

READY FAMILIES

“The importance of a strong family and caring parents in a child's life can't be overstated. Parents are a child's first and most influential teachers.”

– Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the family plays the most important role in a young child's life. Parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing, teaching, and providing for their children. It is the relationship between parent and child that is the most critical for the positive development of children.⁵⁴ Children need supportive, nurturing environments. However, the new economy has brought changes in the workforce and in family life. These changes are causing financial, physical, and emotional stresses in families, particularly low-income families. Moreover, increasing numbers of new immigrants are challenged to raise their children in the face of language and cultural barriers. Consequently, the role of parents and the condition of families should be a central concern for policymakers interested in promoting school readiness.

Parents of Ready Families Are Supported in Their Roles As Their Children's First Teachers

Parents play a primary role in the healthy development of their children. Children who experience sensitive, responsive care from a parent perform better academically and emotionally in the early elementary years. At the same time, not surprisingly, financial and emotional stresses negatively impact parents' well-being and adversely affect their attentiveness and sensitivity to their children.⁵⁵ Beyond the basics of care and parenting skills, children benefit from positive interactions with their parents (e.g., physical touch, early reading experiences, and verbal, visual, and audio communications). They also depend on their parents to ensure that they receive prenatal, well-baby, and preventive health care; receive optimal nutrition; and live in safe and stimulating environments where they can explore and learn. By supporting parents as their children's first teachers, states can help ensure that family environments provide stimulating, interactive experiences to nurture children's early learning.

States already use several strategies to provide parents with information, training, and support. Options include relatively low-cost parent Web sites or information kits. They also include higher-cost, higher-intensity initiatives, such as home visiting programs (e.g., the Parents as Teachers program or Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters program) and family literacy programs (e.g., Even Start). When these programs emphasize high-quality, well-implemented services, are staffed by well-trained professionals, and are linked with other family supports, they are more likely to demonstrate success.⁵⁶ In addition, states can promote stronger connections among families, teachers, and care providers to strengthen parents' knowledge of developmentally appropriate activities.

Ready Families Provide Safe, Stable, and Economically Secure Homes

The well-being of young children is significantly related to the economic success and well-being of their parents.⁵⁷ There is also strong evidence of the detrimental effects of economic hardship on child development. Child poverty is associated with higher rates of low birthweight and infant mortality, substandard nutritional status and poor motor skills, higher risk of physical impairment, lower cognitive scores, and lower school achievement.⁵⁸ Nearly one in five U.S. children below age five (19 percent) lives in poverty. The rate is higher for black children below age five (36 percent) and Hispanic children below age five (29 percent) than for white children below age five (16 percent).⁵⁹ Parents, particularly those who have very low incomes or are socially isolated for other reasons, can benefit from family support services and outreach efforts. Policies addressing housing, family income, asset development, job creation, workforce development, and health insurance coverage all play an important role in helping working parents provide a stable and nurturing home environment.

Child abuse and child neglect stall early learning for many children. They are associated with both short- and long-term negative consequences for children's physical and mental health, cognitive skills and educational attainment, and social and behavioral development.⁶⁰ Abuse and neglect affect a significant number of young children in America. In 2001 77 percent of all children who died from abuse or neglect were younger than age four.⁶¹ Moreover, it is estimated that 12 percent of children below age five have had some connection with the child welfare system.

A parent's mental health status is also critical to school readiness. Maternal depression is linked to greater risks for academic, health, and behavior problems in children.⁶² Among individuals receiving public assistance, the depression rate is estimated to be between 30 percent and 45 percent.⁶³ Parental substance abuse is another factor affecting children's readiness for school.⁶⁴ Therefore, policies that address maternal mental health issues, parental substance abuse, and child abuse and neglect can help promote school readiness and should be considered among the policy options.

This nation's parents are working harder and longer than ever before. Early attachments are critical to child development.⁶⁵ With more parents of young children in the workforce, the need for family-friendly policies and supports is becoming more apparent. Policies such as the federal *Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993* make it possible for some parents to spend the first important weeks of their children's lives at home. Although many aspects of creating family-friendly workplaces fall within the purview of employers, states can promote policies that help families better meet the needs of both their young children and their employers. These policies include, for example, paid family leave and child care tax credits for individuals and employers. States can also invite members of the business community to join school readiness policy discussions to add their per-

spective and win new allies. They can also recognize businesses and employers for supporting parents through family-friendly business awards.

Ready Families Are Supported By and Connected To Their Communities

Because the United States is such a diverse nation, educators, policymakers, and service providers face a tremendous challenge in identifying the needs of children and communicating with families with different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Regardless of home language and cultural perspective, all families should have access to information and services and should fully understand their role as their children's first teachers. Although communities may be in a better position to address these diversity issues, states can play a role in supporting and guiding local efforts to develop communications and outreach strategies for families of varying backgrounds.

To effectively plan and implement early learning programs for young learners with diverse backgrounds, teachers and administrators should understand language learning and second-language acquisition and use research-based approaches to assess the abilities and learning needs of young second-language learners. It is also helpful when teachers and administrators are familiar with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children they serve.⁶⁶ Efforts to improve communication and cultural continuity between early learning programs and the home are also necessary. Early childhood educators can collect relevant information about the linguistic and cultural home environments of their students. In addition, recruiting care providers and early childhood educators with different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds can help bridge the cultural divide and ease communications between families and program staff.⁶⁷ ■