

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

MARCH 2015

Investing in quality early childhood development for all children



PURPOSE

This *Discussion Guide* focuses on the recommendation to “invest in quality early childhood development for all children.” It is designed to provide you with a better understanding of the issues involved and the barriers to achieving this goal. We also encourage you to use the [Action Toolkit](#) that accompanies this *Discussion Guide* to identify ways to bring this conversation to your community and take steps to make a difference. A digital version of both the *Discussion Guide* and the *Action Toolkit* is available at <http://forthesakeofall.org/take-action/>.



BACKGROUND

Children enter the world ready to learn, and our role as adults is to ensure that they are able to do so in safe, nurturing, and supportive environments. What happens during a child’s early years can affect his or her physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development and have lasting effects throughout life.

The definition of “early childhood” varies somewhat. Some believe it begins as early as before birth and up to age 8, but nearly all experts agree that the first five years of life are fundamentally important.

Why is early childhood so important?

- Most brain development occurs during this time. A positive and stimulating environment can nurture this growth. Toxic stress or neglect can disrupt it.
- Experiences in early childhood serve as the building blocks for future learning. This is also a time when developmental delays can be detected and addressed more effectively than later in life.

The impact of early childhood development goes far beyond the playground or schoolyard. One of the best-known studies on the long-term benefits of early childhood education found that young people, particularly those from low-income or high-risk backgrounds, who attended high-quality preschool programs were more likely to graduate from high school, own homes, and ultimately earn up to \$2,000 more per month.¹ Health benefits were also seen, including decreased risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes in adulthood.²

Race, income, and geography can all affect a child’s start in life. In the St. Louis area, an estimated 16,000 African American

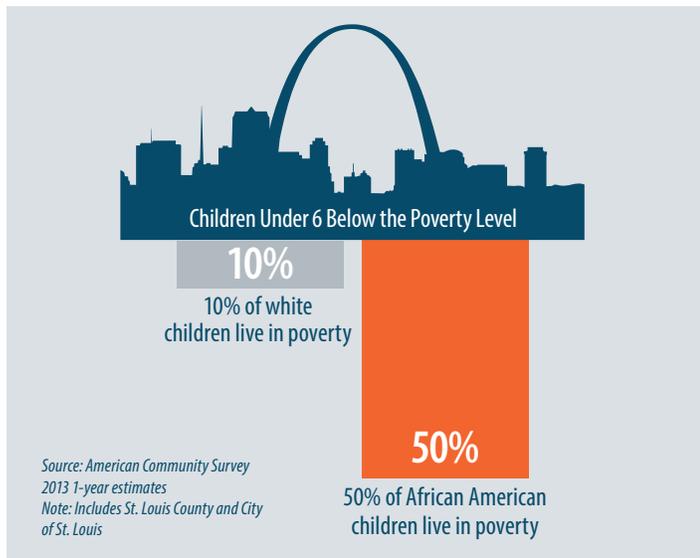
90% OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT HAPPENS BEFORE AGE 5



children under 6 live in poverty. This means that out of all African American children under 6 (32,000), 50% live in poverty, compared with 10% for white children.³ While most agree on the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences and programs, access and availability is not equal for all. Among low-income households nationwide, only 37% of 3- to 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, compared with 55% of all households overall, disproportionately affecting African American children.⁴

Access to quality, affordable child care is essential for parents who work. When child care costs rise, parents must often make the difficult choice to leave their children alone or in substandard care or risk losing their jobs.

16,000 African American children in St. Louis live in poverty



The state of early childhood in our region

Access to quality early child care is limited by its availability and affordability.

- In most of Missouri, licensed child care capacity only serves 25-50% of children under age 6 whose parents are working.⁵
- While federal child care subsidies are available, Missouri requires that families make less than \$23,520 annually to qualify – the lowest threshold of all but two states. Meanwhile, the average yearly cost of full-time, quality child care for a toddler in St. Louis County is \$11,000 and \$8,300 in the City of St. Louis.^{6,7}

Research shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood returns between \$3 and \$17 of benefit for society,⁸ yet investment nationwide has decreased over the past decade.

Out of 41 states with state-funded preschool, Missouri now ranks 38th in funding per child. Between 2012 and 2013, state spending per child dropped 24%, from \$2,726 to \$2,067.⁹

The need for a comprehensive approach

Meeting the needs of our community's children requires a comprehensive approach, starting at birth. This is especially true for families at a disadvantage due to income or other risk factors. This approach should include investing in and expanding access to:

- High-quality, affordable child care and early education programs
- Home visitation services for all families
- Parental engagement programs and resources
- Comprehensive health and developmental screenings



STRATEGIES

Expand access to high-quality early childhood care and education

Getting all children started off on the right foot is crucial to helping them reach their full potential. This can be achieved both by increasing the availability of high-quality early childhood programs and improving access for all families, regardless of race or income. Several strategies should be considered:

1) Reverse state spending cuts to early childhood programs.

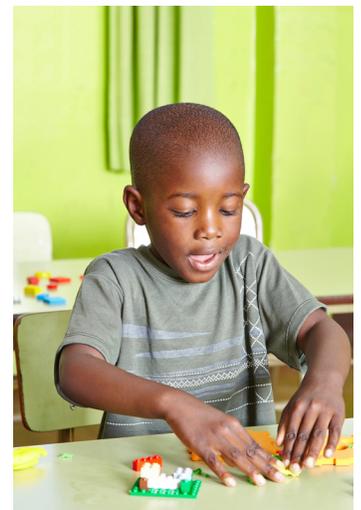
The [Missouri Preschool Program \(MPP\)](#) was introduced in 1998 to expand high-quality programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. Despite the goal to increase access for all families, MPP currently serves just 3% of 4-year-olds.⁹ Similarly, [Parents as Teachers](#) has faced cuts in recent years, losing more than half its budget in 2011.

2) Relax income eligibility requirements, and increase child care subsidies.

As noted earlier, when it comes to federal child care subsidies, Missouri has some of the strictest eligibility requirements and lowest subsidy amounts in the nation. This leaves many low- and middle-income families struggling to afford child care.

3) Seek alternative funding and partners for early childhood programs.

Looking outside of federal and state education dollars offers new opportunities for early childhood investment. For example, the doors recently opened on the new [Flance Learning Center](#) in downtown St. Louis. The project was made possible by a combination of a national housing grant, private equity tax credits, and corporate donors.



There are numerous examples of programs that work.

Local examples include:

- Now an international program, [Parents as Teachers](#) develops curricula and trains professionals in its evidence-based approach, which includes home visits, group meetings, health and developmental screenings, and a resource network.
- [St. Louis County Library \(SLCL\)](#) was recognized as the “2014 Library of the Year” by the Missouri Library Association. In 2015, SLCL will partner with several area hospitals to provide all

new parents with a book for their babies and other materials to encourage families to invest in their children's early literacy.

- [University City Children's Center](#) is recognized regionally as a thought leader in early childhood education and serves as the founding school for the [LUME Institute](#). Their approach focuses on developing children from the "inside out," teaching skills needed for school as well as character and emotional development, while engaging the entire family and the community.
- Recognizing the importance of early intervention, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's [First Steps](#) program offers services and support for children from birth to age 3 with physical and developmental disabilities.

National examples include:

- [The Triple P – Positive Parenting Study](#) is a parenting and family support system designed to prevent and treat behavioral and emotional problems in children and teenagers. Triple P aims to equip parents with the skills and confidence they need to be self-sufficient and to manage family issues without ongoing support.
- [Head Start](#) and [Early Head Start](#) served 20,080 Missouri families in 2013. These comprehensive school readiness programs should be fully utilized in our community.
- The [HighScope Perry Preschool Study](#) and the [Abecedarian Project](#) have become two of the best-known studies on the benefits of early childhood education. The HighScope curriculum views children as active learners, who learn best from activities that they themselves plan, carry out, and reflect upon. Adults serve as partners in the learning process, encouraging children to engage in a wide variety of experiences. The Abecedarian model provided programming on a full-day, year-round basis; had a low teacher-child ratio; and used a



systematic curriculum of "educational games" emphasizing language development and cognitive skills.

Address quality in early childhood care and education

We must remember that the numerous benefits of early childhood programs only apply to "high-quality" programs. Strategies for better serving our region's children should also include improving the quality of existing programs and researching and promoting best practices.

1) Allocate funds toward evidence-based, effective programs.

Funding evidence-based programs offers the greatest return on our investment. Most experts agree on the hallmarks of high-quality programs: small classes led by qualified teachers; significant time spent on instruction, with an emphasis on social and emotional development in addition to academics; and a family-centered approach.

2) Track progress and standardize our approach.

Targeted investments include implementing a continuous quality improvement process with accountability measures and tracking kindergarten readiness.

There are several local organizations that work to address both access and quality in early childhood.

Examples include:

- [Child Care Aware of Missouri](#) works to ensure that families in every community have access to quality, affordable child care.
- The [Missouri Children's Leadership Council](#) promotes the well-being of children, youth, and families in the state of Missouri by effectively advocating for their needs and interests.
- The [St. Louis Regional Early Childhood Council](#) is working on building a comprehensive system that addresses the full range of early childhood needs for all children in St. Louis.
- [Vision for Children at Risk](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building strategic initiatives to improve the well-being of children in the St. Louis region.

EVERY \$1 INVESTED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD RETURNS BETWEEN

\$3 AND \$17 OF BENEFIT





SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Early childhood is a crucial time in a child’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development and can have lasting effects on health into adulthood.
- High-quality early childhood education programs have been shown to provide many benefits for the child and the community. Research shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood returns between \$3 and \$17 of benefit for society.
- Many families, particularly those in low-to-moderate income households, lack access to high-quality child care and education programs, due to the limited number of programs available and cost.
- To help give all children the chance to reach their full potential, we must invest in improving the accessibility and quality of our region’s early childhood programs.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What are some of the factors you think could help a child’s early development?
- 2 What do you think makes an early childhood education experience “high-quality”?
- 3 How would you rate the quality and availability of childcare and early childhood education in your community? What opportunities do you see for improvement?
- 4 What are the greatest barriers to ensuring all St. Louis children have access to quality early child care and education?
- 5 How do race and socioeconomic background affect access to child development programs and resources?
- 6 Since parents and guardians are children’s first teachers, what are we doing to ensure that all caregivers succeed in this important role?
- 7 How do you think individuals and organizations in the community can help support early child development?
- 8 What types of resources and support could help to ensure all children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential?
- 9 Who in the St. Louis region is currently working to improve early child care and development?
- 10 What would you be willing to do to help improve the state of early childhood education in the St. Louis region?

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