initiatives and advocate for public policies that prevent child maltreatment (www.preventchildabuse.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that we have to be willing to report our concerns, even about people we know, and place our commitment to infant and toddler safety above our respect for family privacy.

Questions for Deliberation

What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

What are some examples of this option in your own community and state?

What should we do about sharing more of the responsibility for young children?



Concerns About this Option

Some people feel that this option further erodes the time-honored tradition of families taking care of their own and relying on parents to do what's best for their children. It would be better, they say, to provide extra support to families with special needs, rather than run the risk of overreaching the public sector's role.

Option 2

Uphold the rights and responsibilities of families



“We couldn’t take our healthy baby home from the hospital until we waited another day for a second pediatrician to release him. We were threatened that to refuse to comply would result in the loss of our insurance coverage for the birth. There was no room for informed choice, and we couldn’t speak directly to the doctor about it until the next day. We felt that the baby was a hostage of someone else’s agenda, and that it affected the cost of our care.”

— A mother in Indiana

From this perspective, parents are the first and most important caregivers in their children’s lives. Nothing affects early development more than the bond between parent and child. We must respect the role of parents to raise their children in accordance with their values and beliefs and encourage the natural support provided by their personal networks of other parents, relatives and friends.

This option calls on government, employers, and communities to respect the independence of families and make accommodations that enable parents to better meet the needs of their young children. While nearly all families rely on professional services from time to time, those services should take great care to not undermine parental rights and responsibilities.

- 1. Respect parents as the decision makers for their young children in all matters, and arm them with the information they need to make wise choices.** For example, the national organization ZERO TO THREE offers an online, interactive learning tool to help parents encourage their children’s learning during the first three years (www.zerotothree.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that even with good information about early development, some parents may still make poor decisions about raising their children.

- 2. Promote flexible workplace policies that enable parents to be responsive to their young children’s needs, including policies related to hours and location of work, sick days and family leave.** For example, the Family and Work Institute publishes a “Guide to Bold New Ideas for Making Work,” which features innovative ideas from the annual winners of the Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility (www.familiesandwork.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that providing special accommodations for one set of employees – parents with young children, in this case – may disrupt the work of other employees and interfere with business operations.

- 3. Protect the legal and human rights of families, including the growing number of nontraditional families, such as same-sex parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, and parents living apart from their children.** For example, the American Civil Liberties Union supports advocacy efforts at state and national levels for lesbian,

gay, bisexual, and transgender people to have equal rights and opportunities regarding parenting (www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights/lgbt-parenting).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is the rights of parents could trump the well-being of children.

- 4. Strengthen parent-to-parent support for families with infants and toddlers through playgroups, parent support groups and social media.** For example, Circle of Parents is a national network of parent-led self-help groups, where parents and caregivers share ideas, celebrate successes and address the challenges surrounding parenting (www.circleofparents.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that advice from other parents may at times conflict with advice from early childhood professionals.

- 5. Engage families in advocacy efforts to improve the policies and programs that affect their lives.** For example, Partners in Policymaking teaches parents of young children with disabilities the power of advocacy to change the way people with disabilities are supported, viewed, taught, live and work. The program was developed by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities and has been used by programs nationally and internationally, with 23,000 graduates since 1987 (<http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/>).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that most families with infants and toddlers are already pressed for time, and this would take more time away from their children.



Concerns About this Option

Some people are concerned that this option underestimates the serious problems that prevent many people from being good parents, such as immaturity, addictions and violent behavior. Some also say it overestimates the capacity of relatives, friends and neighbors to help out. Much more needs to be done to protect the rights and safety of children, especially very young children who can't speak for themselves.

Questions for Deliberation

What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

What are some examples of this option in your own community and state?

What should we do to strengthen and uphold the rights and responsibilities of families?

Option 3

Ensure equal opportunity so all children thrive



“Children grow up in different worlds, depending on their economic, educational, and life opportunities and context. You can’t pull yourself up by your bootstraps if you don’t have any bootstraps to pull.” — A man in Louisiana

From this perspective, reducing inequality is essential to helping young children develop their full potential. Social, economic and racial disparities undermine healthy development and cause many children to enter school unprepared to learn. While remedial programs help, the best way to help all young children succeed is to ensure equal opportunity for their families in education, jobs, housing and public life.

This option calls for leveling the playing field in early child development by improving the circumstances of disadvantaged families. The potential actions involve changing tax policies to raise the incomes of poor families, improving access to affordable housing and healthy food, training people for jobs that support a family, and ensuring equal opportunity in education and employment.

1. Reduce child poverty by increasing tax credits and public subsidies for food, health care and child care for low-wage workers. For example, 23 states and the District of Columbia have created earned income tax credits (EITCs) to reduce state taxes on low- and moderate-income working families (www.cbpp.org/files/policybasics-seitc.pdf).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that additional tax credits and public spending will worsen the current budget woes of state and federal governments.

2. Prepare people for jobs that support a family by creating more opportunities for vocational training and higher education. For example, the Early College High School Initiative has helped partner organizations start or redesign more than 240 schools in 28 states, where students attend local community colleges and earn college credits while finishing high school (www.earlycolleges.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that students may feel pressured to commit to a career or vocational path before they’re ready.

3. Improve child nutrition and development through better access to healthy food and physical activity, especially in rural and low-income areas. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provided grants to 50 communities across the country to reduce child and adult obesity by “making the healthy choice the easy choice,” such as improving playgrounds and replacing the candy in grocery store checkout aisles with healthy snacks (<http://www.cdc.gov/communitiesputtingpreventiontowork/>).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that adults will also have to make healthy choices in order to be good role models for children.

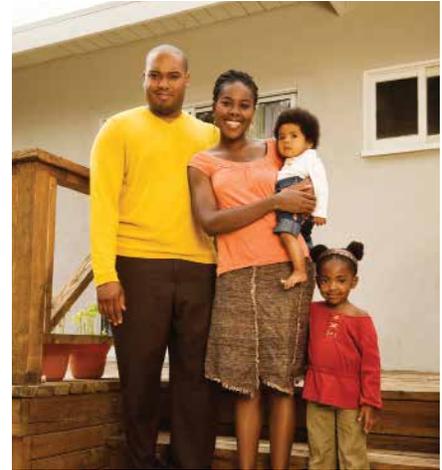
4. Expand access to safe and affordable housing by helping low- and moderate-income families purchase and repair their own homes.

For example, Habitat for Humanity, with affiliates in every state, works with volunteers and families to build, repair, and advocate for affordable housing (www.habitat.org).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that mortgage payments and the time required to keep up a home may compete with other demands on families with infants and toddlers.

5. Expand efforts to reduce discrimination in education and employment through mentorship, training, leadership and recognition of achievement. For example, the National Restaurant Association and PepsiCo Foodservice created the annual Faces of Diversity awards to promote the importance of diversity and inclusion (www.restaurant.org/sustainability/diversity).

A potential trade-off to consider with this action is that relying on voluntary efforts means that some businesses will continue to favor certain demographic groups, consciously or not.



Concerns About this Option

Some people say that while working for equality is a laudable long-term goal, what disadvantaged infants and toddlers need most are programs that address their developmental needs today so they don't fall further behind. Highly focused efforts that help our most vulnerable children catch up with their peers will yield the greatest results and enable them to compete and thrive as adults.

Questions for Deliberation

What are the advantages and drawbacks of this option?

What are some examples of this option in your own community and state?

What should we do to ensure equal opportunity so all young children thrive?

Think. Talk. Reflect. Act.

The most critical time in a child's life is the first four years. Development during these early years has lasting effects on a child's ability to learn, interact and succeed. Yet our youngest children are largely an "invisible population" in terms of public attention and priorities. By the time they enter school and the public's eye, many have fallen far behind – physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally.

During the dialogue, we considered different perspectives on how to give the best start to our youngest children. Our task now is to reflect on our discussion and to weigh the advantages and drawbacks of the three options, as well as others that were proposed during our deliberations.

Reflections on the discussion

- **What new information or insights did you gain?**
- **What actions are we most willing to support, and why?**
- **What actions are we least willing to support, and why?**
- **What tough choices do we still need to grapple with?**

Moving to Action

What are the opportunities for action that emerged from this forum? (See back cover for additional questions.)

OPTION 1

Share the responsibility for early child development



Those in favor of this option point to many successful programs as models that should be adopted elsewhere.

They believe we can:

- Adopt and enforce higher standards for childcare for infants and toddlers.
- Expand early childhood programs.
- Make libraries and parks more inclusive of infants and toddlers.
- Require public facilities to provide more accommodations for families with young children.
- Promote programs that prevent child abuse.

But, some people are concerned that this option further erodes family privacy and the time-honored tradition of families taking care of their own. Instead, we should provide extra support to families with special needs, rather than run the risk of overreaching the public sector's role.

- Are we willing to adopt more government oversight for higher standards for childcare?
- Does professionalizing services for infants and toddlers further erode the natural support from extended families?
- What should we do about sharing more of the responsibility for young children?

OPTION 2

Uphold the rights and responsibilities of families



Those in favor of this option believe parenting needs to be back in the hands of the family.

They believe we can:

- Inform parents of the tools available to aid in their child's development.
- Adopt more flexible workplace policies.
- Protect and expand the legal and human rights of families, including nontraditional families.
- Strengthen parent-to-parent support.
- Increase parent-led advocacy for policies and programs.

But, some people are concerned that this option underestimates the serious problems that prevent many people from being good parents. Much more needs to be done to protect the rights and safety of children, especially very young children who can't speak for themselves.

- While access to information is important, how much is too much, and how will parents know which sources to trust?
- Given how stretched small business owners are, is it fair to ask them to adopt more flexible work policies?
- What should we do about upholding the rights and responsibilities of families?

OPTION 3

Ensure equal opportunity so that all children thrive



Those in favor of this option believe we need to focus on creating a level playing field for families.

They believe we can:

- Reduce child poverty by increasing tax credits and public subsidies for food and child care to low-wage workers.
- Expand programs for at-risk teens to earn college credits during high school.
- Improve access to affordable and healthy food and physical activity.
- Expand efforts to reduce discrimination in education and employment.
- Expand access to safe and affordable housing.

But, some people are concerned that what disadvantaged infants and toddlers need most are programs to address their developmental need today, not long-term programs for tomorrow.

- Would this broad focus on equal opportunity divert attention from specific programs for young children? Or, simply take too long?
- Do we have the political will to change current tax credits and secure additional public subsidies?
- What should we do about ensuring equal opportunity so all young children thrive?

Think. Talk. Reflect. Act.

Most people who participate in community dialogues want to do more than talk about the problem; they also want to consider actions that will improve the situation. What are the opportunities for action that emerged from this forum?

What can we do?

- What can we each do personally to support early childhood development, particularly for babies and toddlers?
- What can our communities do about the issue?
- What policies – local, state or national – should be created or changed?

Where should we start?

- What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?
- What actions are the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What will be our next steps?