

# EARLY CHILDHOOD *MATTERS*

*An occasional newsletter for CT friends of young children*

EARLY CARE AND  
EDUCATION  
SERIES

JULY 2003

## All Children Ready for School Success: Closing the “Preparation” Gap

From Avon to Willimantic and Waterbury to New London, nearly a quarter of a million young children are engaged in the daily work of growing up in Connecticut.

They are not, of course, doing this alone. Their parents, grandparents, and literally thousands of health, early care and early learning providers shape the environments and experiences through which our youngest children learn and grow.

Together, this daily work by kids, parents, and the early childhood provider community creates the foundation on which Connecticut's future will be built.

### The Early Years: Joy and Challenge

Thankfully, most times the work of “growing” our children is marked by pure joy. The first real smile, the first word, the first step... Sleepy eyes and tousled hair on the pillow at night... Pasting noodles on colored paper and on the kitchen counter... Unlocking the magic of the written word... Coming home

from kindergarten with fistfuls of “look what I did today!”

But, sometimes, the work is incredibly hard. Like when a child is sick or hurt or hungry. Or when working parents cannot find safe, high quality, affordable early care for their young children so they can go to their jobs without worry... When literacy challenges mean that no one reads a story book at bedtime... When budget cuts threaten such basic supports as access to health care, affordable housing, and safe neighborhoods.

### Setting the Stage for School Success

Children's neurological growth during the early years is astounding. At birth, a child has 100 billion brain cells. As children grow and learn, each cell can connect with up to 15,000 other brain cells. By the age of three, the brain's “wiring” can have about 1000 trillion connections, twice as many as adults. Children's

early experiences influence how and how much of this development occurs.

Also during children's early years, the relationships they have with adults, beginning with their parents, determine how well they will be able to develop and sus-

tain trusting relationships, learn appropriate social behaviors, and work and learn with others.

### The Readiness Challenge

National and Connecticut data reveal that far too many children arrive at the kindergarten door without these critical life and learning skills, and knowledge. This failure of readiness results in vast expenditures in remedial and special education, threatens high school completion, and portends continued social and economic costs for the individual and for society as a whole.

### A PUBLIC GOAL

All children born in Connecticut beginning 2004 will enter kindergarten healthy, eager to learn, and ready for school success.

Adopted by The CT Early Childhood Alliance  
Spring 2003

## Who Cares for Children Now? Challenges for CT Families

**Most CT parents are in the full-time labor force and are working more hours than before.** Ninety-two percent of CT's children ages five and younger have one working parent and more than six in ten (62%) have their only parent or both parents in the full-time workforce.

Over the past two decades CT families have added nearly 12 extra weeks of work to their annual work year. Families headed by single parents have added

seven and a half extra work weeks to their work year.

**The cost of early care and education can be substantial.** For many CT families with young children, the cost of early care represents their second largest expense, just behind housing.

Early care costs for infants and toddlers, can range from \$7,000 to \$15,000 (or more) per child per year. Early care and education for preschool age children can range from \$6,800 to over

\$10,000 per year. And unlike higher education, early education is under-subsidized.

**For cost and other reasons, many families use unregulated settings.** Among CT's lower-income families who receive child care subsidies, 75% place their young children in unlicensed care. Though generally more affordable and geographically accessible, there is no assurance of safety or quality in unlicensed settings.

### Supports Sought by Parents of Young Children

**64%** want an income tax break for parents who remain home to care for their children

**61%** want six months of paid family leave

**60%** want increased Head Start access

**48%** want a larger tax offset for the cost of professional child care

**40%** want a universal child care system supported by government funding

*Necessary Compromises, Public Agenda. 2000*

## What Do Parents Want for Their Youngest Children?

Public Agenda recently conducted a large scale national study to examine how families with children under the age of five viewed the child care side of the family-work dilemma.

Seven in ten parents felt strongly that the "best arrangement" for the care and development of young children is for one parent to stay at home with the child, *although 67% did not view this as a realistic option.*

Asked to choose the better of two options, supports to help parents stay home for a period during their children's early years or improving the

cost and quality of non-parental child care, parents responded 2 to 1 (62% vs. 30%) in favor of supports to help parents remain at home.

This belief is most strongly held when children are under the age of two. Then, 94% believe one parent should be at home.

Parents see this critical early period as the time in which children build the foundation for moral values and good behaviors, based on the love of and bonding with their families.

*Necessary Compromises, Public Agenda, 2000*

## The CT Early Childhood Alliance: A New Voice for Young Children

There's a new kid on the "early childhood block" in CT, The CT Early Childhood Alliance.

The two-year old Alliance, a state-local, public-private coalition of organizations and individuals, serves as a catalyst for policy change necessary to improve the health, safety, learning and economic security of the state's youngest children, and their families.

Recently-elected Alliance co-conveners for the 2003-04 fiscal year are Linda Kosko of Danbury Children First and Juleen Flanigan of Education Connection, representing CT's

Regional Education Service Centers.

Staffing for the Alliance is supported by the Graustein Memorial Fund through a grant to CT Voices for Children.

This spring, the Alliance prioritized its agenda to support accomplishment of the following public goal:

***All children born in Connecticut beginning in 2004 will enter kindergarten healthy, eager to learn, and ready for school success.***

### CT's Achievement Gap: "The Issue of the Decade"

Only 25% of Connecticut's Hispanic and black students performed at the 4th grade mastery level on the 2002 CT Mastery Tests as compared with 70% of white students. Boys scored lower than girls, and while 61% of all 6th graders met the state goal in math, only 33% of low-income students did so.

Commissioner Ted Sergi  
*The Hartford Courant,*  
October 2002

To inquire about or join the Alliance, contact either:

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## States Are Adopting a "PreK for All" Agenda and Voters Agree

In the face of mounting evidence that having *all* children truly ready for kindergarten provides a strong return on investment, many states are moving to expand access to high quality pre-school learning programs.

This past fall, Florida voters passed a constitutional referendum for universal PreK, led by Miami-Dade Mayor Alex

Penelas. Pennsylvania has just committed \$800 million to expand PreK. New York has a plan for universal PreK and New Jersey's Abbot court settlement requires expanded PreK programs.

Last fall, the CT State Board of Education passed a policy position calling for the gradual adoption of universal access to PreK programs for

all of the state's three- and four-year olds.

Moving to a "PreK for All" policy makes sense to voters as well. Fifty-six percent of recently surveyed voters think all or most children would benefit, and 55% believe these programs should be free to all children.

National  
Institute for Early Education  
Research, 2002

### The Five Elements of Readiness for School

◆ Physical well-being and motor development ◆ Social and emotional development ◆ Learning strategies including curiosity and task completion ◆ Language development and communication ability ◆ Early thinking ability and knowledge

The National Education Goals Panel, 1997

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*Connecticut Voices  
for Children is a  
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committed to the  
vision that all  
Connecticut children  
and families need  
love and good health,  
to live in safety and  
economic security,  
grow as successful  
learners, and  
give back to their  
communities.*

## School Readiness: One Smart Little Investment

National longitudinal research as well as contemporary studies of CT's school readiness program support the old prevention adage: *You can pay me now or pay me later...*

A dollar invested in high quality early childhood development programs returns about seven dollars over a 20-year period, much of the savings from reduced incarceration costs. Given mounting prison costs across the nation, closing the prison door at the kindergarten door is sound public policy.

CT research shows that quality school readiness programs substantially reduce the numbers of children who must repeat kindergarten (at a savings of about \$10,000 per child) and who are diagnosed with special education needs (at a savings beginning at about \$13,000 per child per year).

"Policies and programs aimed at improving the life chances of young children come in many varieties...

They all share a belief that early childhood development is susceptible to environmental influences and that wise public investments in young children can increase the odds of favorable developmental outcomes."

**National Research Council  
and Institute of Medicine, in  
*From Neurons to Neighborhoods*,  
2001**

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