

Seven things Connecticut needs to know about early childhood...



A Letter from the Governor

Dear Friends,

All across Connecticut, our youngest children are engaged in some of the most important work of their lives — growing and learning. It is an extraordinary period of physical, intellectual, emotional and psychological development.

Our state has taken several important steps to make certain we provide as much support as possible for youngsters in these critical early years. Despite this smart start, however, many children in our state do not have access to educational and social experiences that set the stage for all of their later learning. For a variety of reasons, these children do not stand at the kindergarten door fully prepared for what is to come.

I believe this is something we must change.

To do this, I am proposing a modest investment this year to help more Connecticut youngsters benefit from a preschool program. I want to focus our efforts on youngsters who, without our support, would never have this opportunity. We can move toward this goal by better coordinating existing state programs and building on proven services in our communities. It will also be important to measure the results so we will be certain our investment yields real benefits for our children.

In addition, we must continue to provide parents, grandparents and other caregivers with the type of valuable information and guidance contained in the publication you have just received. As this publication makes clear, children are our most precious resource. The support we offer them will make all the difference in their lives and help ensure a bright and prosperous future for our state.

Sincerely,



Cover photo:

Governor Jodi Rell learns the art of crafts from one of the children at the Capitol Child Development Center in Hartford.

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Helping Children to Learn: The Time Is Right; The Opportunity Is Here

It's about helping our youngest citizens become the best that they can be. It's about successful learning while reducing special education costs in our public schools. It's about ensuring a skilled workforce, and about making economic investments proven to pay off in the long run.

And, it's about time we did it.

Research tells us that the early years really matter. It is a period of explosive growth when 85% of the brain's wiring is completed for learning and growing.

Kindergarten teachers tell us that children living in challenging circumstances and who have not attended a quality preschool enter kindergarten without the knowledge, skills and behaviors they need. Teachers also tell us that when children are ready to learn at entry to kindergarten, they learn more rapidly, participate in school, and are more likely to achieve academic success and graduate from high school.

Yet, studies tell us that about 30% of our children enter school unready to succeed and unlikely to catch up. Recent surveys of Connecticut superintendents also tell us that several thousand three and four year olds cannot be accommodated in current programs because there is simply no space.

Economists tell us that investing in quality learning environments for young children pays off, immediately as well as over the longer term. The senior vice president and director of research at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, Arthur Rolnick, reports a 16% annual rate of return on every dollar spent on early care and education.

No longer is the care and early learning of young children viewed as a private matter. Less than half of our families have at least one parent home all day to provide the nurturing and stimulation that all children need. And when families look for quality early care and early education for their children, they are hard pressed to pay for it.

Today, we recognize that providing high quality early learning experiences for young children is a public good, one that benefits families, schools, communities and our society at large.

So what do we need to do?

With so many of our young children being cared for by others while their own parents work, we must be sure that high quality learning experiences await them. And we must work together so that all kids in Connecticut enter the kindergarten door healthy, eager to learn, and ready for school success.

The choice is easy. And, really, it's about time to make it.

Primary sources for this special report:

State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network, Des Moines, Iowa
Why Quality Matters, Linda Espinoza



Seven Things Connecticut Needs to Know About Early Childhood / In Brief

In this publication, you will find information about why quality early care and education matters and what you can do to invest in the future of our state's young children.

You will also learn why more than 3,000 Connecticut residents — parents, teachers, grandparents, folks in business, other employers, and people like you — have come together as Friends of Connecticut's Young Children to show support for school readiness for all children. We invite you to become a Friend too, through a campaign called Ready Set Grow.

1 The earliest years count.

- Most of the brain's growth occurs in the first few years of life.
- Connections between baby and family are the foundation for learning.

2 Parents and families matter.

- Children learn from birth. They need constant care and stimulation as they explore the world.
- Families need the community's support. Parents are a child's first teachers and provide the opportunity to grow up safe and healthy.

3 School readiness is more than words and numbers.

- The skills that lead to reading and math can be learned very early and are important to children entering school.
- Equally important are physical, social and emotional development (growing up healthy, learning to be part of a group) that are fundamental to learning in school.

4 School unreadiness costs.

- The cost of schooling goes up when children enter school developmentally behind. In a Bridgeport study, children who did not have a quality preschool experience were 5 times more likely to be retained in first grade.
- The costs to society include health, special education, retention, delinquency, and incarceration.

5 With so many parents working, we need to get this right.

- Changing economic times have doubled the percentage of mothers working when children are very young. Across Connecticut 62% of children under six live in families where the sole or both parents work.
- Connecticut has over 220,000 children under the age of five and superintendents estimate that thousands have an unmet need for early care and education programs.

6 Quality matters.

- The quality of early childhood programs is what makes a difference. Quality improves development and poor programs can cause harm.
- Quality services to support parents and families improve school readiness.

7 Investments pay off.

- National economists have estimated a 16% annualized rate of return for our investments in high quality early learning programs.
- Connecticut studies are showing that early education programs are saving costs by reducing the need for special education and for students repeating a grade.

We know how to get the job done — with your support all children can be ready for school.

Seven Things Connecticut Needs to Know About Early Childhood / In Depth

1 The earliest years count.

There are as many brain cells in a newborn baby as there are stars in the Milky Way – about a billion. Over the first few years, these cells link together to make trillions of connections, building enormous capacity for taking in and organizing information about the world.

All children are born naturally curious and ready to learn. Much of this learning occurs through ongoing interactions with the important people in their lives. Because these relationships and experiences greatly influence how well these brain connections will develop, young children need to build positive attachments with caring adults who both nurture and stimulate them.

Children learn best with the people they love and trust, and when the experiences are fun. This happens within the context of everyday activities – as an infant turns an object over and over in his hands, a toddler helps stir pancake batter, and a preschooler counts napkins needed for the family meal.

Research tells us that every child needs a set of basic conditions within which to grow safe, strong and vibrantly:

- Competent, confident parenting
- Basic health and nutrition
- Constant, appropriate supervision, and
- Guidance and teaching geared to their stage of development.

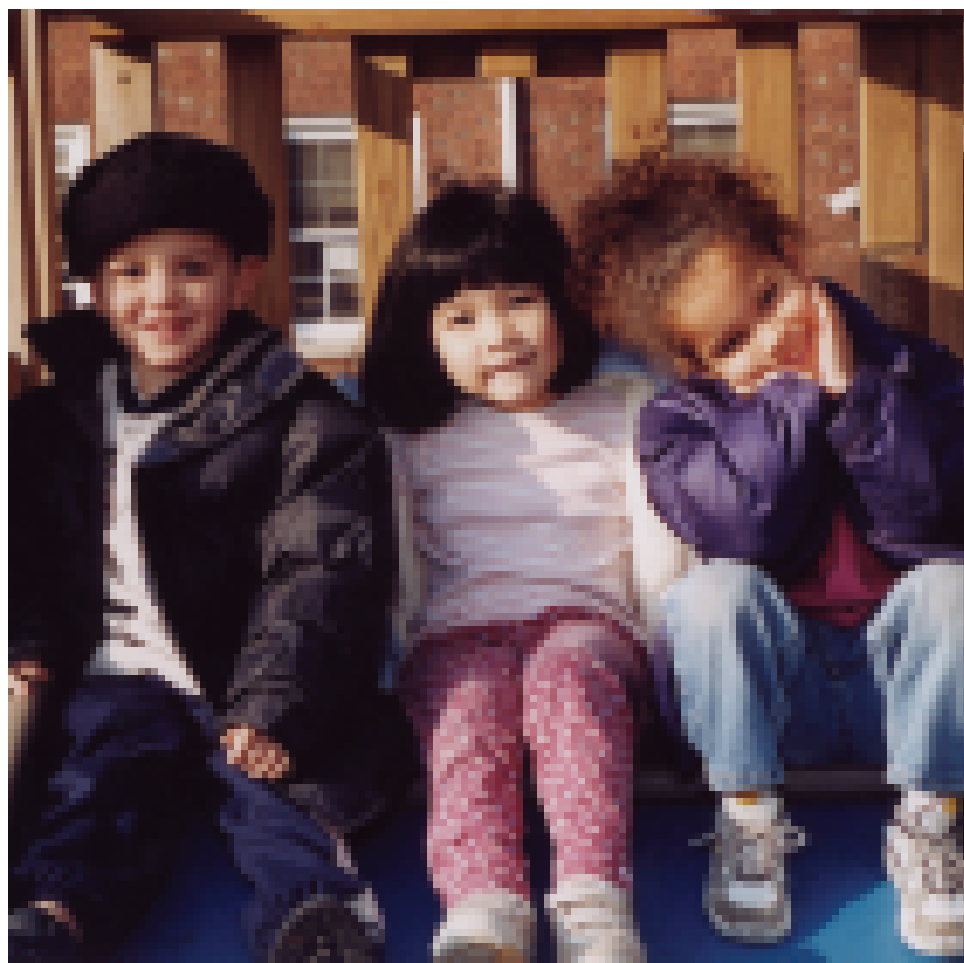
Most of these are provided by parents most of the time, but we all have a role to play to meet children's needs. Failure to meet any of these needs puts a child at risk. The more severe, the longer the duration, or the greater the number of unmet needs, the greater the risk becomes that a child will not develop to his or her potential.

As we know, what is at stake here has an impact on the child, on our community, on the workforce, and on the state's economic competitiveness.

2 Parents and families matter.

We know that all parents need a little help in meeting the needs of young children, and some parents need a lot of support.

- To get help in providing competent, confident parenting, adults may need assistance from parenting education and home visiting programs as well as family support groups.
- To get help in providing for a child's basic health and nutrition needs, parents may need help to secure health insurance, preventive health care, nutrition and food assistance, and access to early intervention and special education services.
- To get help in the provision of consistent supervision of their children, parents may need help to activate family and medical leave opportunities, find parenting education and support programs, and identify quality child care and preschool settings.
- To assure the appropriate guidance and learning for their children at each stage, parents may seek parent education and support and quality learning settings for their children, including quality child care and preschool settings.
- To get parents of newborns support right from the start.



Learning is child's play.

- Play allows children to explore their world and practice what they learn. Everyday activities are learning opportunities. Exploration encourages motor development.
- Play helps children develop curiosity and intelligence — give a child the opportunity to play with toys and objects in their own way, and then play their game with them. This supports their imagination!
- Play prepares children's minds for school — sing, read, count. Every word, story, song or rhyme builds the foundation for literacy.
- Play supports the development of meaningful relationships — playing with a variety of other children builds trust, friendship and love!
- Play nurtures a child's self-confidence and ability to express emotions — allow children to express their feelings through play. This assists children in gaining a sense of order and develop self-control.
- Adults are important in providing opportunities for learning through play.

An easy first step in finding services that help parents and other caregivers is calling 211 Infoline. It offers information on parenting and child development, parenting education or family support services, and quality early care and education programs. It also provides information about ways to secure an evaluation and services for a special needs child.

3 School readiness is more than words and numbers.

Recently, much attention has been paid to the language and literacy skills of young children. In truth, we must consider the interrelationship among five developmental areas in determining school readiness:

- Physical well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Language development (verbal language and emerging literacy)
- Creative expression / aesthetic development
- Cognition and general knowledge (plus spatial relations and number concepts)

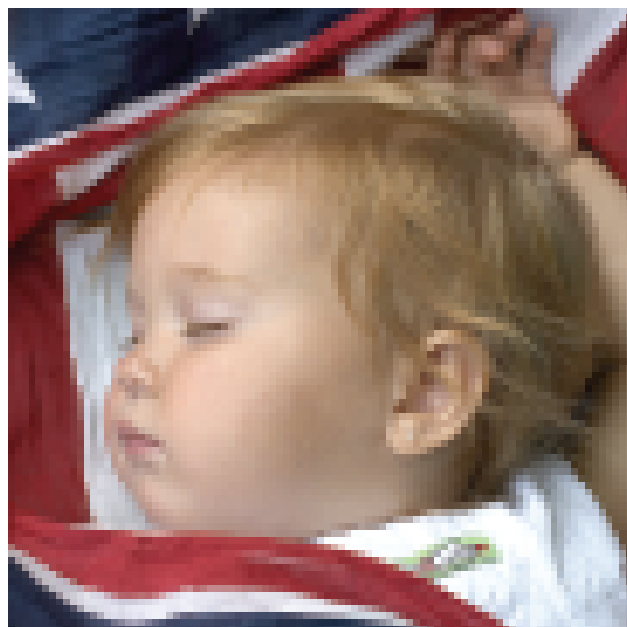
In 1999, the Connecticut State Board of Education issued “The Connecticut Framework” for preschool education and established program goals and content standards that relate to what children need to know prior to kindergarten. The guiding principles of this framework are:

- We should have high expectations for all our children.
- There are individual differences in rates of development among children.
- We expect every child will master each goal at their own pace and achieve their own degree of proficiency.
- We expect families and programs to work together on a child's goals and achievements. Programs and families provide each other information and guidance to support learning and development.
- We must encourage children to explore materials, engage in concrete activities, and interact with other children and adults to understand their world.
- We need to help all programs reach the same high standards. For children cared for in homes, community supports are needed to support families and children to meet these goals.

4 School unreadiness costs.

Research shows that when children are not ready for school, there is an increase in costs to society. These costs include:

- Health care costs to address chronic conditions throughout life
- Special education and grade retention costs in early elementary years
- Juvenile delinquency and remediation costs in middle and high school years
- School failure, reduced earnings and taxpaying, and increased dependency costs in early adult years
- Crime and criminal justice system costs in adult years



Most children start school with the skills they need. Unfortunately, too many do not. When children's basic needs are not met, there are costs — clearly first to the young child, but to society as well.

Yet, with a plan in place, school readiness programs have demonstrated success:

In Stamford, school readiness programs raised reading achievement, lowered retention rates, and decreased the need for special services for participating children.

In Middletown, school readiness narrowed the gap between African-American children from low-income families and white children from families of all income levels.

In West Hartford, in mixed classroom settings, school readiness quadrupled the rate at which low-income children acquired new vocabulary and helped to close the gap with their upper-income peers.

In Bridgeport, readiness for school was proven to increase through organized early childhood programs and parental involvement.

In Milford, children in high quality preschool programs were significantly better prepared for kindergarten. They required fewer special services and faced one quarter the grade retention rate.



5 With so many parents working, we need to get this right.

It is a simple fact that raising young children has changed dramatically over the last several decades. Since 1970, economics has changed the structure of family life, particularly for families with young children. The percentage of mothers with young children (birth to 5) who are in the workforce has doubled, largely because it increasingly requires two incomes to support a family with young children.

Even with this growth in employment, however, many of these families with young children have very moderate incomes. In 2000, 36% of all families with a child under five earned less than \$26,200. For this population, it is often not an option to stay at home rather than work.

In Connecticut, 62% of children under the age of five live in families where the sole or both parents work. We need all of these children to become productive members of the next generation. And we know that means getting a good start in life and in school.

Communities across Connecticut are developing plans for early childhood health and learning that build on local assets and resources. Policy leaders and parent leaders are working together to build a system that works for families.

6 Quality matters.

Across the state quality early childhood programs are showing that it is possible to close the preparation gap, that is, the gap between those children that enter school ready to learn and those that do not. In Hartford, a recent study revealed that preschoolers who attended early childhood programs that were making quality improvements showed dramatic gains in five major developmental areas associated with school readiness.

Support to these programs included intensive curriculum training for staff, stipends to increase staff education, and substitute teachers to enable classroom staff to plan, create lesson plans, and observe model programs. Expert consultation was also provided to the program staff in mental health, challenging behaviors, and parent engagement, and assistance was provided to program administrators and board members in the areas of marketing, business planning, and facility improvements.

Here are ten signals that your child is in a high quality environment.

- Teachers and children listen to each other and engage in positive interactions.
- Teachers encourage children to use language, reasoning and problem solving skills.
- Teachers work from an age-appropriate curriculum, selected because it is closely related to the Preschool Curriculum Framework produced by the State Department of Education.
- Children work with science projects, learn number skills, letters and words, tell stories and are read to, engage in block play and dramatic play, participate in art and music.
- The program is licensed by the State of Connecticut and/or accredited by a national organization or process.
- The space is well-suited to the needs of preschool children, or infants and toddlers, and is well-equipped with books, toys and other materials.
- Parents are present and actively involved in the setting.
- There is at least one teacher for every ten pre-schoolers.
- The total number of children in a group is less than twenty and often much lower.
- Staff members are well trained in early childhood practices, receive ongoing training, and lead teachers hold a bachelor's degree.



An independent research firm found:

- Hartford students assessed in May 2004 scored considerably higher than the national average, after having begun the year slightly below the national average; and
- On each dimension, students achieved significant gains that were far greater than those they would have achieved had they not attended.

When early childhood programs achieve high quality, children grow by leaps and bounds. The improvement of quality in early childhood programs is within our means. These results are replicable when Connecticut builds upon “what works.”

Quality early childhood programs help prepare young children with learning and living skills. They offer lots of opportunities for exploration and curiosity. They foster language development and communication skills. Children learn early reading and early math skills. They learn to play together and work independently. They gain a sense of self confidence in their skills and in their ability to learn. But poor quality programs can actually be harmful to children's healthy growth and development.

To identify quality in early care and education settings, scientific studies have taught us to look most closely at the ways that teachers interact with young children, to guide and reinforce their learning, give them comfort and security, laugh with them, listen and talk with them, encourage them and reward them.

7 Investments pay off.

The traditional approach to economic development has been to invest in roads, buildings and other facilities to attract businesses to a community, convince them to expand, or encourage them to stay. To have early childhood investment top the economic development list would seem strange to many people.

Not so, says Arthur Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. In Connecticut and across the nation, the very best dollar for dollar return on investment comes from high quality early childhood programs serving at risk youngsters and their families during the first years of life.

Rolnick recently re-examined several of the nation's gold standard studies of high quality early childhood programs. What he found surprised him. These high quality programs returned an annual rate of return of 16% over a period of twenty years or more.

Rolnick's calculations factor in decreased crime and welfare costs as well as demonstrated reductions in K-12 public school special education costs. He also factors in the benefits to individuals and the economy from high school completion (and post secondary education) and increased earnings. Similar work by other economists have also found a strong return on dollars invested in high quality early childhood programs, with benefit to cost ratios ranging between \$4 and \$7 for every \$1 spent.

In other words, giving young children a fair chance at school success will mean that as adults they are much more likely to become contributing members of society.

Beyond the dollar return on investment, assuring children's educational success can help build a fully functional workforce and a generation of citizens ready to carry on the responsibilities of our democracy.

A RAND Corporation study shows that while 85% of the brain develops in the first three years of life, only 5% of public investments in children occur during these years. Society has not yet developed an early care and education system to meet young children's needs.

Sounds like there's plenty of room for growth in this field — and a good deal for everybody.

Early childhood programs come in all sizes with many names:

Head Start, school readiness, daycare, preschool, child care, nursery school, pre-K.

What they do have in common is that they care about children; they provide learning and growing opportunities for children; and they form partnerships with families to grow children ready for school.



What can you do?

As a family member you can:

- Encourage early learning and school readiness for all young children.
- Ask your child’s teacher about what your child is learning. Get involved in the program.
- Contact your local library for a schedule of activities.
- Ask your local school, college or school readiness council about the resources in your community and how you can get involved.
- Call 211 Infoline for more information.

As a community member you can:

- Be informed about the importance of safety, health and learning for young children.
- Be involved in expanding access to early childhood programs for all children.
- Work to improve the quality of all programs, including those in centers, in licensed homes and in other settings that support both children and families.
- Call 211 Infoline for more information.

Ready, Set, Grow...CT Kids

We hope you’ve learned more about early care and education in Connecticut in these pages and that you use these resources. And, please explore the website for the “Ready, Set, Grow...CT Kids” campaign (www.readysetgrowtkids.org). Add your name to the 3,000 Connecticut residents who have declared themselves “Friends of Connecticut’s Young Children.”

Sign up online or complete the form below and mail to:

Ready, Set, Grow...CT Kids
 c/o The Community Foundation
 for Greater New Haven
 70 Audubon Street
 New Haven, CT 06510

www.readysetgrowtkids.org

By signing your name you add your voice to the growing number of people in our state who believe that we can, and must, invest in our young children now — when the returns are greatest. Among the three million people who call Connecticut home, about 43,000 enter kindergarten each year. We can afford to be sure that all of them are healthy, eager to learn and ready for school success.

We know the cost of failure, and we know the return we get from smart early childhood investments — for our children, our towns and cities, our state and our society.

Upon receipt we will add your name to the list.
**We respect your privacy. We won’t spam you, sell or give contact information to outside sources.*

Yes, I support Ready, Set, Grow...CT Kids.

Name _____

Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Email Address* _____ Phone (optional) _____