

A Case for the Integration of Child Health, Parent Skill Building, and Early Care and Education

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The Policy Group for Florida's Families and Children recognizes the integration of child health, parent skill building, and early care and education as an essential step toward obtaining child and family well-being as described in the following key indicators of well-being:

- * All of Florida's **children** are healthy, safe and ready to learn at every age.
- * All of Florida's **families** are stable, nurturing and economically self-sufficient.
- * All of Florida's **communities** are supportive of families raising children.

The key evidence-based policies and practices that are required to achieve well-being are:

- * All **children and families** in Florida have access to affordable, quality:
 - ✓ health care;
 - ✓ parent and family support services (e.g., home-visiting);
 - ✓ early care and education; and
 - ✓ integrated health, economic and family support services.
- * All **communities** in Florida, in partnership with the state are supportive and provide for a comprehensive, integrated continuum of natural, primary and specialized supports and services that are available to all children and families.
- * All public and private **employers** in Florida promote family-friendly employment practices and a livable wage for all people who work.

The Importance of Integration of Child Health, Parent Skill Building, and Early Care and Education

The medical, scientific, and early childhood communities agree that young children's early developmental needs are primarily met through child health, responsive caregiving, and safe environments. The recommendations in *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), *Rethinking the Brain* (Shore, 1997), Carnegie's *Starting Points* (1994), and *Zero to Three's Heart Start, the Emotional Foundations of School Readiness* (1992) focus on maternal and child health services, parental supports, and increased investments and enhancements (particularly those that address the social and emotional development of children) for early care and education.

Furthermore, children benefit most when there are strong linkages between the supports. For example, parenting has the greatest impact on child health outcomes, and a key component of quality early care and education is parent involvement.

Providing these necessary supports – affordable, accessible and quality health care, parent skill building, and early care and education – for all young children and their families requires a combination of natural and extended family, community, state, and federal supports. Families are more likely to provide the “essentials” of health, safety, good parenting, and quality early care and education when they have adequate financial resources and a variety of accessible supports (e.g., through family, friends, and/or community services). When information is not readily available or accessing supports requires multiple calls for help, trips, applications, and interviews, the likelihood of successful family functioning diminishes.

Status of Integrated Services in Florida

Florida's public-sector programs for child health, parenting support, and early care and education have been incremental add-ons to existing health, welfare, and education programs (Stonecipher, 1997). Access is limited by funding, information, and lack of coordination. Although not-for-profit and faith-based organizations attempt to meet some gaps in services, funding limitations prevent access for all eligible and interested children and families. With a few remarkable exceptions, programs remain uncoordinated at the state and local levels, information on services are not coordinated for family access, and information on services is not consistently available to parents, and access to services is often difficult.

A Solution

Child and family well-being can best be supported through the integration of child health, early care and education, and parent skill-building. The Policy Group for Florida's Families recommends the institution of policies, practices, and stable funding levels sufficient to meet quality standards that will support communities in establishing integrated services for young children and their families. Such service integration must ensure that families have access to and continuity between wide arrays of high-quality, family-centered, flexible, primary and specialized services (from screening to treatment) through multiple points of entry. Some families will primarily utilize natural supports and need only information, and others will need intensive specialized supports.

Service integration can be identified through the following core criteria:

- * **Prevention Orientation** — Focuses proactively on front-end capacity-building, natural supports, and risk assessments that enable families, and ultimately the service system to reduce the need for preventable, long-term and costly interventions.
- * **Holistic Service Delivery** — Views the family as the client and considers the broader ecological contexts in which families grow and develop.
- * **Evidence-based Practice and Programs** — Builds on logic models and theories of change that are research supported and evidence based.
- * **Supported Front-line Staff and Highly Skilled Staff at all Levels** — Ensures that highly skilled staff are supported in operating as system managers, bringing together the appropriate array of needs-based resources and services.
- * **Flexible Fiscal Policies that Promote Integration and Quality** — Ensures adequate and stable funding to meet quality standards and provides the flexibility to align funding streams in order to provide better and tailored needs-based services.
- * **Local Community Decision-making** — Improves opportunities for community support and program sustainability due to the ability of communities to identify service needs and for providers to be responsive to those needs.
- * **Family Supportive Policies** — Facilitates ways home, school and community partnerships can balance the needs for stability and change for children and families; enabling families to shape and choose appropriate activities and services for their children and themselves.
- * **Continuity and Ease of Transitions** — Ensures that families have consistent service providers within an organization and that services provided by one entity complement services provided now and at later points in development with other service providers.
- * **Accountability** — Provides the evidence to determine the efficacy of decisions and their impacts for Florida's families and children.

The Vision

The vision of The Policy Group for Florida's Families and Children is that, together, we will ensure a generation of young people who grow up to be responsible adults — ready, willing and able to contribute to self, to family and to their community. As much as possible, families and their natural support systems (i.e., extended family, friends, and neighbors) ensure these outcomes for children. Many families require additional supports and rely on primary and specialized services at one or multiple times as they raise children. The Policy Group believes that to realize this vision of well-being for all children and families we must focus our thinking on identifying and promoting evidence-based policies and practices that produce healthy births, healthy child growth and development, educational success, family stability and safe and supportive communities. It is to this end that the case for integration of services is made.

The following outcome measures have been developed for each of the key indicators of well-being recognizing that they are inter-dependent and that achievements in one area will impact other areas. Because of this, some overlap in indicators is to be expected.

Healthy Children

The benefits of beginning and living a healthy life are enormous and long lasting. The consequences of beginning life unhealthy can be lifelong and costly. To safeguard our health, we need accessible and affordable health care. Particularly important is a healthy start prenatally and from birth. Children should have the supports and services necessary to live full, healthy and productive lives. It is our desire that **all children are healthy** as measured by:

- Increase in the percentage of pregnancies that are intended.
- Reduction in the number and percentage of subsequent pregnancies that occur within two years of the birth of the last baby.
- Increase in the percentage of pregnant mothers with access to and use of comprehensive health care in the first trimester.
- Increase in the percentage of babies born healthy (i.e., full-term babies weighing 5.5 pounds or more, born to mothers who did not smoke, drink alcohol or use illegal drugs during pregnancy).
- Reduction in the number and rate of substance exposed newborns (e.g., fetal alcohol and other drugs).
- Reduction in the neonatal and postnatal mortality rates.
- Reduction in the incidence rate of untreated or unresolved maternal depression.
- Increase in the percentage of children screened and receiving supports necessary for identified developmental delays and special health and developmental needs.
- Increase in the percentage of children appropriately immunized by the age of five.
- Increase in the percentage of children with vision and hearing problems detected and corrected by the time of entry into kindergarten.
- Reduction in the child morbidity rate.
- Increase in the percentage of children and families with access to appropriate health care and who can get needed medical care.
- Increase in the percentage of children and families with health coverage.
- Reduction in the rate of obesity.
- Increase in the percentage of children with acceptable BMI (i.e., Body Mass Index) scores.
- Increase in the percent of children and parents whose behavioral mental health needs are met.

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida's infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the growth rate of emergency room use and costs for primary care.
- Reducing the percentage growth rate in special education placements and costs.
- Reducing the growth rate of costs associated with specialized medical care for children.

Children Safe in their Families and Communities

The quality of life in our communities depends upon feeling and being safe in our communities. Children are among our most vulnerable citizens. They require protection and nurturing to help them grow up to become responsible, law-abiding and nurturing adults. It is our desire that **all children are safe** as measured by:

- Reduction in the number of homeless children.
- Reduction in the number of abducted or missing children.
- Reduction in the percentage of children harmed or killed due to violent crime.
- Reduction in the percentage of children who have "some indication" or "verified" evidence of being abused or neglected.
- Reduction in the percentage of children who have "some indication" or "verified" evidence of being re-abused or neglected within two years of the first report.
- Reduction in the rate of domestic violence in homes with children and/or pregnant mothers.
- Increase in the rate of treatment for children exposed to domestic violence and child abuse.
- Reduction in the percent of children dying from injuries.
- Reduction in the percentage of illnesses and deaths due to poisoning from environmental hazards or toxins.

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida's infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the growth rate of emergency room use and costs for injuries due to violence (e.g., murder, forcible sex offenses, robbery, aggravated assault, etc.) and non-violent crime (e.g., burglary, breaking and entering, larceny, theft, motor vehicle theft, etc.).
- Reducing the growth rate in use and costs of corrections and juvenile detention facilities and treatment programs.
- Reducing the growth rate of foster care homes and associated payments.
- Reducing the growth rate of adoptions subsidies.
- Reducing the growth rate of costs associated with child abuse/neglect investigations, protective supervision and court processing.

Children Ready to Learn and Succeed in School

Quality early education and care beginning in the infancy period should be affordable and accessible for all children. It is the first and crucial step in creating a well-educated work force and citizenry to help build better lives for Florida's families and a prosperous economy for Florida as a whole. Our best investment is to capitalize on the capacity for young children to learn in the early years and to teach our children how to live and work in our rapidly growing and complex world. At the outset, all children should enter school ready to succeed and continue to succeed as they grow. It is our desire that **all children are ready to learn and to succeed in school** as measured by:

- Increase in the percentage of first-time mothers who have graduated from high school.
- Increase in the percentage of children who are read to by their parents and relative caregivers.
- Increase in the percentage of children participating in quality early care and education programs.
- Increase in the percentage of children screened and receiving supports necessary for identified developmental delays and special needs.
- Increase in the percentage of children who reach their developmental potential in physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, problem solving, language development and in cognition and general knowledge based on a valid and appropriate school readiness screening tool.
- Increase in the percentage of kindergarten students who attended quality preschool or childcare programs.
- Reduction in the percent of children who are placed into special education in elementary school.
- Increase in the percentage of state investments in early education and care commensurate with K-college educational investments.
- Increase in the percentage of children served by quality early education and care programs (e.g., Gold Seal or other accreditation measures)
- Reduction in the turnover rate for early education and care workforce.
- Increase in the percentage of early education and care workers with CDAs and other credentials.
- Increase in the percent of early education and care centers that provide for continuity of care.

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida's infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the growth rate of remedial education costs.
- Reducing the growth rate of costs associated with alternative subsidized schools.
- Reducing the growth rate in costs of funding a fifth year of college for undergraduates.
- Reducing the growth rate of the number of children below poverty level with at least one parent or relative caregiver employed full-time.

Stable and Nurturing Families

Florida reflects a society comprised of four generations — children, parents, grandparents and super-elder great-grandparents. For all Floridians to participate fully in society, families need to thrive — children need to be able to grow to full potential and elders need to feel secure and believe they are needed. It is our desire that **all families are stable and nurturing** as measured by:

- Increase in the percentage of stable new families (i.e., with the first birth to a mother who has completed high school and is age 20 or older and with the father's name recorded on the birth certificate.)
- Reduction in the number of subsequent pregnancies that occur within two years of the birth of the last baby.
- Reduction in the percentage of teenage mothers who have second or more children.
- Increase in the percentage of intended pregnancies.
- Reduction in the rate of single women giving birth.
- Reduction in the separation and divorce rate.
- Reduction in the incidence of "some indication" or "verified" report of child abuse or neglect.
- Reduction in the percentage of children under the age of six in need of foster care services.
- Increase the percentage of children under age six in foster care who are placed in a permanent home within 12 months.
- Reduction in the average number of moves for children under age six within the child substitute care system (e.g., foster care).
- Increase in the percentage of families able to access and afford quality early education and care.
- Increase in the percentage of children with vision and hearing problems corrected by the time of entry into kindergarten.
- Increase in the percentage of parents and relative caregivers with parenting knowledge and skills to anticipate and meet the developmental and special needs of their children.
- Increase in the involvement of elders as contributing members of families.

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida's infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the need for and commensurate costs of teenage parent programs.
- Reducing the growth rate of cash supports for young people and parents who cannot compete in the labor market.
- Reducing the growth rate of foster care homes and associated payments.
- Reducing the growth rate of adoptions subsidies.
- Reducing the growth rate of the number of children below poverty level with at least one parent or relative caregiver employed full-time.

Economically Self-sufficient Families

Low-income and/or single parent families, some with inadequate or unsafe housing, face extraordinary challenges in providing the basic necessities of life. Such families are vulnerable to an array of social and economic challenges: unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancy, lack of an adequate education and the need for public assistance. Eliminating poverty is an initiative likely to strengthen our communities in many ways, not just economically. It is our desire that **all families are economically self-sufficient** as measured by:

- Reduction in the percentage of children under age six living in poverty.
- Reduction in the percentage of families with children under the age of six living in poverty.
- Increase in the percentage of welfare recipients leaving public assistance because of gainful employment or higher incomes.
- Reduction in the unemployment rate among parents with children under the age of six.
- Increase in the percentage of employed parents, with children under the age of six, who earn a “living wage”.
- Increase in the percentage of parents, with children under the age of six, who have advanced training beyond high school.
- Increase in the percentage of families, with children under the age of six, able to access affordable and quality early education and care based on the family’s and child’s needs.
- Reduction in the percentage of families, with children under the age of six, living in inadequate or no housing (e.g., homeless, overcrowded, lacking complete plumbing, lacking a complete kitchen, substandard, condemned).

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida’s infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the growth rate of foster care homes and associated payments.
- Reducing the growth rate of adoptions subsidies.
- Reducing the growth rate of cash subsidies to families who cannot earn a “living wage”.
- Increasing the growth rate of the tax base for Florida.
- Increasing the growth rate of Florida’s per capita income.
- Increasing the Gross State Product (due to higher earnings, increased expenditures, personal savings and investments) for Florida.

Supportive Communities

For Florida’s communities to thrive and for children to grow up to become contributing adults who take their personal and community responsibilities seriously, a stable neighborhood environment that nurtures and supports the four generations represented in our communities is essential. To maximize satisfaction, commitment and retention, employers need to provide high-quality jobs and supportive workplaces that support employees’ personal and family well-being. It is our desire that **all communities are supportive of families raising children** as measured by:

- Increase in the percentage of communities providing access to affordable, high quality early education and care.
- Increase in the percentage of people living in communities that provide activities and primary supports for young children (e.g., arts, recreation, resource centers) including those with special health care and developmental needs.
- Increase in affordable housing (e.g., less than 30 percent of income is spent on standard housing).
- Reduction in the percentage of people living in inadequate or no housing (e.g., homeless, overcrowded, housing lacking supports for individuals with needs for special physical accommodations, homes lacking complete plumbing and lacking a complete kitchen; substandard, condemned).
- Reduction in the rate of housing discrimination complaints.
- Increase in the percentage of people who volunteer an average of one hour or more per week in their community.
- Increase in the percentage of people making contributions to initiatives or charities in their communities through service contributions or through monetary or other donations.
- Increase in the voter participation rate.
- Increase in the percentage of employers (i.e., public, private and non-profit) involved in identifying and developing quality early education and care options for their community.
- Increase in the percentage of employers (i.e., public, private and non-profit) providing work-family benefits (e.g., flex-time or part-time employment, paid sick days for parents to attend to children’s illnesses, sick child care options, time off for parent-teacher conferences, time off for classroom volunteer opportunities).

If these positive outcomes can be achieved, when Florida’s infants and young children become older we will impact spending and save taxpayer resources by:

- Reducing the growth rate in juvenile detention facility use and costs.
- Reducing the growth rate of expenditures associated with homeless services.
- Reducing the growth rate of costs associated with employee absenteeism and turnover.
- Increasing the tax base due to home ownership, stable employment and increased productivity.
- Reducing the growth rate of costs due to vandalism and juvenile crime.

Endnotes

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The Policy Group is an independent, non-partisan policy research organization composed of local and state leaders who are working together to enhance the well-being of Florida's families and children. The vision of the Policy Group for Florida's Families & Children is that, together, we will ensure a generation of young people who grow up to be responsible adults — ready, willing and able to contribute to self, to family and to their community. For additional information about The Policy Group, this paper or other products, please visit our web site at www.policygroup.org. You may also contact the Executive Director as follows:

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