

A man in a grey and black striped polo shirt is sitting on a bed, reading a book to two young girls. The girl on the left has long black hair with a white flower in it and is wearing a red floral dress. The girl on the right is wearing a pink dress. The book they are reading is titled "Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger's Birthday" and features illustrations of Winnie the Pooh and Tigger. There are other books on the bed, including one with a blue cover that says "SP... WA... S...".

policy  
report  
KIDS COUNT



# CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR FAMILIES

a two-generation approach

**ABOUT THE  
ANNIE E. CASEY  
FOUNDATION  
AND KIDS COUNT**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow.

KIDS COUNT®, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for all children.

At the national level, the initiative develops and distributes reports on key areas of well-being, including the annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*. The initiative also maintains the KIDS COUNT Data Center ([datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)), which uses the best available data to measure the educational, social, economic and physical well-being of children. Additionally, the Foundation funds a nationwide network of state-level KIDS COUNT projects that provide a more detailed, community-by-community picture of the condition of children.

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Additional data and information on ordering this report can be found at [www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org).

# CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR FAMILIES

a two-generation approach

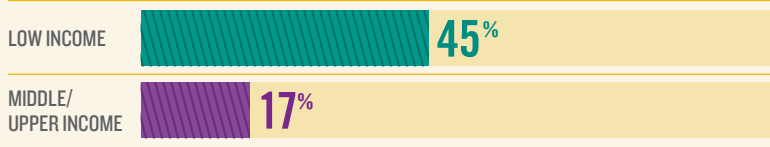
For many American families, every day is a juggling act involving work, child care, school and conflicting schedules. But for low-income families, the balls are more likely to fall, and the consequences can be dire when they do. A lack of reliable child care can mean fewer work hours or even a lost job. Weekly or daily shift changes require repeatedly stitching together a patchwork of care. Just getting to work is tough without dependable transportation. And for children in these families, early educational opportunities and extracurricular activities tend to be unaffordable luxuries as parents stretch pennies to keep the lights on.

FIGURE 1

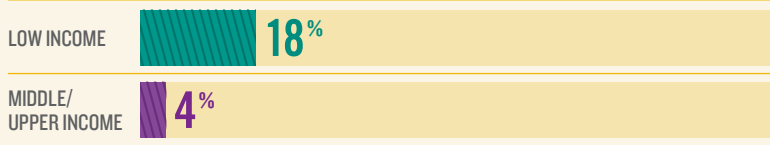
## Low-Income Families Face Greater Barriers for Children in the Early Years

Low-income families with children age 8 and under face extra barriers that can affect the early years of a child's development. Parents in these families are more likely than their higher-income peers to lack higher education and employment, to have difficulty speaking English and to be younger than 25.

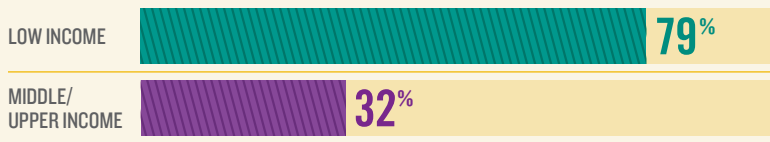
### PERCENTAGE HEADED BY A SINGLE PARENT



### PERCENTAGE WITH PARENTS WHO HAVE DIFFICULTY SPEAKING ENGLISH



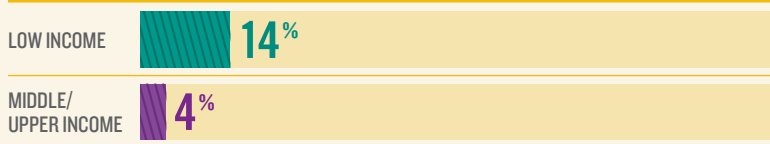
### PERCENTAGE IN WHICH NO PARENT HAS AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE OR HIGHER



### PERCENTAGE IN WHICH NO PARENT HAS FULL-TIME, YEAR-ROUND WORK



### PERCENTAGE WITH PARENTS UNDER AGE 25



In short, the 10 million low-income U.S. families with young children<sup>1</sup> face considerable daily obstacles that can threaten the entire family's stability and lead to lifelong difficulties for their kids.

For 25 years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has documented how America's children are faring to spur action that lifts more kids out of poverty and opens doors to greater opportunities. Despite the efforts of many, however, the cycle of poverty persists. More kids grow up poor today than a quarter century ago — a fact that we cannot solely attribute to the lingering aftereffects of the recession.<sup>2</sup> Yet we cannot give up: The future prospects of our children, our economy and our nation are at stake.

While the Casey Foundation continually seeks to improve child well-being through investments and reliable research to inform good policies for kids, we also have spent the past two decades promoting strategies to increase the financial stability of low-income families. A family-supporting job that provides a steady source of parental income and opportunities for advancement is critical to moving children out of poverty.

Furthermore, a child's success is strongly tied to his or her family's stability and well-being. An asthmatic child living in unsafe housing can become chronically absent from school, unable to focus on learning and, perhaps ultimately, unable to succeed academically. At the same time, poverty can undermine family stability.

**SOURCE** Population Reference Bureau's analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey.

**NOTES** "Low income" refers to families with incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. In 2012, this figure was about \$47,000 for a family of four (two adults and two children). "Middle/upper income" refers to families with incomes greater than or equal to 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold. Unless otherwise noted, "young children" refers to children from birth to age 8.

FIGURE 2

## What It Takes to Raise a Family

Many low-income families are headed by a single parent with no more than a high school diploma whose median monthly earnings cover just over half the basic costs of raising children.

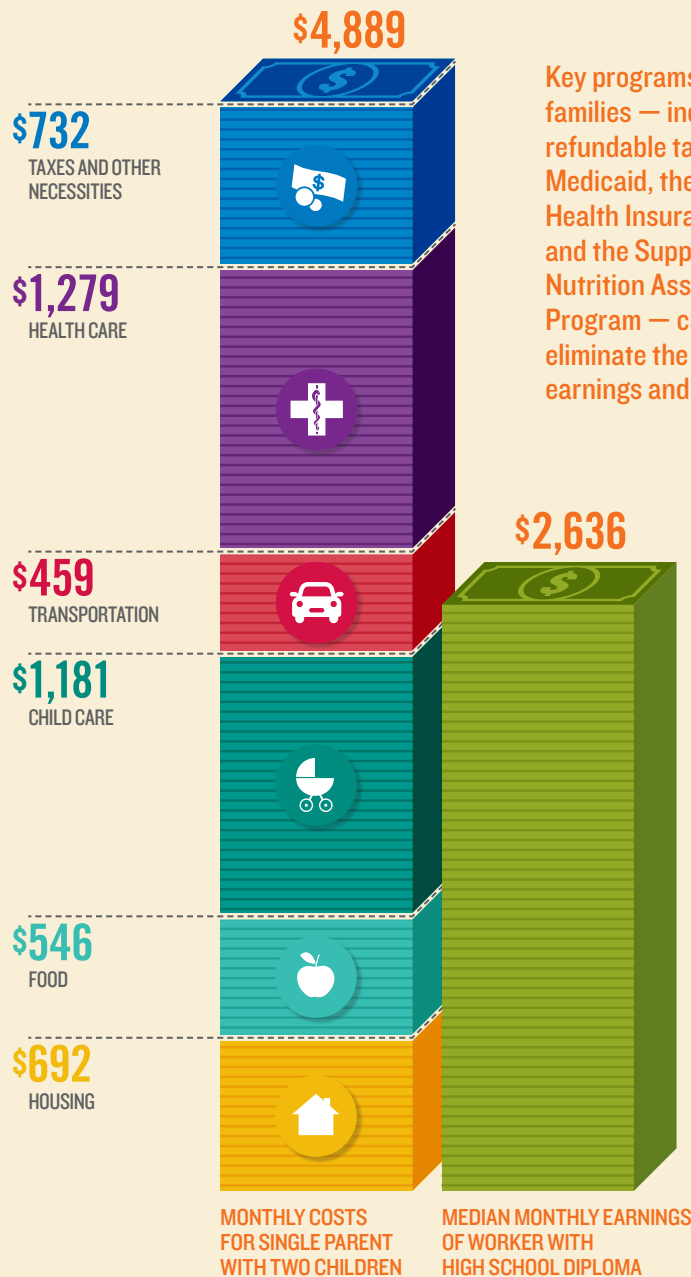
A parent working multiple jobs to make ends meet without paid time off struggles to foster his or her child's healthy growth on meager resources and bandwidth. A child raised in poverty is more likely to become an adult living in poverty — less likely to graduate from high school or remain consistently employed.<sup>3</sup> Forty-two percent of children born to parents at the bottom of the income ladder stay there.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing this connection between child and family well-being and future success, we and others in the public, non-profit and private sectors are exploring ways to address the needs of families as a whole.<sup>5</sup> This two-generation approach aims to create opportunities for families by simultaneously equipping parents and kids with the tools they need to thrive while removing the obstacles in their way.

### CHALLENGES FACING AMERICA'S LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

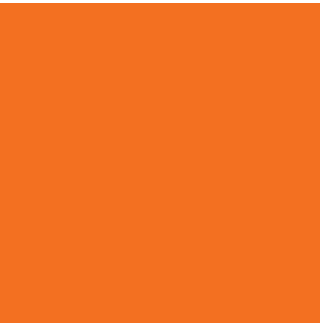
Today's low-income parents contend with a complex web of challenges — at work, in their child's care and education and at home — that exacerbate the inherent difficulties of raising a family.

**Inflexible, unpredictable jobs that do not pay enough to support a family.** The changes in our economy during the past few decades have compounded the strain of supporting a family. Gone are the manufacturing jobs that offered a reliable, decent income, plus benefits and a path to a career. The



Key programs for working families — including refundable tax credits, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program — can reduce or eliminate the gap between earnings and living costs.

**SOURCES** The Annie E. Casey Foundation's analysis of Economic Policy Institute, Family Budget Calculator, Topeka, Kansas (median). Retrieved from [www.epi.org/resources/budget](http://www.epi.org/resources/budget). And, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release, Nov. 1, 2013. Retrieved from [www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/wkyeng\\_11012013.htm](http://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/wkyeng_11012013.htm)



**Low-income parents with young children are nearly three times more likely to report having poor or fair mental health than higher-income parents.**

majority of today's well-paying jobs call for some level of higher education.<sup>6</sup> Now two incomes are required to maintain the same standard of living one manufacturing worker provided for a family years ago, which also means paying more for child care and transportation.<sup>7</sup>

In nearly 80 percent of low-income families with children age 8 or younger, parents have no postsecondary degree, drastically limiting their job prospects.<sup>8</sup> Their jobs often do not allow for time off to care for a sick child. Their schedules can be so unpredictable — fluctuating weekly, even daily — that they constantly must rework tenuous child care arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, children age 5 or younger in low-income families are more likely than their peers in higher-income families to have parents who identify child care problems as the impetus for changing, quitting or simply not taking a job.<sup>10</sup> Varying schedules and rising tuition costs also create obstacles to pursuing higher education that could help parents compete for better-paying jobs.<sup>11</sup>

**Lack of access to high-quality,<sup>12</sup> flexible and reliable early child care and education.**

Working parents regularly struggle to find the safest, most convenient and enriching child care, preschool or babysitter. Choices for low-income families are automatically limited by cost and erratic job schedules, as few child care centers accommodate last-minute changes or evening and weekend hours. Many parents rely on family,

friends or neighbors to watch their kids.<sup>13</sup> Although some do find safe and stable care, the affordable, flexible options in low-income communities often fall below standards of quality, to the detriment of their children's development. Children age 5 or younger in low-income families are more likely to have parents who report concerns about their child's learning, development or behavior than their peers in higher-income families.<sup>14</sup>

The ramifications are stark when children start elementary school. Less than half of kids from low-income families are ready for kindergarten, compared with 75 percent of those from moderate- or high-income families.<sup>15</sup> In later years, they continue to lag behind their peers academically and developmentally.<sup>16</sup>

**Stress at home, for parents and kids.** Parents play a central role in their children's lives and development, setting an example and providing emotional support, as well as fulfilling their basic needs. This is a tall order for anyone, and low-income parents must do so while constantly trying to make ends meet. If child care arrangements, public transportation, housing or steady income fall through, other elements can easily follow, throwing the family into a tailspin.

The strain is even greater for single parents, who shoulder all of the responsibility alone. Nearly half of low-income families with young children are single-parent households.<sup>17</sup>

TABLE I

## Financial Stability of Low-Income Families With Young Children by State: 2012

Nearly half — 45 percent — of American families with children age 8 and under are low income, and many do not have the essential tools to achieve financial stability. Additionally, in half of these families, no parent has full-time, year-round employment. This lack of parental employment varied among states. Alaska, at 64 percent, had the highest rate, while North Dakota had the lowest, at 30 percent. In nearly 80 percent of these families, parents do not have the higher education required for well-paying jobs.

Location	Population of Low-Income Families With Children Age 8 and Under	Percentage in Which No Parent Has Full-Time, Year-Round Employment	Percentage in Which No Parent Has an Associate Degree or Higher	Location	Population of Low-Income Families With Children Age 8 and Under	Percentage in Which No Parent Has Full-Time, Year-Round Employment	Percentage in Which No Parent Has an Associate Degree or Higher
	Number	Percent	Percent		Number	Percent	Percent
United States	9,976,000	50	79	Missouri	195,000	49	79
Alabama	172,000	52	82	Montana	29,000	44	67
Alaska	19,000	64	82	Nebraska	58,000	33	69
Arizona	236,000	48	80	Nevada	100,000	47	85
Arkansas	119,000	44	81	New Hampshire	26,000	52	74
California	1,277,000	51	83	New Jersey	203,000	51	79
Colorado	154,000	46	72	New Mexico	83,000	47	77
Connecticut	80,000	60	80	New York	559,000	53	76
Delaware	24,000	46	72	North Carolina	358,000	50	79
District of Columbia	13,000	58	80	North Dakota	16,000	30	59
Florida	588,000	49	75	Ohio	366,000	53	77
Georgia	383,000	49	80	Oklahoma	149,000	42	80
Hawaii	33,000	49	73	Oregon	126,000	50	78
Idaho	64,000	41	73	Pennsylvania	324,000	54	77
Illinois	378,000	48	79	Rhode Island	25,000	60	86
Indiana	228,000	49	77	South Carolina	174,000	54	80
Iowa	85,000	45	75	South Dakota	23,000	43	76
Kansas	95,000	37	77	Tennessee	226,000	48	82
Kentucky	162,000	52	84	Texas	1,035,000	43	85
Louisiana	171,000	52	85	Utah	103,000	37	62
Maine	40,000	54	78	Vermont	16,000	45	74
Maryland	128,000	54	79	Virginia	208,000	48	77
Massachusetts	139,000	60	76	Washington	196,000	54	75
Michigan	306,000	56	79	West Virginia	56,000	56	80
Minnesota	129,000	53	76	Wisconsin	147,000	46	77
Mississippi	137,000	55	78	Wyoming	16,000	37	65
				Puerto Rico	185,000	57	63

SOURCE: Population Reference Bureau's analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey.

TABLE 2

## Early Development and Child Care Concerns of Low-Income Families: 2011/2012

Children age 5 and under in low-income families are more likely to have parents who report concerns about their child's learning, development or behavior. They also are more likely to have parents who say child care problems led to changing, quitting or simply not taking a job.

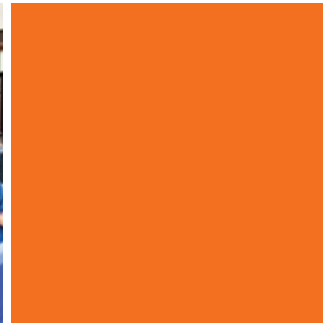
Location	Population of Children Age 5 and Under in Low-Income Families	Percentage at Risk for Developmental Delays	Percentage Whose Parents Report That Child Care Issues Affected Their Employment	Location	Population of Children Age 5 and Under in Low-Income Families	Percentage at Risk for Developmental Delays	Percentage Whose Parents Report That Child Care Issues Affected Their Employment
	Number	Percent	Percent		Number	Percent	Percent
United States	11,606,000	31	17	Missouri	225,000	25	18
Alabama	202,000	30	15	Montana	37,000	25	19
Alaska	26,000	24	17	Nebraska	70,000	22	11
Arizona	294,000	31	24	Nevada	123,000	28	13
Arkansas	134,000	31	18	New Hampshire	28,000	27	16
California	1,475,000	33	16	New Jersey	226,000	28	17
Colorado	169,000	31	17	New Mexico	103,000	26	17
Connecticut	80,000	33	24	New York	629,000	42	18
Delaware	29,000	28	19	North Carolina	409,000	29	18
District of Columbia	19,000	36	23	North Dakota	18,000	23	19
Florida	707,000	29	23	Ohio	425,000	21	17
Georgia	450,000	30	16	Oklahoma	168,000	31	12
Hawaii	40,000	32	18	Oregon	145,000	24	10
Idaho	77,000	23	11	Pennsylvania	374,000	28	16
Illinois	433,000	39	16	Rhode Island	28,000	27	14
Indiana	261,000	31	21	South Carolina	197,000	31	15
Iowa	96,000	32	14	South Dakota	34,000	26	15
Kansas	117,000	37	14	Tennessee	263,000	21	20
Kentucky	175,000	29	18	Texas	1,247,000	35	14
Louisiana	202,000	40	16	Utah	142,000	22	9
Maine	40,000	25	18	Vermont	16,000	30	14
Maryland	153,000	24	N.A.	Virginia	231,000	31	18
Massachusetts	143,000	37	26	Washington	227,000	32	20
Michigan	346,000	25	13	West Virginia	66,000	24	16
Minnesota	155,000	25	19	Wisconsin	180,000	29	16
Mississippi	156,000	38	15	Wyoming	19,000	27	16

**SOURCES** Child Trends' analyses of data from the 2011/2012 National Survey of Children's Health and from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 American Community Survey.

**N.A.** Data not available.

**NOTE** Children were classified as at risk for developmental delays if parents answered that they had concerns regarding any developmental areas that are considered predictive of delay at a given age.





Families of color or those with dual-language learners or children with disabilities also face significant challenges. Furthermore, low-income families tend to live in neighborhoods with high crime, poor-quality housing and low-performing schools, as well as a dearth of child care or enriching after-school activities for kids.<sup>18</sup> These factors make creating a safe, nurturing home environment even more difficult.

In trying to keep all of the pieces together, low-income families experience more daily stress than their higher-income counterparts. That stress inevitably touches their children.<sup>19</sup> Stress resulting from insufficient income and financial uncertainty can cause depression, anxiety and a greater risk of substance abuse or domestic violence — all of which can compromise good parenting.<sup>20</sup> Some parents lack strong support networks of family or friends to help lighten the load.<sup>21</sup> Low-income parents with young children are nearly three times more likely to report having poor or fair mental health than higher-income parents.<sup>22</sup>

### **ANOTHER HURDLE: PROGRAMS AND AGENCIES WORKING IN ISOLATION**

While providing critical help to many, some of the federal and state programs designed to help low-income families overcome their daily challenges operate in isolation from one another. These programs, which include child care assistance and job training, among others,

tend to focus on either children or parents — but generally not both.

Moreover, many of these programs were not designed for interagency collaboration. This rigidity filters down to the nonprofit, faith- and community-based organizations working with low-income families. Different funding sources, distinct definitions of success and narrow guidelines impede these organizations' ability to respond to the needs of children and parents in tandem.

Such limitations impact families in several ways. Many parents have no knowledge of the full range of programs that could benefit them and their kids. Even when they do, applying for and accessing different programs can be a full-time job.<sup>23</sup>

The programs themselves put parents' and children's needs at odds. Employment and job-training programs are designed for adults and don't necessarily factor in the child care required so that parents can be at work or in training, or the paid time off needed to care for a sick child or newborn. In addition, colleges often fail to acknowledge the reality of today's students: Nearly 25 percent of U.S. college students are parents — and almost half of them are single — yet child care options are in short supply.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, early childhood education programs and elementary schools generally do not address parents' financial and educational challenges or the broader family dynamics that affect a child's well-being. A parent who cannot attend a parent-teacher

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**To give families more opportunities to succeed, we must bring together programs for children and adults and take an intentional, coordinated approach.**

conference or school events may be dismissed as uninterested, rather than being seen as a parent struggling to work enough hours to make it through the month.

When families enrolled in some of these programs see a moderate increase in income, they can find themselves in jeopardy of losing the very benefits essential to helping meet their basic needs while they work toward financial stability.<sup>25</sup> Government programs that provide food and child care assistance, for example, base eligibility on family income. One study found that a mere \$0.50 uptick in hourly pay could result in the loss of a valuable child care subsidy — or a 25 percent drop in annual income.<sup>26</sup> That sudden loss could put families back where they started, potentially threatening their children's health and development.

### **AN APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING THE WHOLE FAMILY**

To give families more opportunities to succeed, we must bring together programs for children and adults and take an intentional, coordinated approach. In this section, we detail the three key components of this two-generation strategy.

**1. Provide parents with multiple pathways to get family-supporting jobs and achieve financial stability.** Having more family income, especially during a child's earliest years, can make a lifelong difference.<sup>27</sup> Research suggests that even modest increases in

income can result in improved child outcomes, particularly for young kids.<sup>28</sup> One study found that children whose family income was below the federal poverty level — which today is about \$24,000 for a family of four — completed fewer years of school, worked and earned less as adults, relied more on food assistance and suffered from poorer health than kids whose family income was at least twice that level. But an extra \$3,000 annually for these families during a child's earliest years could translate into an increase of more than 15 percent in what that same child earns as an adult.<sup>29</sup>

We therefore must create opportunities for parents to develop the skills necessary to increase their income and achieve financial stability by providing access to education and training programs that prepare them for today's jobs. Financial coaching can help families design strategies to manage income, plan and save for the future and build their assets — habits that create a crucial cushion to fall back on when the unexpected happens.<sup>30</sup> We also must make sure families can access state and federal programs that boost income, including the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Research shows such income supplements can also improve child achievement.<sup>31</sup>

**2. Ensure access to high-quality early childhood education and enriching elementary school experiences.** The evidence is clear: A solid

foundation in children's early years sets them up for success in school and beyond, paving the way for higher test scores, fewer behavioral problems, better job opportunities and greater income.<sup>32</sup> High-quality child care and early education that intentionally foster healthy growth and development are essential to that foundation.<sup>33</sup> Families need access to schools that provide effective instruction, address absenteeism and develop strong connections with parents. Greater coordination among early learning centers, schools and other programs for kids can further support healthy development from birth through the early elementary years.<sup>34</sup>

**3. Equip parents to better support their children socially and emotionally and to advocate for their kids' education.** A loving, nurturing parent can make a world of difference in any child's life — and can soften the negative impact of living in poverty. One cannot overestimate the significance of positive parent-child relationships as an anchor in the midst of uncertainty.<sup>35</sup> Such relationships give kids a much better chance of reaching their full potential.<sup>36</sup>

When parents are able to reduce their stress and anxiety, they can better respond to their children's emotional needs and help them weather substantial difficulties.<sup>37</sup> Parents therefore must have opportunities to take care of their own health — emotional, mental and physical. They also need to build connections with other parents, their community and people

## Building Paths to Opportunity for Parents and Children on New York's Lower East Side

Lourdes, a New York mother of two, had been working on her associate degree before her first son was born. But after his premature birth, her education took a backseat to doctor's appointments, specialist home visits and trips to the hospital. Instead, Lourdes focused on providing for her kids; going back to school was not an option.

Yet her job search kept hitting walls. She could not afford the child care she would need for her younger son, nor did she know anyone in her neighborhood to ask for help. Even after enrolling her youngest in the Educational Alliance's Head Start at the school her firstborn attended, she couldn't find a job that worked with their schedules.

Then her Head Start family advocate at the Educational Alliance asked if she would consider returning to school with the help of the nonprofit's College Access and Success Program, which helps Early Head Start and Head Start parents realize their own educational goals.

With some guidance from a staff advisor, Lourdes completed the necessary forms for her local community college and went on a campus tour. She also eagerly pursued all of the opportunities the nonprofit had to offer. These included classes on saving, spending and investing; a family book fair; and parenting workshops to deepen her insight into her kids' young minds. Through these activities, Lourdes met fellow parents who shared some of the same struggles.

This year, Lourdes is returning to community college to finish her associate degree in business management, with plans to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology next. Her long-term goal is to open her own child care center.

"Without [Educational Alliance] and all these workshops I've been to, I don't think I would have gotten as far on my own," she said. "It's not just school based. It really has helped me overall."



## A Focus on Mental Wellness for New Haven Moms

The New Haven Mental Health Outreach for Mothers (MOMS) Partnership in Connecticut meets low-income mothers where they are — at grocery stores, parks and other places in their neighborhoods. The partnership, a collaboration of agencies throughout New Haven, aims to help mothers overcome what they themselves have identified as major challenges in their lives. At the top of that list are getting necessities such as food and diapers, being socially isolated and dealing with stress.

Guided by the principle that family wellness starts with mothers, MOMS helps these parents reduce their stress. An eight-week stress management class teaches coping strategies. About

90 percent of the mothers who participated in the class this year have seen a decrease in their symptoms of depression, said Megan V. Smith, who directs MOMS.

Community ambassadors, who are mothers themselves, reach out to those who are more isolated and make referrals for assistance. Among the partnership's plans is to open one-stop centers in neighborhood businesses or organizations to address basic needs, as well as mental health and employment challenges.

By reducing mothers' stress, the MOMS Partnership aims to improve their ability to nurture their children's development and to get — and keep — a job to support their families.

who can support them in their journey and to be actively involved in their children's education from birth.<sup>38</sup> Programs such as the Nurse-Family Partnership® and Parents as Teachers, which include home visits with nurses or other trained staff, can help parents take care of themselves while fostering their children's development, particularly in the earliest years.<sup>39</sup>

Virginia's Comprehensive Health Investment Project (CHIP) offers a practical example of taking a whole-family approach. This successful program — which uses the Parents as Teachers curriculum in home visits with new parents — goes beyond the usual focus on maternal and infant health. Along with quarterly visits from a registered nurse, a parent educator works with participants to develop important skills, such as creating routines, managing their families and bolstering their children's health — all of which smooth parents' path to employment. Educators also assist families with achieving self-sufficiency goals, such as getting a driver's license, earning a GED or certification or pursuing higher education. CHIP has seen a nearly 40 percent increase in the number of families with one or both parents working at least part time after a year in the program.<sup>40</sup>

Addressing child and parent challenges simultaneously strengthens families and places them on firmer ground. This gives their children a more solid footing from the start, greatly improving their chances of charting a better course.

FIGURE 3

## Creating Partnerships to Build Two-Generation Approaches

Schools and early-education, home-visiting and job-training programs are just some of the existing platforms that offer opportunities to factor in the needs of parents and children at the same time.

### HOME VISITING

Home-visiting programs can help families move toward financial stability by building relationships with organizations focused on employment and financial coaching.

### JOB TRAINING

Job-training programs and community colleges can help parents access employment, high-quality child care for school and work and financial coaching to plan now and for the future.



### SCHOOLS AND EARLY EDUCATION

An elementary school or early-education program can collaborate with parents to expand their involvement in their child's development and create programs for their own educational advancement.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## creating paths to opportunity for parents and children

Beyond a moral imperative to reduce family poverty, there are practical reasons for adopting a two-generation approach. The workforce of today and tomorrow must have the skills and education to meet employers' needs and compete in the global economy. Investing in children and their families at key points in a child's development will place the next generation on a steadier path. We simply cannot afford to continue doing business as usual.

A great deal of evidence underscores the importance of increased income, early childhood education and parents' ability to nurture and advocate for their children, but none of these factors alone has been able to break the cycle of poverty in America. Although research is emerging on the effectiveness of approaches that simultaneously account for all three elements, several programs show great promise and provide an opportunity to further test and refine two-generation strategies to help families move out of poverty.

Here, we suggest changes that policymakers, businesses and community leaders can make to help whole families access the tools and develop the skills they need to thrive. Aside from identifying specific policies to increase income and opportunities for parents to support child development, we intentionally focus on linking systems and programs. These recommendations aim to achieve a greater return on our public-sector investments. While some proposals require new investments, others call for different ways of thinking and acting that can make us more efficient and effective in what we already do.

Three key principles undergird our recommendations. First, any policy discussion on what low-income families need must include their voices. Policymakers should create authentic opportunities to involve these families and recognize parents as experts on their kids and communities. Second, poverty and its host of negative consequences disproportionately affect children of color,<sup>41</sup> and any policies aimed at reaching their families must address the obstacles that have impeded their chances to succeed. Communities of color long disconnected from economic opportunity must be a priority. Finally, government cannot accomplish this alone. Businesses, communities and faith-based institutions also should play vital roles.

### RECOMMENDATION I

**Create policies that equip parents and children with the income, tools and skills they need to succeed — as a family and individually.**

- Increasing and making refundable the Child Tax Credit for low-income parents of very young children is a critical step toward easing the burden of poverty. In addition, expanding the EITC for workers without dependents would increase the income of noncustodial parents, enabling them to maintain child support and devote additional resources to their children.
- We must strengthen policies that allow parents who have limited education and job skills to earn a family-supporting income. The new Workforce Innovation



and Opportunity Act and the Higher Education Act, as well as other career pathways and apprenticeship efforts, should build bridges to affordable, quality child care and early education and other tools that enable working parents to play their dual roles. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) has the same potential. Policies should pay particular attention to the role of fathers in supporting their families and fostering their children's development. Pilot child-support programs, for example, are creating incentives for fathers to access training and increase their work hours while bolstering their parenting skills.

- States and businesses should adopt policies that give parents needed flexibility at work, such as paid time off (family and sick leave). California, New Jersey and Rhode Island have passed paid family leave laws. Businesses also can adopt family-friendly scheduling policies. For example, Costco — known in the retail industry for its high rate of productivity and low employee turnover — notifies employees of their work schedules in advance to help them balance family commitments.<sup>42</sup>
- Policies and programs should connect families with health care and newly expanded mental health programs now available to adults.
- Programs should recognize parents' strengths and help them take an active role in their child's education and development. They can incorporate ways for parents

to interact with fellow parents and build peer-support systems. Programs also should move beyond traditional parent involvement to offer leadership development and support over time.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2** **Put common sense into common practice by structuring public systems to respond to the realities facing today's families.**

- State and federal governments should use interagency commissions and innovation funds to promote public-private collaboration, align policies and programs and ensure that public-benefit policies help families move toward financial stability, rather than raising unintended obstacles.
- Federal leaders should incentivize child- and adult-focused state agencies to bring their data together to look at the whole family and develop a common set of outcomes, which could streamline their programs and processes. South Carolina, for instance, has long had an integrated data system that pulls participant information across multiple programs to assess effectiveness and inform policy improvements.
- States should adopt a no-wrong-door approach that encourages agencies to connect families with needed programs. Louisiana has embraced this concept, recently using SNAP eligibility data to automatically enroll kids in its Children's Health Insurance Program. State and

**Investing in children and their families at key points in a child's development will place the next generation on a steadier path.**



**To ensure that kids thrive and succeed from birth onward, we must simultaneously address the obstacles facing their parents.**

federal governments also should use online tools and other innovative methods for accessing benefits to streamline the process of applying and qualifying for programs.

■ Federal policymakers should take advantage of new legislation and reauthorization periods for policies such as the Higher Education Act (HEA) and programs such as Head Start and TANF to bring together adult- and child-focused programs. The HEA, for example, could expand federal tuition assistance programs to better accommodate part-time students. Head Start could pilot programs that connect parents with education and job training. Another Head Start pilot could have family support staff work with some children and families through the third grade to ensure that parents continue accessing medical and dental care for their kids, transportation and child care, among other necessities.

**RECOMMENDATION 3**  
**Use existing child, adult and neighborhood programs and platforms to build evidence for practical pathways out of poverty for entire families.**

■ Early childhood and K–12 settings should partner with educational, employment and job-training programs that foster family financial stability.<sup>43</sup> In California, United Way of the Bay Area is working with several community schools to embed programs that link parents with financial coaching, job-readiness assistance and other tools.

■ Policymakers should support further expansion of home-visiting programs. They could offer incentives for these programs to work with employment and training organizations to ensure that parents have what they need to foster their children’s healthy development. Goodwill Industries of Central Indiana, for example, has teamed up with the Nurse-Family Partnership to connect parents receiving home visits with educational and job opportunities, as well as other programs geared toward breaking the cycle of family poverty.

■ Policymakers should incentivize community colleges and employment and job-training agencies to partner with organizations focused on early childhood, benefit access and child care to design programs that help parents who are trying to further their education juggle work, school and family.

■ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Family Self-Sufficiency, Moving to Work and other supportive housing programs should connect families with early care and education, as well as tools to build financial stability. Initiatives such as the federal Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods, among others, could focus on creating opportunities for children and parents to succeed together within a community.

One successful model is the Siemer Institute for Family Stability, which helps families at risk of homelessness stabilize their housing and increase their income so that their children can remain in the same



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► Policymakers should take advantage of state financing options to pay for new two-generation models. States could use SNAP Employment and Training funding to provide job-training programs tied to specific sectors in local economies, along with quality early care and education, after-school care and transportation.

## CONCLUSION

For too long, public agencies and programs have focused on either kids or adults, without taking the entire family into account. Although these programs certainly have enabled some low-income families to improve their situations over the past several decades, millions have yet to realize, or even glimpse, the hope of a better future. We can, and must, do better.

To ensure that kids thrive and succeed from birth onward, we must simultaneously address the obstacles facing their parents. The ability of our children to enter and navigate paths to success has implications for all of us. The 17 million young children in low-income families today<sup>44</sup> will become tomorrow's parents, employees and leaders. Given opportunities to reach their full potential, they can become greater contributors to our society, building their own strong, stable families and communities and bolstering our economy. Their success translates into ours as a nation, making our future, along with theirs, that much brighter.

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