

Quality Matters
CAMPAIGN

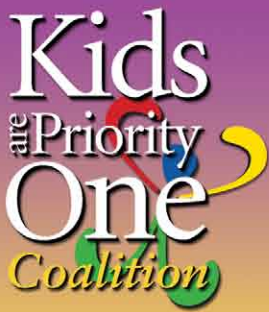
Why the Early Years Matter

The **future prosperity** of our society will be determined by the health and development of our children.¹ The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follow. Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time so getting things right the first time is easier and less costly than trying to fix them later. With “71% of Vermont children under five years old...in the care of someone other than their parents for at least part of the day,”² the stakes are high.

Moreover, because the brain is a highly integrated organ, we must encourage and stimulate equal growth of a child’s brain capacity. Social and emotional development are inextricably intertwined with cognitive development. Simply put, a good outcome for a child depends on a well-balanced approach.

Certain kinds of stressors in a child’s environment can derail healthy development. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. The first is known as positive stress, which is short-lived and not harmful, such as the discomfort of an immunization. The second is known as tolerable stress, such as the sadness of the loss of a family member. Tolerable stress can be endured with the help of supportive adult relationships. However, **toxic stress** damages the developing brain. It lasts longer, is characterized by a lack of consistent, supportive relationships and leads to lifelong problems related to learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health. Toxic stress is caused by certain circumstances such as extreme poverty, abuse, and severe maternal depression. The buffering effects that come from a strong and responsive environment of relationships determine the impact of various types of stress on the developing child.





Quality Matters CAMPAIGN

Why Quality Matters

Healthy development in the early years depends heavily on **an environment of nurturing, healthy relationships**. The interactive influences of genes and experience literally shape the developing brain. Healthy interaction between children and adults can be likened to the “**serve and return**” in tennis. Young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, etc., and adults respond by synchronizing and repeating the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back.

Early care and education programs³ that participate in quality rating or accreditation systems have demonstrated a commitment to following identified standards. Program leaders start to become attuned to certain key **effectiveness factors**—inputs that help ensure children’s healthy development. When early childhood educators regularly access professional development opportunities, they are able to learn the latest in research and maintain an ability to address children’s needs at various stages of development. In this way, public investments in early childhood education begin to pay off with the growth of healthy children, thus ensuring a greater return on the initial investment. Without these effectiveness factors, however, scientists have demonstrated that programs can actually have an adverse effect on a child’s well-being and development.

There are nearly five decades of research to help guide effective investments in early childhood education. Vermont has built on that knowledge base by developing, implementing and promoting the **Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS)**. This voluntary quality rating and improvement system helps parent consumers choose high-quality programs for their children. STARS also provides early childhood educators and programs with concrete and specific benchmarks for measuring quality. **National accreditation systems**, such as those offered through the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Family Child Care, also provide another quality “seal of approval.” The goal is to have enough high-quality programs to serve children statewide and a method to bring all programs along a quality continuum in a step-wise fashion.

Unfortunately for many Vermont families, the high cost of quality precludes their children from attending programs that would ensure good outcomes. It also helps explain the relatively small percentage of regulated programs in Vermont that participate in STARS or are nationally accredited. As of 2010, only 25% of eligible early care and education providers held a STARS certificate at any level, and only 5.2% of Vermont’s programs were nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. As high as tuition is for many families, early childhood educators’ salaries are low so turnover is high. This means children have to cope with the stress of meeting and learning to trust new caregivers. Furthermore, a lack of private and public funding has resulted in high caseloads among child care licensors, which leads to inadequate regulatory oversight. The large number of unregulated child care providers makes it hard to ensure that everyone who cares for and teaches our youngest citizens is offering quality child development services.



WHAT DEFINES QUALITY

The Kids Are Priority One Coalition looks to national accrediting bodies to define quality in center- and family-based early care and education programs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has developed ten program standards to define quality: ⁴

1. Relationships: The program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and to foster each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member.

2. Curriculum: The program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive.

3. Teaching: The program uses developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate and effective teaching approaches that enhance each child's learning and development in the context of the program's curriculum goals.

4. Assessment of child progress: The program is informed by ongoing systematic, formal and informal assessment approaches to provide information on children's learning and development. These assessments occur within the context of reciprocal communications with families and with sensitivity to the cultural contexts in which children develop. Assessment results are used to benefit children by informing sound decisions about children, teaching, and program improvement.

5. Health: The program promotes the nutrition and health of children and protects children and staff from illness and injury.

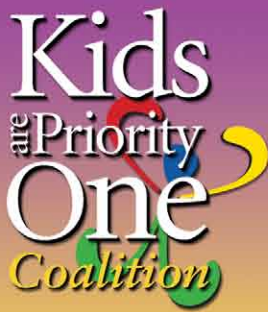
6. Teachers: The program employs and supports a teaching staff that has the educational qualifications, knowledge, and professional commitment necessary to promote children's learning and development and to support families' diverse needs and interests.

7. Families: The program establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture.

8. Community relationships: The program establishes relationships with and uses the resources of the children's communities to support the achievement of program goals.

9. Physical environment: The program has a safe and healthful environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments. The environment includes facilities, equipment, and materials to facilitate child and staff learning and development.

10. Leadership and management: The program effectively implements policies, procedures and systems that support stable staff and strong personnel, fiscal, and program management so all children, families, and staff have high-quality experiences.



Quality Matters CAMPAIGN

Solutions

Through its *Quality Matters Campaign*, the Kids Are Priority One Coalition is joining forces with partners statewide in proposing increased public and private investments in a combination of strategies aimed at improving the quality of early care and education services in Vermont. Our recommendations fall into three broad policy areas:

1. Provide the **resources and incentives** necessary for early childhood professionals and programs to improve the quality of early care and education by:
 - Establishing a **Quality Fund** designed to:
 - ◆ Increase access to professional development and training opportunities to support early childhood professionals in pursuit of professional degrees, teacher licensure, or other credentials in Early Childhood Education;
 - ◆ Help professionals and programs to reach and maintain high-quality standards;
 - ◆ Provide resources to support ongoing evaluation of the quality of the early care and education system.
 - Increasing the capacity of Vermont's higher education system to train, educate and support the early care and education workforce;
 - Implementing a statewide educational loan forgiveness / repayment program and/or increasing available scholarships for early childhood educators (including early intervention and early childhood special education professionals);
 - Amending the Next Generation Initiative of Workforce Development legislation (Act 46, 2007) to allow for inclusion of the early education/after-school care workforce as a priority area.
2. **Implement the public policies** needed to ensure that early care and education programs and early childhood educators meet minimum quality and education standards by:
 - Linking all public funding for child development services to quality standards and linking compensation to training for early childhood educators;
 - Developing a statewide plan to ensure that early childhood educators earn a livable wage and have access to affordable health insurance;
 - Increasing the number of licensors within the state of Vermont's Child Development Division to reflect the national standard.
3. Support community-based early care and education programs in achieving the quality standards required under **Act 62**, which permits school districts to partner with qualified programs in their community.



WHAT DEFINES QUALITY (CONT.)

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) also offers quality standards just for family child care programs. They include 289 standards divided into five content areas:

- Relationships;
- The Environment;
- Developmental Learning Activities;
- Safety and Health;
- Professional and Business Practices.

Although the Kids Are Priority One Coalition relies on NAEYC and NAFCC standards to define quality, the Coalition also supports Vermont's quality rating and improvement system (STARS) as a means for early childhood educators to move along the quality continuum.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

There is now extensive research showing how comprehensive, high-quality early learning programs are cost-effective investments.

Economists Arthur Rolnick and Rob Grunewald write, "The evidence is clear that investments in ECD [early childhood development] for at-risk children pay a high public return.... Compared with the billions of dollars spent each year on high-risk economic development schemes, an investment in ECD is a far better and far more secure economic development tool."¹¹

According to economist Dr. James Heckman, "Investment in birth to five early education for disadvantaged children helps prevent the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate and reduce overall social costs. In fact, every dollar invested in early childhood education produces a 10% per annum return on investment."¹²

Barriers to Providing High-Quality Early Care and Education

Several factors impede efforts to provide high-quality early care and education in all communities in Vermont and across the country: ⁵

- **Insufficient training and education of the early childhood workforce:** Many early childhood educators have difficulty accessing professional development opportunities due to geographic distance and/or out-of-pocket costs. Furthermore, institutions of higher education are not always equipped to meet the needs of existing early childhood educators who want to further their education, thus leaving providers without the means to meet higher educational standards.
- **Lack of consistency among caregivers/teachers:** Parent fees (which represent about 60% of total revenue in the early care and education system) cannot cover all the costs associated with providing high-quality early care and education. This in turn results in low wages with few prospects for a pay increase as one moves up the career ladder. Low wages, coupled with limited benefits (if any), make it hard to attract and retain qualified staff. The concomitant high turnover undermines children's healthy development, which depends on consistent relationships with the adults in their lives.
- **Ratios and group size that exceed recommended standards:** While better than some states, Vermont's ratios and group sizes for regulated early care and education programs fall short of standards recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. However, ensuring that a family child care provider or a center-based provider is caring for an age-appropriate number of children is expensive. While the state's Child Care Financial Assistance Program helps children from low-income families pay for child care, state budget constraints mean that income eligibility guidelines are set too low for moderate-income families to qualify for child care assistance. Yet most moderate-income families cannot afford to pay for high-quality early care and education services without financial assistance. Many early care and education programs are reluctant to invest in higher quality if they know doing so will make their program unaffordable to families in their community (higher quality costs more).
- **Inadequate facilities:** The size, location and condition of the facilities in which early care and education programs are situated are also benchmarks of quality. Vermont boasts some beautiful facilities and a Building Bright Futures Facilities Fund, administered by the Vermont Community Loan Fund, to help programs upgrade their facilities. However, the Fund has not been able to meet current demand. In 2010, the Vermont Community Loan Fund received requests totaling \$196,740 but only had \$69,745 available for facility grants. ⁶ However, U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders has requested a \$575,000 earmark for Vermont's Building Bright Futures Facility Grant Fund. These funds would go a long way in addressing the need for improved space in early care and education programs. ⁷
- **Insufficient regulatory oversight:** Program oversight also influences the quality of early care and education services. While "...Vermont is ranked number 4 [in the nation] for the strength of its child care regulations," it is ranked 44th for its "...ability to provide adequate oversight to child care programs, including routine inspections." ⁸ While the recommended licensor caseload is 1:50 (one licensor/50 programs), Vermont's licensor caseload is 1:199 (1:319 when legally exempt providers are included). ⁹ High caseloads make it difficult for licensors to visit programs regularly and provide ongoing technical assistance and support.
- **Large unregulated sector:** Informal child care arrangements often work very well as an alternative to regulated early care and education. However, chronic shortages of accessible, affordable quality child care often force parents to rely on informal, short-term child care arrangements. These short-term situations undermine children's ability to bond with a caregiver, thus compromising healthy child development. While Vermont currently has no way of determining exactly how many children are cared for through informal child care arrangements, national estimates suggest that 15.6% of children under fifteen are in non-relative care (in the child's home, a provider's home, a family child care program or with another non-relative). ¹⁰

What You Can Do

There are many ways to get involved in the Kids Are Priority One Coalition's *Quality Matters Campaign*, such as:

- Join the Kids Are Priority One Coalition's e-network so you stay up-to-date on campaign activities (go to www.kidsarepriorityone.org to sign up).
- Contact the Kids Are Priority One Coalition about participating in either the Coalition's Policy Committee or Organizing Committee.
- Work with the Coalition's Leadership Team to plan an awareness-building event in your community.
- Attend Early Childhood Day at the Legislature (visit www.kidsarepriorityone.org for more information).
- Let us know if you are willing to talk with your legislator about the importance of the early years.
- Ask your local school board to consider partnering with a qualified local early education program if your school district hasn't already entered into such a partnership.

For more information, contact Kim Friedman, Kids Are Priority One Coalition's Campaign Director, at (802) 348-9879 or kfriedman@svcable.net.

Kids Are Priority One is Vermont's statewide early childhood coalition that mobilizes organizations, individuals and businesses to ensure a good start for all children.



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ENDNOTES

¹ The Kids Are Priority One Coalition drew on research conducted and materials produced by the FrameWorks Institute (all of which are in the public domain) in the development of this document.

² Permanent Fund for the Well-Being of Vermont's Children, A.D. Henderson Foundation, and the Vermont Community Foundation, Understanding Vermont: Early Care and Education, 2010, p. 6.

³ In this context, early care and education programs include family child care, center-based child care, and private and public pre-k programs. While Early Head Start and Head Start also provide early care and education, they must adhere to their own performance standards.

⁴ National Association for the Education of Young Children, Overview of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, <<http://www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/OverviewStandards.pdf>>, October 19, 2011.

⁵ This section was excerpted from Vermont's 2010 application to the federal government for State Early Childhood Advisory Council funds (see pp. 5-9).

⁶ Email from Maria Lamberti, Loan Coordinator, Child Care Programs, Vermont Community Loan Fund, October 25, 2011.

⁷ <<http://sanders.senate.gov/services/approps-2011.cfm>>, October 25, 2011.

⁸ Vermont Child Care Advisory Board, Child Care: 2010 Legislative Report, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Administration for Children and Families, National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, United States Child Care Statistics, <<http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/statistics.pdf>>, June 10, 2010.

¹¹ Rob Grunewald and Arthur Rolnick, A Proposal for Achieving High Returns on Early Childhood Development, p. 28. [Online] <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/publications_papers/studies/earlychild/highreturn.pdf> September 23, 2010.

¹² Dr. James Heckman, University of Chicago. Letter to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Reform, pg. 3. [Online] <<http://eyeonearlyeducation.org/2010/11/16/nobel-laureate-to-debt-panel-invest-in-early-education/>> November 1, 2011.