

## Children and Families

### Supporting Young Children and Families

#### An Investment Strategy That Pays

##### Background

U.S. public investment in children typically begins only when they enter public school at age five or six. The care of young children before then is almost exclusively in the domain of parents. Yet many parents today are stretched thin, in both time and money. Despite the challenges facing young families, the federal government has provided little direct support.

Whether a single mother working the night-shift at a fast-food restaurant or a busy executive dashing home before the child care center closes, parents across the socioeconomic spectrum struggle to balance both their children's developmental needs and the demands of their employers.

Research has shown that the development of neural pathways in the brains of infants and toddlers is influenced by the quality of their interactions with other people and their surroundings. Growing up in healthy environments and engaging in sensitive interactions with parents and other caregivers in their early years provides children with life-long advantages and makes them more productive citizens.

At the state government level, there have been efforts to provide direct support to younger children and families. A majority of states have now adopted public pre-kindergarten programs and other forms of early childhood intervention. Attitudes toward public investment in the pivotal early childhood years are shifting, and the time is ripe for a new President to provide federal leadership in developing policies to support young children and their families as a key part of his domestic policy agenda.

##### Recommendations

The President should work with Congress to expand early childhood programs that have proved cost-effective and to promote tax and workplace policies to reduce burdens on young families. More specifically, he should:

- Provide federal funding for high-quality, center-based preschool programs for three- and four-year-old children, open to any family that wishes to enroll their



child, and fully subsidized for the poorest families;

- Send nurse home visitors into the homes of all first-time pregnant women in economically impoverished families, to promote sound prenatal care and the healthy development of infants and toddlers through age two; and
- Support young families at all income levels through a federal-state initiative to provide up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave after birth or adoption.

## Key Facts

- A large research literature documents the benefits of enrolling poor children in early childhood education programs: quantified in dollar terms, estimated benefit-cost ratios range from a conservative 2:1 for a generic program to 17:1 for the model Perry Preschool curriculum.
- Rigorously designed research has produced ample positive evidence of a program model that has public health nurses visit the homes of low-income families expecting the birth of a first child.
- California's Paid Family Leave program provides six weeks of coverage over 12 months after the birth or adoption of a child, with benefits equal to about 55 percent of wages. The federal Family and Medical Leave Act currently provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave.

A full version of this proposal, as well as supporting background material, is available at [www.opportunity08.org](http://www.opportunity08.org).

## About the Author and the Project

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Julia Isaacs is child and family policy fellow at the Brookings Institution. Her intergenerational analysis included in a 2008 volume, "Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America," revealed the extent to which parents pass on their economic advantages to their children. She has worked at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the American Institutes for Research, and the Congressional Budget Office.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.