

Parents and Children Thriving Together

A Framework for Two-Generation Policy and System Reform





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Executive Summary

This brief explores the lessons learned from the 2016 *Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network (PACTT Network)*, a collaboration between the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Through this initiative, five states explored how to use the two-generation approach to improve their state systems that serve children and parents. This brief summarizes the lessons learned from the two-year initiative and provides a framework to help guide state leaders trying to implement two-generation strategies.

Introduction

In 2016, the NGA Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) partnered with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) to launch the *Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network (PACTT Network)*. The PACTT Network was a peer learning network to advance two-generation state policy strategies that promote and work toward the well-being of children and their parents or caregivers simultaneously, and create system change—through regulatory, administrative or legislative means—that alters how families are served by and engage with state government. NGA Center and CLASP provided two years of intensive technical assistance with support from Ascend at the Aspen Institute to five states — **Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, New Jersey and Oregon**ⁱ— to work toward statewide systems and policy change. Each state also received peer mentoring and a \$90,000 grant through PACTT.

This collaborative effort provided an opportunity for states to reshape child- and adult-focused services using the two-generation approach as a framework. In supporting the PACTT Network, NGA Center and CLASP intended to learn from the experiences of the PACTT Network states and disseminate the lessons and insights from the different approaches taken to better meet the holistic needs of families. Each state empaneled a team of senior leadership representing key state agencies, county and local stakeholders, and the governor’s office. These five state teams designed and executed plans that reformed policies, cross-trained staff, utilized data in new ways, and streamlined and aligned programs and practices to achieve a range of goals that supported the economic success and wellbeing of families as a whole.

The PACTT Network states designed their plans based on gubernatorial interest, emerging federal and state policy opportunities across relevant issue areas, and on a growing body of research on the importance of two-generation approaches. There is an emerging consensus that a successful two-generation approach should support parents in their dual roles as caregiver and provider, while addressing the care and educational needs of their children. Through improved and better coordinated policies and systems, states seek to improve family economic security; access to quality care and education for children; and access to programs, services and networks to support parents and help them advocate for their children and support their healthy development.

The two-generation strategies supported through the PACTT Network can be applied at the state policy level as a framework for increasing connections between state-administered programs and state systems to improve the lives of families with low incomes. States engaged in the cohort were supported in finding new and different ways to meet the needs of families with low incomes who interact with siloed, often complex systems.

Why a Two-Generation Approach?

Decades of national researchⁱⁱ have demonstrated that the well-being and success of children and parents are inextricably linked. Well-intentioned policy interventions operating in “adult-focused” or “child-focused” silos can fall short of meeting their goals because they do not take a holistic view of the population they are attempting to serve. However, promoting the needs of children and parents together is more likely to improve outcomes for whole families. “Two-generation” strategies seek to promote children’s learning and healthy development and parents’ success as both caregivers and breadwinners—giving families with low incomes a double boost in their efforts to achieve economic success and stability. Two-generation strategies reflect the reality that the well-being of parents is a crucial ingredient in children’s social-emotional, physical and economic well-being. Simultaneously, a parent’s ability to succeed in school and the workplace is substantially affected by the well-being of their children.



SYSTEMIC CHALLENGE	TWO-GENERATION ADAPTATION
<p>Fragmented state agencies with siloed data systems formulated by outdated policies</p>	<p>Set a statewide vision for families and encourage cross-agency alignment and coordination through the governor’s office</p>
<p>Disconnect between needs of working student parents and government supports for families</p>	<p>Change eligibility structures to expand access to childcare and other supports and adjust operational procedures (hours or scheduling) for parents to work and attend school or training programs</p>
<p>Inflexible state regulations and funding streams prevent community-based organizations from effectively providing customized and culturally relevant services to whole families</p>	<p>Promote practices with promising results at the state level and provide information about areas of flexibility and innovation within current programming to local agencies and communities</p>
<p>Low uptake and participant retention in effective state programs serving families</p>	<p>Develop recruitment and retention strategies informed by the experiences of families participating in two-generation or family support programs</p>
<p>Lack of engagement by families in the planning and implementation of solutions that seek to address the issues they face</p>	<p>Consult with families through community-based conversations to co-design policy and practice solutions that reflect the realities children and their caregivers face daily</p>

Why Focus on Systems Change?

While all systems consist of pathways and institutional structures that could be improved through increased coordination and capacity, a *two-generation* strategy for systems change must include the needs of the whole family, throughout every step. Systems change involves an intentional focus on the whole family by state leaders in developing, improving and assessing policies, practices and programs to change the way families experience and interact with state government. Two-generation system reform strategies offer the opportunity to impact more families at once and operate at a larger scale than individual programs to help families achieve broader goals beyond the purview of the programs themselves.

Developing and implementing a two-generation state strategy for systems change is complex and time-consuming. The work of the states in the PACTT Network demonstrates that systems change requires critical reforms on several levels, including:

- Family (e.g. engaging and listening to the voices of families, providing culturally relevant and customized services);
- Programmatic (e.g. changing eligibility structures, policies, regulations, operational approaches and funding streams); and
- Agency/State Level (e.g. collaboration and alignment across human services, education, health and workforce development agencies).

State systems are highly complex and include bureaucratic and technical structures that make it challenging to focus on the needs of individual families. If states want to improve outcomes for the families they serve, then fundamental changes are necessary at the family, programmatic and agency levels to create a policy and practice ecosystem with families at the center.

Two-Generation System and Policy Change at the State Level: A Framework for States

Undertaking large-scale, systemic changes in state government is difficult. States involved in the PACTT Network experienced successes and challenges in advancing this work. This brief outlines eight key action steps based on lessons learned from the PACTT project. It also provides state examples and questions that governors and state leaders should consider as they look to implement two-generation policy and system reforms in their own states.

ACTION STEPS FOR INTRODUCING A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

1. Define the Problem and Prioritize an Area for Action
2. Understand the Landscape
3. Build Leadership Capacity in Governor's Offices and State Agencies
4. Advance Cross-agency and Community Collaboration and Buy-In
5. Embed Family Voice and Prioritize Authentic Community Engagement
6. Prioritize Continuous Learning and Quality Improvement
7. Use Data for Diagnosis and Evaluation
8. Apply an Equity Lens Throughout the Process

1. Define the problem and prioritize an area for action

The concept of two-generation system reform is big. The advantage of the broad concept of the two-generation approach is that it can be applied to address many public policy problems and can improve service delivery for families across any number of state agencies. To move change forward, however, it can be advantageous for states to narrow and prioritize specific policy, program and funding areas that are ripe for action.

For example, **Georgia** identified challenges in the state’s early childhood and postsecondary education systems that reduced access to quality early education and postsecondary opportunities for families with low incomes and families of color. The lack of high-quality care and educational programs in certain geographic areas created barriers for parents and caregivers to attain the education, training and jobs needed for economic self-sufficiency. Georgia leaders developed clear goals around the alignment of early childhood and postsecondary education systems and remained focused on a clear action plan throughout the course of the project. Some states had to work hard to define the scope and focus of their project within the broader two-generation framework. Having a well-defined problem to solve or clear goal in mind allows states to identify the necessary actors to quickly move toward actionable results.

Directing more focused attention on two-generation outcomes within a specific policy area (or cluster of policies) may yield successful outcomes in some states. Some PACTT Network states also identified the advantage of starting with small goals and achieving “early wins” to build momentum and catalyze the adoption of the two-generation lens in state agencies. Put simply, states may want to start small and expand over time. **Minnesota** launched pilot programs in four communities representing areas in the state with some of the deepest disparities to understand how to equitably scale a two-generation approach at the state level and identify which policy levers impact family well-being. The state team also used early lessons to inform administrative changes and build intentional cross-agency partnerships.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- What are your state's strengths and weaknesses when it comes to serving the needs of parents and children together, especially among families with low incomes?
- What is your state's strategic interest in a two-generation approach?
- How does it relate to gubernatorial and agency priorities?
- What problem would a two-generation approach help solve?
- What quantitative and qualitative data are you using that tells you this is a pressing problem for your state?
- How have you ensured that your policy problems and solutions reflect the needs and experiences of the families in your state?

2. Understand the landscape

Two-generation approaches at the state level benefit from a robust understanding of what policies, programs and practices exist that can be integrated into a different way of serving families. In many states, two-generation programs have been operating at the local level. State approaches should be designed to optimize these local efforts and, in many cases, should seek to remove policy or funding barriers to strengthen local efforts. Strong policies and system reforms create an environment where strong programs can thrive, and strong programs help decision-makers understand which policies work and which need improvement.

The majority of PACTT Network states conducted landscape analyses to inform their state strategies. States did so through a combination of surveys and interviews with community-based organizations, local governments and other stakeholders to identify existing two-generation approaches throughout the state; assess which two-generation programs and policies were working well; and identify gaps or opportunities for improvement. The results of a landscape analysis are useful in scoping and prioritizing the work: figuring out what already is happening, what already has been tested, and what is working. The analysis can also help state leaders identify where there is opportunity to improve services to families by better aligning programs for adults and their children through coordinated service delivery.

Colorado had a history of using the two-generation approach and a strong body of existing work. The Colorado team participated in the PACTT Network to align and build on those efforts, which led to an informal assessment of existing programs and policy objectives across agencies to inform their statewide action plan. **Georgia's** Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) commissioned a formal survey tool to improve the state's understanding of the two-generation strategies being developed and implemented by community-based agencies. The survey endeavored to identify two-generation practitioners, assess what is or has worked well while implementing strategies, and determine what could be improved with funding and technical assistance. The survey's findings were used to inform state grantmaking opportunities that piloted two-generation strategies in communities across the state.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- What policy framework is in development or in place that guides how your state serves families?
- What two-generation work is in development or already in place at the state level?
- What cross-agency partnerships are in development or already in place?
- Are there IT and data systems in development or in place to support whole-family enrollment and service delivery?

3. Build leadership capacity in governor's offices and state agencies

Systems change requires leadership that can both elevate an issue and drive progress through state agencies. **Colorado** was in the fortunate position of having a newly created statewide vision and framework for advancing two-generation approaches to achieve systems change at the time the state was selected to participate in the PACTT Network. The state used its PACTT Network grant to hire a two-generation program coordinator in the governor's office to support all state agencies and their local government and non-government partners in adapting strategies to align with the two-generation approach. The team identified this as a critical action step to moving its two-generation work beyond the state Department of Human Services where it had been incubated. This strategic decision not only created the needed political leadership to move additional state agencies toward a two-generation orientation, but also the dedicated staff time necessary to effectively lead and manage such an effort.

In other states, where hiring staff was not an option, the buy-in and dedication of senior agency leadership to advancing a two-generation strategy proved essential. In **Georgia**, dedicated engagement by the commissioners and deputy commissioners across the early learning, postsecondary and economic development agencies proved key to gaining buy-in at every level and generating momentum around the state's two-generation strategy.

The states in the PACTT Network found it challenging to implement and track two-generation strategies without dedicated staff support. The **Minnesota** PACTT team addressed this challenge by using grant funds to support part of the time of a senior project manager from the Minnesota Management and Budget Office, who was ultimately elevated to the role of team lead, and leveraged other funding to engage with a consulting agency that helped facilitate statewide convenings to broaden the reach of an enterprise-wide strategy. **New Jersey** took a similar approach by using state funds to hire a consultant to serve part-time as a management and operations coordinator alongside the PACTT team lead. The state confirmed that this pairing provided much-needed support and relief to a complex and challenging statewide effort.

An important lesson from the states in the PACTT Network was that the loss of key staff as part of the lifecycle of agency turnover underscores the importance of relationship-building and identifying and supporting two-generation "champions" at all levels to ensure broad support to sustain the work.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Is there a commitment from the governor and senior state officials to use a two-generation vision for addressing the needs of families in your state?
- What additional or existing staff capacity will be necessary to advance your state's two-generation strategy?
- Are there two-generation "champions" within agencies at multiple levels, including among career staff who are likely to remain across leadership transitions?

4. Advance cross-agency and community collaboration and buy-in

Cultivating strong relationships across sectors and with local communities is a critical piece of developing and successfully implementing a two-generation state strategy for systems change. States in the PACTT Network found that they were able to build relationships and elevate the profile of two-generation issues by sharing decision-making power across interagency coordinating bodies, hosting statewide summits, and through strategic communication and staff training.

Children’s Cabinets, sometimes known as councils or commissions, are typically comprised of senior leadership of multiple state agencies with child- and youth-serving programs. They meet regularly to coordinate services, develop a common set of outcomes, and collaboratively decide upon and implement plans to foster the well-being of children and youth. **Oregon’s** Children’s Cabinet adopted a two-generation lens and developed cross-agency efforts to better support families across multiple policy areas. Oregon specifically partnered with a range of organizations in five communities in order to utilize Human-Centered Design when creating and implementing solutions. The conversations revealed that families who utilize supports have lived experience about how policies and processes work in practice rather than just on paper.

States used convenings as a tool for relationship-building, information sharing and achieving stakeholder buy-in. Statewide summits proved to be helpful tools to build momentum, raise the profile of two-generation state strategies, engage agency leadership, increase political buy-in to support statewide systems change, and gain support from community stakeholders. **Georgia** used PACTT funds to host several statewide summits for state leadership, agency management, field staff and community partners. The **New Jersey** PACTT team hosted a *New Jersey Parents and Children Thriving Together* statewide summit featuring the first lady of New Jersey, along with leadership from the Department of Human Services, to highlight evidence-based home visiting programs and act as a catalyst for a yearlong training cycle to rebrand and improve the Temporary Assistance for Children and Families (TANF) Initiative for Parents program. **Colorado** also hosted a statewide convening, *2Gen Statewide Conference: A Call to Action*, which brought together more than 200 thought leaders – including representatives from state, county and local government, nonprofits, business, philanthropy and research organizations – to catalyze the adoption of two-generation approaches. The event allowed participants to share information about current and planned two-generation initiatives in states, and to identify new strategies and opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

Minnesota developed a “2-Generation Policy Network” to convene, coordinate resources, and engage in deeper conversation about changes to policy, program and practice at both state and local levels. This collaboration of state agencies, counties, local and tribal organizations engages in shared learning opportunities to help advance two-generation approaches around the state. Minnesota also developed a “Principles to Practice” tool for state agency program managers to assess the opportunity to infuse a two-generation approach into existing policy, practice, funding and program evaluation. The guide was informed by the work of community-based organizations and state agency staff and exemplifies how local partners can influence the work of state agencies.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Are there governance structures in place that can support cross-agency decision-making?
- Are there relevant collaborations with local, county or community providers in development or already in place?
- How do nongovernmental partners fit into the state’s two-generation approach?

5. Embed family voice and prioritize authentic community engagement

Another key lesson from the work of the PACTT states is the importance of engaging families in the design and implementation of two-generation strategies. Policies often are designed around a preconceived notion of families with low incomes, rather than around the lived experiences of the families that policymakers serve. Including families in the design process from the beginning of a systems-change strategy can help identify opportunities and solutions policymakers might otherwise miss. Each of the PACTT Network states identified ways to incorporate family voice in their efforts. States conducted focus groups and interviews with families and sought ways to develop a continuous feedback loop to engage families in the assessment, modification, program planning and implementation of two-generation approaches.

The **Oregon** PACTT team traveled the state and interviewed families and community partners in five school districts to assess the conditions that were driving high rates of chronic absenteeism in the public school system, which was the focus of the state’s two-generation plan. State leaders collaborated with community partners who had established relationships with local families to build trust and to understand where there were opportunities for two-generation interventions. The state learned from those interviews that social capital is a component of what families with low incomes need to ensure their children are attending school regularly. As a result, the state piloted an online tool that incentivizes family goal tracking, peer resource-sharing, and online journaling. The idea behind this platform is to use data from the pilot to elevate family voices and inform public policies while providing a space that strengthens social capital networks and community.

The **Georgia** PACTT team built family voice feedback loops into their Two Gen Innovation Grants that were awarded to local community partners. **New Jersey** contracted with a local university to conduct focus groups with families that were participating in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) home visiting program to learn about their experiences. **Colorado** conducted an informal survey of state agencies, to better understand how and where the state was engaging families in program and policy discussions, and to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. Over the course of PACTT, the Colorado Department of Human Services established a new Family Voice Council, made up of 20 members who come together monthly to learn, provide insight and ultimately affect positive systems change.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- How will the state engage families in the development of a two-generation policy strategy?
- Are there existing family and youth advisory boards that can be incorporated into your state’s planning?
- Is there a process to evaluate the success of efforts to engage families and youth?
- Are there resources to provide food and childcare for families who attend state-led meetings?

6. Prioritize continuous learning and quality improvement

Several states in the PACTT Network launched pilot programs to evaluate the efficacy of two-generation programs and increase understanding of and gain community buy-in around the approach. In **Georgia**, pilots in three counties were tasked with identifying innovations at the local level to create better postsecondary connections for parents whose children were enrolled in state-funded early childhood programs. The first cycle of **Georgia** PACTT Two Gen Innovation Grants achieved promising results with the increased collaboration between early childhood development programs and postsecondary institutions without requiring additional funds. In fact, Georgia learned that grantees benefited perhaps more from the structure of required partnerships between child- and parent-serving organizations than from the funding itself. As a result, Georgia PACTT released additional requests for proposals to sustain the PACTT work — one focused on building capacity for sites that already have two-generation services, and the other aimed to provide implementation funding for sites that are new to two-generation work.

Minnesota piloted programmatic solutions in community-based organizations, including presumptive eligibility for parents seeking childcare subsidies and culturally specific interventions to address concerns raised by families and test out policy solutions before scaling statewide. State leaders also engaged in a continuous evaluation strategy to recalibrate the state two-generation approach as lessons emerged from the two-generation pilots.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- How are two-generation programs addressing the challenges identified in your state?
- What are the costs of successful programs?
- What criteria/measures will be used to determine a program's success or failure?
- What alternative programs/solutions might also address the problem?
- Does the design of a program allow for meaningful evaluation?



7. Use data for diagnosis and evaluation

States that applied to the PACTT Network were asked to design a set of strategies across adult- and child-serving systems, that when implemented would foster economic security among children and families with low incomes. The goal of the effort was to spur changes that could produce large-scale impacts for families with low incomes. NGA Center and CLASP asked applicant states to explain how their proposed approaches would contribute to that overarching goal, given the demographic and service delivery data on families with low incomes in their states.

Some states struggled to connect their demographic data to evidence of a need that could be addressed through two-generation state policy strategies and systems change. The lack of “whole family” data presented a challenge to analyzing the need for this approach. Some states in the PACTT Network were interested in aligning existing data systems to better understand the needs, service gaps and outcomes for children and their caregivers to serve whole families. A long-term objective in **Colorado** was to increase the state’s capacity to share and integrate data across various systems. PACTT participation helped advance the state’s efforts to create the Linked Network of Colorado (LINC), a state collaborative designed to securely share data to a centralized linking hub in state government. Colorado will use LINC to identify the population of student parents who receive other state benefits (e.g. TANF, SNAP and WIC) as a first step in understanding families enrolled in these systems.

Colorado was one of the states in the PACTT Network that was simultaneously participating in other philanthropic or federally funded data initiatives, which they were able to leverage to advance data interoperability. The availability of additional support from other technical assistance partners allowed the state to focus their data collection, sharing and analysis efforts throughout the project and develop a long-term data strategy for their state with a two-generation lens.

Developing a deeper understanding of where and how state agencies interact with families with low incomes requires intentional cross-agency coordination, as most agency data systems do not “talk” to each other to facilitate the linking of children to their parents across adult- and child-serving programs. **Oregon** used data to identify chronic student absenteeism as a marker of families who would need extra support, thereby establishing those families as the target of their two-generation state strategy. State officials worked to incorporate data from the Oregon Department of Education within the shared database in the Oregon Department of Human Services to help track the outcomes over time for children and their parents. In addition, the department expanded the statewide TANF assessment to include questions focused on the well-being and education of the children of TANF clients.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- What are the demographic characteristics (e.g. race/ethnicity, family structure, labor force participation, geographic concentration of poverty) of children and families with low incomes in your state?
- What is the degree to which such families are enrolled in various state programs?
- What is known about the lived experiences of such families through program participant surveys, focus groups or other activities?
- Based on analysis of the data, where do you see specific needs, barriers, service gaps and opportunities?

8. Apply an equity lens throughout the process

The PACTT Network asked participating states to consider the structural barriers to success that disproportionately impact families of color with low incomes in designing their two-generation strategies, such as inequitable access to educational and economic opportunities. A first step to incorporating a racial equity lens for many of the states was to better understand demographic data in their state and variability in access to family supporting programs. States disaggregated their program data to better understand racial or ethnic disparities in access or outcomes. **Minnesota** and **Oregon** used demographic data on race, ethnicity and poverty to inform the selection of pilot sites to take a data-driven approach to incorporating equity into their programs.

Multiple state teams hosted conversations about racial equity and sought opportunities to listen to the stories and voices of community-based organizations and families in this space. **Oregon** used the PACTT project to hold expansive conversations about how to integrate an equity lens into its two-generation strategy and ultimately adopted a broader equity frame that included race, disability and poverty. A critical component of Oregon’s learning was a facilitated conversation to understand how and why government agencies are adopting and using equity lenses. **Colorado** leveraged the cross-agency and communication structures established through PACTT to establish the Colorado Equity Alliance, a collaborative effort to operationalize equity and make sure it is woven into the fabric of state government. Consisting of representatives from 13 state agencies and 11 community organizations, the alliance meets monthly to review certain daily operations of state agencies through an equity lens, and to identify the underlying causes of opportunity gaps and establish policies and practices to address them.

Understanding how to practically incorporate a racial equity lens in programs administered by state agencies and throughout organizational culture is a deep learning process that requires intention. While data offers a starting point, more needs to be done to support states in identifying equity-based action steps and understanding how policy reforms that they pursue can be evaluated through a racial equity lens. States identified this as an area for further support in technical assistance initiatives.

QUESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Reflect on the three-pronged definition of “two-generation,” including family economic security; child development; and parents as caregivers. How does your plan address racial equity in all three areas?
- What information do you need to understand and assess racial and ethnic structural barriers?
- To what extent does your plan incorporate the voices of diverse families?

Conclusion

Two-generation approaches promote the needs of children and parents together to increase the likelihood of successfully generating better outcomes for whole families through intentional policies, programs and practices. A two-generation approach does not require adopting a new initiative or project, but rather can provide a new lens for improving existing programs and policies. Since parent and child well-being are so closely connected, two-generation strategies can advance governors' key goals whether they are related to children's school readiness, adult credential attainment, workforce readiness, poverty reduction and others. For example, if a state is striving to meet a credential attainment goal, a two-generation strategy can support this objective by making it more likely that parents can be successful knowing that their child(ren) are well situated. States focused on school readiness can both expand access to pre-kindergarten and other early learning opportunities while also considering the employment barriers that keep families from regularly attending programs (such as fluctuating work schedules and/or part-time programs that require parents to cobble together multiple child care arrangements) or develop strong family engagement and comprehensive supports to address a broader set of factors related to positive child development, which is likely to yield greater success in school readiness.

Ultimately, for a two-generation approach to be successful it should be connected to a state's vision of how to improve access to services, supports and economic opportunity for all families. As states move their policy agendas for families forward, a two-generation lens can strengthen the outcomes that they are able to achieve.

ⁱ States were competitively selected based on their responses to a request for proposals (RFP) launched by NGA Center and CLASP.

ⁱⁱ Robert St. Pierre, Jean I. Layzer, and Helen V. Barnes, *Regenerating Two-Generation Programs* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1996); Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, and Denise Polit, "Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children" (New York, NY: MDRC, January 1997), Retrieved November 1st 2017 from <http://www.mdrdc.org/publication/new-chance>; and Carolyn Heinrich, "Parents' Employment and Children's Wellbeing," *The Future of Children* 24 no. 1 (2014): 121-146

