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High-quality early care and education improves child safety and well-being

Early Childhood Education and Child Welfare Policy Brief



“High-quality ECE programs are a powerful strategy to improve child safety and well-being.”



High-quality early care and education (ECE) programs create safe, stable environments that protect children from harm and sets them on a path toward healthier, more successful lives, demonstrating many **benefits for children involved with the child welfare system**. Because nearly 40% of children reported as victims of maltreatment are under age 5 and experiencing trauma during these early years can be **especially damaging**, **high-quality ECE programs are a powerful strategy to improve child safety and well-being**.

Despite these positive results, ECE programs currently are underused by children involved with the child welfare system. For example, children in foster care are automatically eligible for Early Head Start, which serves children ages 0-2, but just over 9% were enrolled in 2022.^{1,2}

The COVID-19 pandemic also dramatically impacted access to high-quality ECE in recent years, especially for low-income families.³ Even after shuttered early childhood centers reopened, ECE enrollment in programs like Head Start and Early Head Start yet to reach pre-pandemic levels.⁴ Reengaging families in ECE and improving access to high-quality programs among involved in the child welfare system could benefit a large number of children and families.

ECE benefits children and families

High-quality ECE makes a difference in the lives of young children and their families while they are in care and beyond. ECE programs **lay the foundation for children to become successful adults**, especially among the most vulnerable.

In particular, ECE helps:

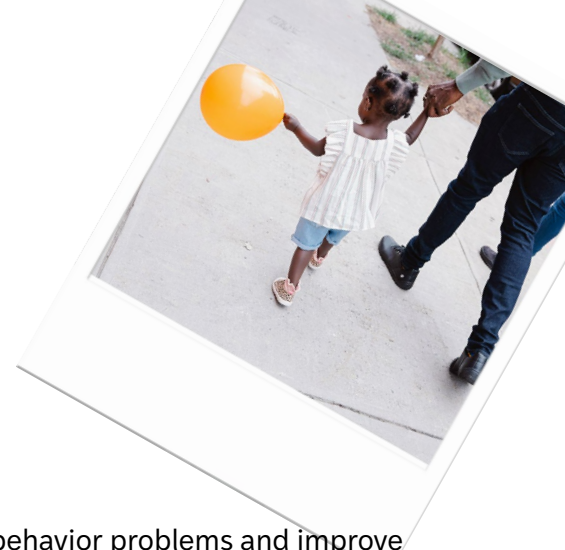
- Reduce parental stress by providing needed breaks.
- Inform parents about normal child development and behaviors.
- Increase family involvement in children’s education.
- Provide parents with models of appropriate and effective disciplinary approaches for children.
- Connect families to the supports they need.

ECE REDUCES CHILD MALTREATMENT AND FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

Children who participate in ECE have fewer reports of child maltreatment and a lower likelihood of removal from the home.⁵ Children in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers preschool program were half as likely to experience maltreatment as children in the comparison group by age 17 (5% versus 10.5%).⁶ These children’s parents were more involved in their education, which may have improved parent attitudes and behaviors and parent-child relationships.⁷

Research has also shown that **children in Early Head Start or Head Start were 93% less likely to enter foster care**, compared to children who received no ECE.⁸ Children who received ECE from a non-Head Start early childhood education center, a family, friend, or relative, or another type of provider also did not experience the decrease in out-of-home placement rates experienced by those who attended Head Start.⁸

“Infants and toddlers enrolled in Early Head Start had better cognitive, language, and social-emotional development at age three than members of a control group.”



ECE HELPS PREVENT POVERTY-RELATED CONDITIONS THAT COULD BE SEEN AS NEGLECT

Three-quarters of child welfare reports involve allegations of neglect.⁹ **Inability to provide basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter can often be interpreted as child neglect**, even if the parents are not intentionally neglecting their children. ECE programs provide meals, clothing, and basic supplies for children and help connect parents to additional services, which can help alleviate financial burdens on families.

ECE PREPARES CHILDREN FOR KINDERGARTEN AND BEYOND

High-quality ECE programs improve academic and social skills for all children, especially those in the child welfare system.¹⁰ The benefits for children involved with the welfare system may be different than other young children. For example, attending a childcare center rather than an in-home daycare

seemed to lower behavior problems and improve social skills for children in the welfare system.¹⁰ Other studies have also found that while all children benefit from high-quality ECE, children from families with low incomes may have even larger benefits.¹¹

Although many studies focus on the benefits of preschool for child and family success, **ECE is also beneficial for younger children** who are rapidly growing and developing.¹² Babies’ brains make more than a million neural connections each second—faster than at any other age---and by age three their brains are 80% developed.¹³ Infants and toddlers enrolled in Early Head Start had better cognitive, language, and social-emotional development at age three than members of a control group.¹⁴ Parents of Early Head Start children were more likely to read to their children daily and were more responsive and encouraging.

ECE BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN BY KINDERGARTEN	ECE BENEFITS THROUGHOUT K-12 AND INTO ADULTHOOD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased school readiness^{11,15,16} • Better social-emotional development¹¹ • Better health, including healthier weight and improved eating habits¹⁷ • Improved access to diagnostic screenings and treatment, especially for vision, hearing, or asthma needs.¹⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better cognitive and social-emotional functioning compared to children who did not attend pre-kindergarten or other center-based child care¹⁹ • Better physical health, lower stress levels, and lower rates of substance use as adults^{20,21} • Lower usage of special education services²² • Higher math scores, lower rates of absenteeism, and a lower risk of repeating a grade in middle school¹⁶ • Increased high school graduation rates^{11,22}

“ECE participants’ higher earnings later in life reduce poverty rates and boost income tax revenue.”



ECE participation benefits children long after they leave the program. Adults who attended Head Start as children were more likely to attend college and earn a degree, be employed, own their own home, have higher lifetime earnings, and have committed fewer crimes.^{11,16,23,24} These outcomes are critical to help break the cycle of poverty—in which children who grew up poor remain poor into adulthood—that is at the root of many low-income families’ interactions with the child welfare system.

ECE IMPROVES FAMILY WELL-BEING

Programs like Head Start and Early Head Start address poverty and improve child and family well-being by supporting the families along with their children. This approach includes five key components:

- Bolstering families’ post-secondary education and employment opportunities
- Ensuring families are involved in early childhood education and development
- Increasing families’ economic assets
- Improving the health and well-being of children and their families
- Building family and peer networks

Family engagement improves outcomes for children. Parents who were more involved in their children’s Head Start programs decreased their use of spanking, decreased controlling behaviors toward their child, and increased their use of cognitively stimulating activities (such as telling a story to a child).²⁵ Children whose parents changed their behaviors in these ways had greater gains in academic outcomes.²⁵

ECE programs that engage families also benefit parents. Parents whose children attend Head Start are more likely to further their own education compared to parents whose children do not attend.²⁶

ECE PROGRAMS HAVE LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON FAMILY GENERATIONS

Early childhood education also has long-term benefits for the next generation. Adults who participate in high-quality ECE as children demonstrate greater use of positive parenting practices, including spending more time reading to their children and teaching them the alphabet, numbers, shapes, and colors. Their children also are more likely to complete high school and enroll in college, and are less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system or become teen parents.²⁷

ECE IS A GOOD INVESTMENT

Involvement with the child welfare system is costly—from providing for children’s medical needs to covering foster care placement costs to paying for caseworkers. Participation in high-quality ECE can help reduce those costs by decreasing child welfare usage and improving long-term outcomes for children and their families. **Participation in high-quality ECE offers a \$12.90 return on investment per \$1 invested.**^{29,30} ECE participation also reduces spending on special education, welfare, the criminal justice system, and healthcare.

ECE participants’ higher earnings later in life reduce poverty rates and boost income tax revenue.^{28,29}

“Participation in high-quality ECE offers a \$12.90 return on investment per \$1 invested.”



According to Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman, **earlier investment can lead to even greater returns.**¹² It is estimated that attending a full-day pre-kindergarten program for one year can increase lifetime earnings by 10%, while attending a more intensive program from birth through age 5 can increase lifetime earnings by 25%.³⁰

Quality matters

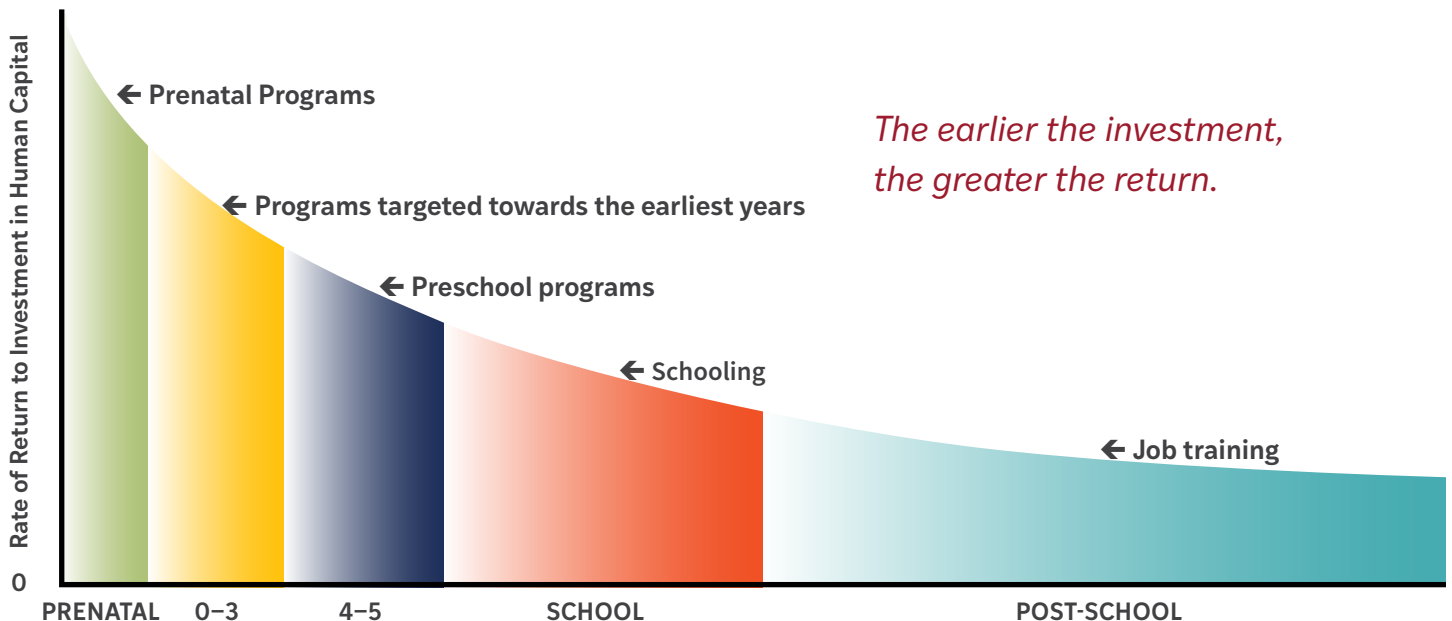
ECE programs are not identical, and research has demonstrated that programs of high quality result in better outcomes.¹¹ Well-trained staff, lower child-to-staff ratios, more intensive programming, and accreditation status are important quality indicators that can lead to improved outcomes.³¹

CHILDREN OF COLOR, POOR CHILDREN LACK ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY ECE

Despite what we know about the importance of program quality, cost and lack of access of are persistent barriers to high-quality ECE. **These barriers are especially true for families of color.** For example, Black children are more likely than their white counterparts to enroll in Head Start programs with lower observed quality.³² Children from low-income families are less also likely to access preschool compared to kids from higher-income families. From 2005-2022, **60% of low-income children did not attend preschool**, compared to just 45% to 50% of higher-income children.⁴

Early Childhood Development is a Smart Investment

Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics



“Early care and education one piece of a web of supports that are crucial to help create strong, stable families.”



Parents may also desire programs that fit their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, provide individualized attention to infants or children with disabilities, or offer care at non-traditional hours like evenings or weekends.³³ Lack of high-quality programs available to meet these needs is an ongoing challenge.

Strategies to increase ECE enrollment among children in the welfare system

- **Increase access to Head Start and Early Head Start for children in foster care**

Children in foster care are eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start, even if their families' income is higher than the programs' requirements. Yet enrollment in these programs is extremely low among children involved with the welfare system. Active recruitment, simplified enrollment, and prioritized placement in available Head Start/Early Head Start slots could help many children in the welfare system gain access to high-quality ECE.

- **Prioritize the allocation of new or existing ECE funding to children in the welfare system**

Children in the welfare system have less access to quality, affordable childcare. Providers also lack the flexibility to quickly place these children in ECE programs. Given the negative impacts early childhood trauma has on child brain development and educational readiness, priority populations for ECE investment could be expanded to include children served by the child welfare system as well.

- **Increase coordination among ECE and child protection agencies**

Developing strategic, collaborative relationships between ECE and child protection can increase the utilization of ECE among young children

involved in (or at risk for involvement in) the child protection system. Improved coordination could include creating pathways for service coordination, improving cross-program communication, establishing information-sharing agreements, and engaging in joint trainings.

- **Train child welfare and ECE staff on the importance of ECE for reducing the risk of child maltreatment**

Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors need training on the importance of ECE for children involved in the welfare system and how to help families access ECE programs. Likewise, ECE providers can benefit from training on childhood trauma, how to identify children who may benefit from preventive services, and how to refer families for support.

- **Reduce and respond to staff turnover**

Turnover is high among both ECE and child welfare staff, making ongoing collaboration between the groups even more challenging. Addressing the root causes of this turnover, such as **low compensation** and burnout, could help reduce turnover and strengthen partnerships with child welfare agencies. Introducing staff and creating educational materials that can be shared with new employees can help keep partnerships strong when turnover does happen.

- **Help at-risk families thrive**

Early care and education one piece of a web of supports that are crucial to help create strong, stable families. Policies that **create living wages**, **establish paid family and sick leave**, and **provide direct cash assistance** to low-income families helps reduce economic instability and chronic stress that can lead to child maltreatment.

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Note: The section “*ECE benefits children and families*” includes and expands on content from two briefs developed by Casey Family Programs: **How can child protection agencies partner with early care and education to improve outcomes for children?** and **How does high-quality early care and education improve safety, permanency, and well-being?**

This brief was developed based on the insights shared during the panel discussion, ***Transforming Systems: How Early Childhood Education Can Support Child Welfare and Well-Being***, featuring Ellicia Lanier, Founder and Executive Director of Urban Sprouts Child Development Center; Judge Darrell Missey, former Director of Children’s Division, Missouri Department of Social Services; Katherine Magnuson, Professor and Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty, Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison; and moderated by Gary Parker, PhD, Associate Dean for External Affairs and Director of the Clark-Fox Policy Institute, Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis. This webinar was sponsored by the **American Academy for Social Work and Social Welfare** with support from the **Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Clark-Fox Policy Institute, Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy**, and the **William T. Grant Foundation**.

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