

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

MARCH 2015

Investing in quality early childhood development for all children



PURPOSE

This *Discussion Guide* focuses on the recommendation to “invest in quality early childhood development for all children.” It is designed to provide you with a better understanding of the issues involved and the barriers to achieving this goal. We also encourage you to use the [Action Toolkit](#) that accompanies this *Discussion Guide* to identify ways to bring this conversation to your community and take steps to make a difference. A digital version of both the *Discussion Guide* and the *Action Toolkit* is available at <http://forthesakeofall.org/take-action/>.



BACKGROUND

Children enter the world ready to learn, and our role as adults is to ensure that they are able to do so in safe, nurturing, and supportive environments. What happens during a child’s early years can affect his or her physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development and have lasting effects throughout life.

The definition of “early childhood” varies somewhat. Some believe it begins as early as before birth and up to age 8, but nearly all experts agree that the first five years of life are fundamentally important.

Why is early childhood so important?

- Most brain development occurs during this time. A positive and stimulating environment can nurture this growth. Toxic stress or neglect can disrupt it.
- Experiences in early childhood serve as the building blocks for future learning. This is also a time when developmental delays can be detected and addressed more effectively than later in life.

The impact of early childhood development goes far beyond the playground or schoolyard. One of the best-known studies on the long-term benefits of early childhood education found that young people, particularly those from low-income or high-risk backgrounds, who attended high-quality preschool programs were more likely to graduate from high school, own homes, and ultimately earn up to \$2,000 more per month.¹ Health benefits were also seen, including decreased risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes in adulthood.²

Race, income, and geography can all affect a child’s start in life. In the St. Louis area, an estimated 16,000 African American

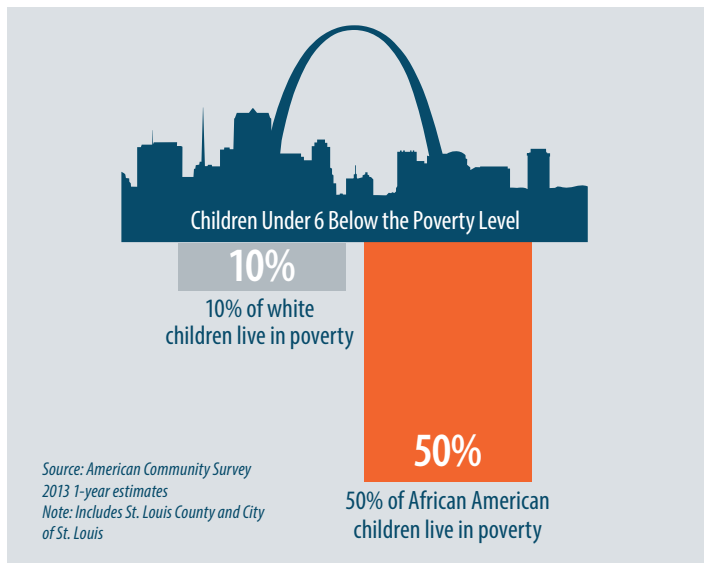
90% OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT HAPPENS BEFORE AGE 5



children under 6 live in poverty. This means that out of all African American children under 6 (32,000), 50% live in poverty, compared with 10% for white children.³ While most agree on the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences and programs, access and availability is not equal for all. Among low-income households nationwide, only 37% of 3- to 4-year-olds are enrolled in preschool, compared with 55% of all households overall, disproportionately affecting African American children.⁴

Access to quality, affordable child care is essential for parents who work. When child care costs rise, parents must often make the difficult choice to leave their children alone or in substandard care or risk losing their jobs.

16,000 African American children in St. Louis live in poverty



The state of early childhood in our region

Access to quality early child care is limited by its availability and affordability.

- In most of Missouri, licensed child care capacity only serves 25-50% of children under age 6 whose parents are working.⁵
- While federal child care subsidies are available, Missouri requires that families make less than \$23,520 annually to qualify – the lowest threshold of all but two states. Meanwhile, the average yearly cost of full-time, quality child care for a toddler in St. Louis County is \$11,000 and \$8,300 in the City of St. Louis.^{6,7}

Research shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood returns between \$3 and \$17 of benefit for society,⁸ yet investment nationwide has decreased over the past decade.

Out of 41 states with state-funded preschool, Missouri now ranks 38th in funding per child. Between 2012 and 2013, state spending per child dropped 24%, from \$2,726 to \$2,067.⁹

The need for a comprehensive approach

Meeting the needs of our community's children requires a comprehensive approach, starting at birth. This is especially true for families at a disadvantage due to income or other risk factors. This approach should include investing in and expanding access to:

- High-quality, affordable child care and early education programs
- Home visitation services for all families
- Parental engagement programs and resources
- Comprehensive health and developmental screenings



STRATEGIES

Expand access to high-quality early childhood care and education

Getting all children started off on the right foot is crucial to helping them reach their full potential. This can be achieved both by increasing the availability of high-quality early childhood programs and improving access for all families, regardless of race or income. Several strategies should be considered:

1) Reverse state spending cuts to early childhood programs.

The [Missouri Preschool Program \(MPP\)](#) was introduced in 1998 to expand high-quality programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. Despite the goal to increase access for all families, MPP currently serves just 3% of 4-year-olds.⁹ Similarly, [Parents as Teachers](#) has faced cuts in recent years, losing more than half its budget in 2011.

2) Relax income eligibility requirements, and increase child care subsidies.

As noted earlier, when it comes to federal child care subsidies, Missouri has some of the strictest eligibility requirements and lowest subsidy amounts in the nation. This leaves many low- and middle-income families struggling to afford child care.

3) Seek alternative funding and partners for early childhood programs.

Looking outside of federal and state education dollars offers new opportunities for early childhood investment. For example, the doors recently opened on the new [Flance Learning Center](#) in downtown St. Louis. The project was made possible by a combination of a national housing grant, private equity tax credits, and corporate donors.



There are numerous examples of programs that work.

Local examples include:

- Now an international program, [Parents as Teachers](#) develops curricula and trains professionals in its evidence-based approach, which includes home visits, group meetings, health and developmental screenings, and a resource network.
- [St. Louis County Library \(SLCL\)](#) was recognized as the “2014 Library of the Year” by the Missouri Library Association. In 2015, SLCL will partner with several area hospitals to provide all

new parents with a book for their babies and other materials to encourage families to invest in their children's early literacy.

- [University City Children's Center](#) is recognized regionally as a thought leader in early childhood education and serves as the founding school for the [LUME Institute](#). Their approach focuses on developing children from the "inside out," teaching skills needed for school as well as character and emotional development, while engaging the entire family and the community.
- Recognizing the importance of early intervention, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's [First Steps](#) program offers services and support for children from birth to age 3 with physical and developmental disabilities.

National examples include:

- [The Triple P – Positive Parenting Study](#) is a parenting and family support system designed to prevent and treat behavioral and emotional problems in children and teenagers. Triple P aims to equip parents with the skills and confidence they need to be self-sufficient and to manage family issues without ongoing support.
- [Head Start](#) and [Early Head Start](#) served 20,080 Missouri families in 2013. These comprehensive school readiness programs should be fully utilized in our community.
- The [HighScope Perry Preschool Study](#) and the [Abecedarian Project](#) have become two of the best-known studies on the benefits of early childhood education. The HighScope curriculum views children as active learners, who learn best from activities that they themselves plan, carry out, and reflect upon. Adults serve as partners in the learning process, encouraging children to engage in a wide variety of experiences. The Abecedarian model provided programming on a full-day, year-round basis; had a low teacher-child ratio; and used a



systematic curriculum of "educational games" emphasizing language development and cognitive skills.

Address quality in early childhood care and education

We must remember that the numerous benefits of early childhood programs only apply to "high-quality" programs. Strategies for better serving our region's children should also include improving the quality of existing programs and researching and promoting best practices.

1) Allocate funds toward evidence-based, effective programs.

Funding evidence-based programs offers the greatest return on our investment. Most experts agree on the hallmarks of high-quality programs: small classes led by qualified teachers; significant time spent on instruction, with an emphasis on social and emotional development in addition to academics; and a family-centered approach.

2) Track progress and standardize our approach.

Targeted investments include implementing a continuous quality improvement process with accountability measures and tracking kindergarten readiness.

There are several local organizations that work to address both access and quality in early childhood.

Examples include:

- [Child Care Aware of Missouri](#) works to ensure that families in every community have access to quality, affordable child care.
- The [Missouri Children's Leadership Council](#) promotes the well-being of children, youth, and families in the state of Missouri by effectively advocating for their needs and interests.
- The [St. Louis Regional Early Childhood Council](#) is working on building a comprehensive system that addresses the full range of early childhood needs for all children in St. Louis.
- [Vision for Children at Risk](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building strategic initiatives to improve the well-being of children in the St. Louis region.

EVERY \$1 INVESTED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD RETURNS BETWEEN

\$3 AND \$17 OF BENEFIT



Community
Investment

Community
Benefit



SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Early childhood is a crucial time in a child’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development and can have lasting effects on health into adulthood.
- High-quality early childhood education programs have been shown to provide many benefits for the child and the community. Research shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood returns between \$3 and \$17 of benefit for society.
- Many families, particularly those in low-to-moderate income households, lack access to high-quality child care and education programs, due to the limited number of programs available and cost.
- To help give all children the chance to reach their full potential, we must invest in improving the accessibility and quality of our region’s early childhood programs.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What are some of the factors you think could help a child’s early development?
- 2 What do you think makes an early childhood education experience “high-quality”?
- 3 How would you rate the quality and availability of childcare and early childhood education in your community? What opportunities do you see for improvement?
- 4 What are the greatest barriers to ensuring all St. Louis children have access to quality early child care and education?
- 5 How do race and socioeconomic background affect access to child development programs and resources?
- 6 Since parents and guardians are children’s first teachers, what are we doing to ensure that all caregivers succeed in this important role?
- 7 How do you think individuals and organizations in the community can help support early child development?
- 8 What types of resources and support could help to ensure all children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential?
- 9 Who in the St. Louis region is currently working to improve early child care and development?
- 10 What would you be willing to do to help improve the state of early childhood education in the St. Louis region?

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Funding for this project was provided in part by Missouri Foundation for Health. The Foundation is a resource for the region, working with communities and nonprofits to generate and accelerate positive changes in health.

ACTION TOOLKIT:

MARCH 2015

Investing in quality early childhood development for all children

Whether we're parents or not, we all benefit from helping the children in our region get started off on the right foot for future success. Therefore, we all play a role in ensuring that high-quality early childhood care and education programs are available and accessible to all families. Use the information below to guide your conversations with family, friends, neighbors, government officials, or the media, and choose among the list of suggested activities to guide your action. **Be a thought leader and an agent of change in your community!**

**TAKE ACTION!**
Be part of the solution.

There are many steps you can take to help improve the quality and accessibility of early childhood programs for all children.

Educate and inform:

- Read the companion [Discussion Guide](#) and learn more about the strategies provided to improve early childhood programs.
- Watch the video “[Two Lives of Jasmine](#),” available online at <http://forthesakeofall.org>.
- Review and use the “Talking Points” provided on page three.
- Explore research on the outcomes of early childhood development programs, such as the [Abecedarian Project](#) or [HighScope Perry Preschool Study](#).
- Share what you learn with your family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues — both face-to-face and through social media.
- Host a book club or discussion session with family, friends, co-workers, or members of your religious, social, or civic organization about the [For the Sake of All Report](#), briefs, and [Discussion Guide](#). Through a recent partnership with the [St. Louis County Library](#), copies of the report and Book Discussion Kits will soon be available at county library branches.

Donate:

Seek out organizations in your community that are making a difference by:

- Advocating for or improving the quality and accessibility of early childhood care and education.
- Offering support, education, and resources to parents and families of young children.
- Working to support early language and literacy development and improve school readiness.
- Providing early childhood health and developmental screenings and in-home visits for early intervention.

Learn more about these organizations and their work, and make an investment to support their efforts. Many also maintain wish lists of in-kind donations, such as books, art supplies, and educational toys and games.



Volunteer:

Give your time to initiatives and organizations that are helping to improve the quality and accessibility of early childhood programs in our region. Examples include:

- Through [Ready Readers](#), more than 500 trained volunteers read weekly to thousands of preschool children from low-income communities who attend 160 early childhood centers in the St. Louis area.
- Many Head Start/Early Head Start providers in the region welcome volunteers to assist in their preschool classrooms, including [Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis](#), [YWCA Metro St. Louis](#), [Grace Hill Settlement House](#), and [Youth in Need](#).
- Volunteer your time with an early child care or education provider, such as [University City Children's Center](#), [SouthSide Early Childhood Center](#), [Kingdom House](#), [Flance Early Learning Center](#), or one in your community.
- Volunteer at the [St. Louis Public Library](#) or [St. Louis County Public Library](#) to support their early literacy efforts. Even if you can't volunteer during the school day, you can lend your time to serve on a committee, assist with fundraising events or facilities maintenance, and help with advocacy efforts or other projects to help our region's early childhood program providers.



Organize and advocate:

- Write a letter to the editor or op-ed in support of increased state funding for early childhood development programs, relaxing income eligibility requirements, increasing child care subsidies, or efforts to ensure quality and measure improvement in early childhood programs.
- Contact your elected officials to ask them to support investment in early childhood development and education programs. Find out who your state legislators are at <http://www.house.mo.gov/legislatorlookup.aspx> and http://www.senate.mo.gov/LegisLookup/default.aspx/leg_lookup.aspx. Schedule a meeting, give them a call, write them a letter, or send them an email. Your state legislators are there to represent you, and the only way they know what is important to you is for you to communicate with them!
 - › Use the provided talking points and let them know your thoughts on what can be done to improve early childhood programs in our region. Encourage others to do the same.
- Host a community forum, discussion, or roundtable on the topic. Reach out to your networks, such as your school board or PTO, civic or service organizations, or religious groups. Invite a speaker or panel familiar with the subject, or enlist the help of a moderator to guide the discussion.





RESOURCES

Talking points:

- What happens during a child's early years can affect his or her physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development and have lasting effects throughout life. This makes the availability and accessibility of high-quality early childhood care and education all the more important.
- A comprehensive approach to early childhood includes high-quality child care and early education programs, home visitation services, parent resources, and comprehensive health and developmental screenings.
- By age 4, children from low-income families have 30 million fewer words spoken to them than children from higher income families.¹
- For every \$1 invested, society sees a return of between \$3 and \$17 in benefits, including reduced crime and public assistance, improved health, and higher education and employment rates.
- Race, income, and geography can all affect a child's start in life, and access to high-quality early childhood programs is not equal for all of our region's children. In 2011-2013, an estimated 28% of mothers who gave birth in St. Louis in the past year had incomes below the poverty level, affecting their ability to afford quality child care and education.²
- Access to quality, affordable child care is essential for parents who work. In most of Missouri, licensed child care capacity only serves 25-50% of children under age 6 whose parents are working. Missouri also has among the lowest subsidy rates and strictest eligibility requirements for federal child care subsidies in the country.
- Despite proven benefits, state investment for early childhood education has decreased nationwide over the past decade. Out of 41 states with state-funded preschool, Missouri now ranks 38th in funding per child.

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2. US Census Bureau. Social Explorer. 2013 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, Women 15 to 50 Years Who Had a Birth in the Past 12 Months By Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months. St. Louis County, Missouri & St. Louis City, Missouri.

Use these TALKING POINTS when informing others about investing in early childhood.



Sample social media posts:

When using these sample posts, make sure to include a link to the *For the Sake of All* website: <http://forthesakeofall.org>.

- 90% of brain development occurs before the age of 5. Learn more about the importance of early development on lifelong health.
- Every \$1 invested in early childhood returns \$3-\$17 of benefit for society, yet state investment nationwide is down.
- The impact of early childhood development goes far beyond the playground or schoolyard – check out what you can do to help.
- To help all children reach their full potential, we must improve the accessibility and quality of early childhood programs in STL.

By age 4, children from the poorest families will have **30 million fewer words** spoken to them.

instructions teaching
handwriting learners language parents lessons books vocabulary
children
writing read music

Media Tips:

Keep these in mind when writing a letter to the editor or op-ed piece.

- **Keep it short.**

A brief, well-written letter (200 words or less) or op-ed (700 words or less) is more likely to be published.

- **Make it relevant and timely.**

Your letter, op-ed, or blog post should be in response to something that was recently featured in the news or to a recent event, and it should offer a unique perspective on the topic.

- **Respond quickly.**

Ideally, you want to respond within hours so your letter or commentary is published online that day and possibly in the paper the next day.

- **Include your contact information.**

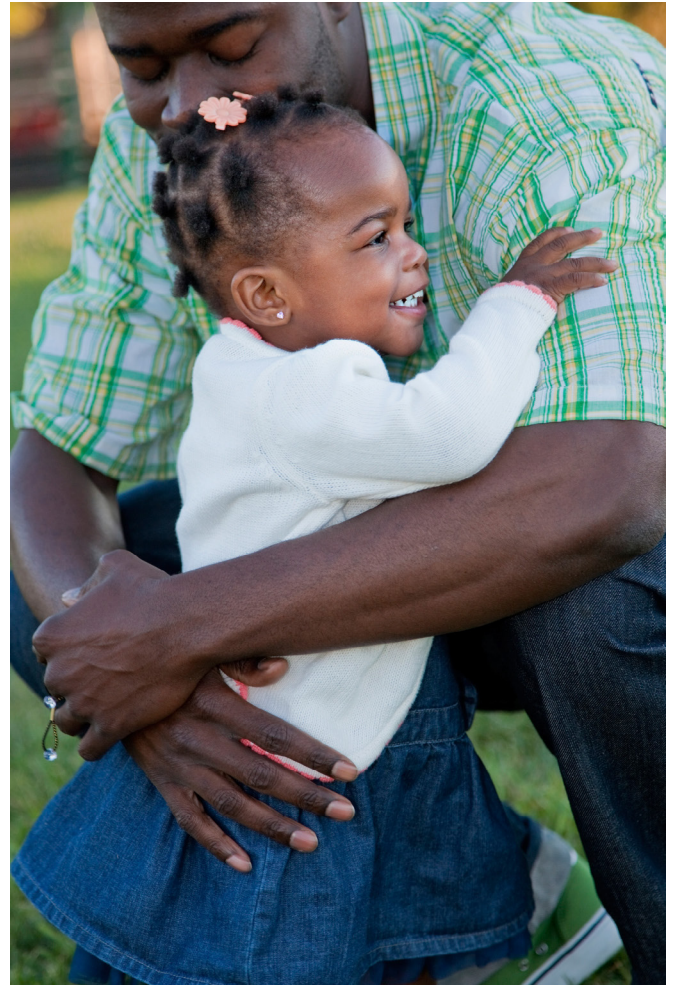
News organizations often want to verify your full name, title, organization, address, phone number, and email. They may also have follow up questions.

- **Take advantage of the comments section.**

Most people get their news online these days, and many are likely to express their views. Posting your comments is another vehicle for letting your voice be heard.

- **Use these resources to help.**

Go to <http://forthesakeofall.org/take-action> to find sample letters to the editor and guidelines from local media.



Personal Commitment Statement

What action will you take to invest in quality early childhood development for all children in our region?
