



## **First Five Years Fund Briefing on Early Childhood Education and its Positive Impacts on Health Outcomes for Children**

Good Morning!

I am pleased and honored to be here today and thank the First Five Years Fund and our other sponsors for giving me the opportunity to present a roadmap to guide our investment in our young children in order to prepare future leaders and reflective citizens. The remarks I will share with you today are based on more than thirty years of clinical and research experience working with Dr. Stanley Greenspan to develop the crucial guide for high quality childhood programs which will enable all children to reach higher emotional, social, intellectual and academic abilities so necessary for adulthood. Our work, at the Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders, is creating a new cadre of leaders who have the knowledge to help children establish healthy foundations for the future, offer prevention and early detection, and provide effective treatment for behavioral, social, emotional and executive function challenges, as well as developmental delays and disorders.

During the current financial crisis, infants and young children are more at risk than ever. Studies show that parents under economic strain are less involved, less nurturing, less vigilant, harsher in their treatment, more inclined toward depression, more enmeshed in marital conflict, and less consistent in their disciplinary methods than their economically stable counterparts.<sup>1 2</sup>

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Furthermore, infants and young children growing up with a single parent, and experiencing economic stress, have increased risk of developmental delays and mental health challenges. Not surprisingly, many of the concerns you just heard regarding young children in relation to medical and dental health, as well as obesity have underlying emotional and family mental health challenges.

High quality early childhood programs are needed more than ever to support families during these difficult moments. The current need of these families provides us an opportunity to invest wisely in future generations. Rigorous analysis of well evaluated early child development interventions, including the Perry Preschool studies, show that these programs generate a positive return to society, which ranges between \$1.80 and \$17.07 for each dollar spent on the interventions.<sup>3</sup> The quality of the early childhood programs is what will make the difference in the amount of the dollar return to society. Furthermore, evidence shows when you train people to work with their peers and help others, we not only wisely invest in new jobs, but see carryover to their families and children, another cost saving factor.

How will we do this? To do this we need the best roadmap for the building blocks and foundation we want to establish for every child and to do it better than ever. We now know the mind and the brain grow most rapidly in the early years as an outgrowth of interactions with caregivers. Social, emotional, language, and cognitive capacities, including the ability to regulate behavior, impulses, and mood, are all learned through interactive relationships that involve affective, emotional exchanges. This is the key. These exchanges provide a fundamental sense of relatedness which is the basis for resilience, the strength to overcome adversity. When

children are deprived of this relatedness, as we have seen in orphanages and many other settings, they fail to grow and their language and cognitive capacities do not develop well.

The regulation of behavior, impulses, and mood, as well as the development of executive functioning, is especially dependent on these early relationships. In the early affective, emotional interchanges, infants and young children learn to read and respond to emotional and social signals that enable them to organize their behavior, mood and impulses. High quality early childhood programs, which harness these affective interchanges and relationships, have been shown to have a positive impact on later school achievement, lower teenage pregnancy rates, increased employment, higher socio-economic status, and reduced criminal behavior.<sup>4</sup>

We are not talking about general emotional supportive interactions but very specific types of exchanges with caregivers which target the development of social problem-solving skills, creative and logical thinking, and higher levels of abstract thinking. In addition, every word in our language must be “lived first” and experienced in order to understand it fully in all its contexts. Saying so isn’t enough! Language, cognition, math, and quantity concepts are best learned through the active emotionally guided interactive relationships early in life.

High quality early childhood programs that foster these essential interactions must have several critical features:<sup>5 6</sup>

- Warmth and security
- Regulation, attention and focus so that the child does not become overwhelmed
- Relatedness and engagement

- Back-and-forth emotional signaling and gesturing
- Shared social problem solving
- The use of ideas in a meaningful and functional way
- Logical thinking and reasoning

These features constitute the new roadmap that shows us the experiences that determine how children will turn out when they become adults. For example, engagement and empathy begin with the first parent/infant exchanges and continue throughout life to fuel our understanding of, and caring for, the community and world we live in. Curiosity and logical thinking are the foundations of any kind of academic study, innovation, and organizational leadership. Regulation and initiative are the stepping stones for self-control and executive functions. And without building the crucial abilities of self-awareness, emotional balance, and discipline, the potential of even the most gifted child will be at risk<sup>7</sup>. And as a note of caution, the wrong type of programs or advice to caregivers, no matter how much they fall under the umbrella of “infant stimulation”, can create negative experiences which unfortunately can undermine this healthy development.

High quality childhood programs must not only provide a safety network by reducing distress in children and their families, but also facilitate coping skills, especially for empathy and reflective thinking in order to make the right choices. Furthermore, high quality early childhood programs should include educational opportunities for parents as an essential feature. This will enable all caregivers to acquire the skills to recognize, create, and enjoy the interactive experiences that build healthy minds in an atmosphere of warmth, acceptance, and empathetic

guidance.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as parents learn to provide these essential interactive experiences to their children, they grow and develop as parents and can heal and repair their past experiences when needed.

Actively and interactively promoting skills which help children focus and engage, communicate desires and emotions using gestures and language, create and share ideas and opinions, and learn to reflect will help parents minimize the odds that children will be side-tracked into negative behaviors and emotions. Parents and caregivers can help their children to develop strong problem-solving skills, good judgment, and healthy emotions, all of which can lead to less risk-taking behavior, including drug and alcohol use and precocious sexual activity. Children can learn to turn challenges into windows of opportunity that promote intelligence, morality, and emotional health.

Funding high quality childhood programs for our youngest members of society is critical. As indicated again, social, emotional, intellectual and academic abilities necessary in adult hood are being formed very rapidly in the days and months of the child's formative years. Before a child gets to school, much of the groundwork has already been laid. This doesn't mean that it's too late to play catch up later, and the benefits of mental health services in Head Start and Early Head Start have demonstrated significant favorable impacts on behavior problems and approaches to learning.<sup>†</sup> Early screening, early identification, and early intervention is the most effective, and most cost-effective, way to address behavioral and developmental issues. Catching up later it's harder and more expensive than doing it right the first time. Investing in high quality early childhood programs that use this new roadmap will not only help infants and children at

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risk, but also enable all children to reach higher emotional, social, and intellectual achievements, to raise the bar, so to speak, for all children in this new complex, competitive, and globalized economy.

Our model of human development provides a psychological framework for considering the kinds of family and educational practices necessary to create a reflective citizenry and institutions that can rise to the challenge of global interdependency.<sup>9</sup> This is not just an opportunity, but a mandate for this generation.

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<sup>3</sup> Karoly LA, Kilburn MR, Cannon JS. (2005). *Early Childhood Interventions. Proven Results, Future Promise.* RAND Corporation monograph series. RAND Labor and Population, RAND Corporation.

<sup>4</sup> Zoritch B, Roberts I, Oakley A. (2005). *Day care for pre-school children (Review).* The Cochrane Collaboration. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> Greenspan (1999). *Building healthy Minds. The Six Experiences that Create Intelligence and Emotional Growth in Babies and Young Children.* Perseus Books.

<sup>6</sup> Greenspan SI & Wieder S. (2006). *Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health. A Comprehensive Developmental Approach to Assessment and Intervention.* American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Greenspan (2007). *Great Kids. Helping Your Baby and Child Develop the 10 Essential Qualities for a Healthy, Happy Life.* Da Capo Press.

<sup>8</sup> Greenspan (1999). *Building healthy Minds. The Six Experiences that Create Intelligence and Emotional Growth in Babies and Young Children.* Perseus Books.

<sup>9</sup> Greenspan SI & Shanker S. (2004). *The First Idea. How Symbols, Language, and Intelligence Evolved from our Primate Ancestors to Modern Humans.* DaCapo Press.

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