A rigorous body of published research reveals that children who grow up in stable, responsive and nurturing households reap a lifetime of benefits. From infancy to adolescence and across adulthood, these children are healthier, exhibit fewer behavioral problems, use drugs less frequently, perform better in school and on the job, and are less likely to be incarcerated.\(^1\)

Equally well-established is the role of parents and other primary caregivers in supporting their children’s health and development.\(^2\) By contrast, studies show the toll taken when parents are unable to nurture their children. The economic costs alone are huge – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that in a single year, some 580,000 confirmed cases of child maltreatment cost the nation $124 billion.\(^3\)

Given the obvious benefits to society, including significant cost savings of children raised to thrive and become healthy adults, the federal government has long invested resources to support parents and strengthen parent-child relationships and the family environment, especially for vulnerable children. The payoff is evident in the direct correlation that has been documented between programs and policies designed to improve parenting skills and the greater capacity to raise a healthy child.\(^4\)

In its 2016 report, Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children 0-8, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine outlined a roadmap for the future of parenting policy, research and practice in the United States.\(^5\) The goal of the report was to help achieve better outcomes for children and families across the dimensions of cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, physical and economic health. Building on the report’s recommendations, Nemours Children’s Health System and the Health, Medicine and Society Program of the Aspen Institute convened a broad group of stakeholders in November 2016 to consider existing and new federal policies likely to promote effective parenting.

The Guiding Principles and Policy Recommendations in this paper that follow were informed by that convening, which brought together experts in health care and education from nonprofit organizations, government and academia to exchange ideas and insights. While there was no attempt by the group to reach consensus, there was considerable agreement about the importance of supporting parents and families to address their expressed needs and the value of a “two-generation approach” – defined as a “focus on creating opportunities for and addressing needs of both vulnerable parents and children together.”\(^6\) The convening paid special attention to the role that health care providers, early care and education providers and home visitors can play in engaging parents and primary caregivers. Participants underscored the value of mutual respect, trust and understanding between parents and providers, using a strengths-based approach. Participants also expressed interest in policies that support working parents.
SUPPORTING PARENTS TO HELP CHILDREN THRIVE

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Opportunities to support parents in pursuit of the goals they set for their children and families should be considered within a framework based on the following principles:

- All levels of government should continue their long-standing and critical role of promoting and strengthening child and family well-being and supporting parenting skills and competencies.
- Although parenting can be richly rewarding, it also brings many challenges. All parents are likely to benefit from support.
- Primary care, early care and education, schools, and home visits can all be part of a coordinated network of support for families. There is no wrong door for building parenting skills; each of these settings offers opportunities to support parents, learn about their needs, and build upon their strengths in ways that allow them to raise children who thrive.
- Programs, practices and policies that support parents should reflect a culturally appropriate, strengths-based perspective in which parents are engaged from a position of respect. Parents are the experts on their own families, and their wants, needs and goals should be respected and drive the kind of support they receive.
- Amplifying the voice of parents, and supporting parenting skills and competencies, should be foundational tenets of family-informed policymaking.
- Peer support and strong social ties are critical assets that can allow parents to learn from, and to teach, one another.
- The lives of parents have a profound impact on their children; two-generation approaches improve policies, programs and services that aim to create opportunities for vulnerable children and their parents.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Government support for cost-effective programs and initiatives that have strengthened parenting builds on the large body of evidence, cited previously, demonstrating that the family is at the foundation of a child’s well-being. Given the depth of the science, the President, federal agencies and Congress (as well as their state and local counterparts) should continue to support and improve policies, programs and messages that honor and reinforce parenting skills, competencies, and engagement, and promote child and family well-being.

The body of knowledge that has accumulated over the past two decades to guide policy decisionmaking and resource allocation, including tested and effective methods for family engagement, can serve as a North Star to the Trump administration and Congress. The recommendations that follow are intended to move policies in that direction, with suggestions in parenthesis as to which entities could carry out the recommendations.

Elevate awareness, scale what works and take down silos.

- Use the bully pulpit and convening power of the government to articulate and implement a vision and set of shared principles that center on supporting parents so that they, in turn, can support their children. (President, governors, executive-branch agencies and foundations)
- Develop executive-branch structures that include and emphasize the role of parents as primary agents of healthy child development and well-being across agencies, and foster systems integration and workforce cross-training. Possible silo-busting approaches include ensuring the role of parents is included in a Presidential Commission on Children and Families; a White House Council of Governors; an Interagency Task Force on Children and Families or a Cabinet position focused on children and families. (President and executive-branch agencies)
- Advance the recommendations of the 2016 National Academies’ Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8, which are designed to scale proven interventions, communicate evidence-based parenting information, and address research gaps. (Federal executive-branch agencies, Congress, states and foundations)

Build on existing programs and funding streams that impact parents and children.

- Promote opportunities embedded in the 2015 bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act, the nation’s core national education law. This includes fostering family engagement to promote parenting skills and competencies as part of state and local education agency plans and programs. (U.S. Department of Education)
- Identify and fully fund programs that strengthen parenting skills and help working families afford quality child care and pre-school to enhance learning (examples: Child Care and Development Block Grant; Head Start; pre-school development grants; and the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program). (Congress)
- Ensure that federal and state policy changes do not diminish health care coverage for families and the 36 million children served through Medicaid and support the reauthorization of the Children’s Health Insurance Program, as primary care is an important setting for strengthening parenting skills and competencies. (Congress, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and states)

Promote collaboration and innovation across government agencies and through public-private partnerships.

- Ensure that the lessons and best practices associated with Head Start’s family engagement strategies are leveraged in other federally-funded early childhood education and K-12 programs. (Administration for Children and Families)
- Implement the core recommendations of the “Joint Policy Statement on Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades,” issued by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2016, the statement calls for implementing effective family engagement policies and practices to improve outcomes. (U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, states, local education agencies, schools, and early care and education programs)
- Support community-based, public-private partnerships with a two-generation focus in order to improve family and child health and development. Such partnerships could pilot an approach that pools public and private resources and includes a core set of common reporting requirements, metrics and goals. (Executive-branch agencies, Congress, states, payers and foundations)
Strengthen parent supports through health care and home visiting.

- Incorporate two-generation approaches that address the needs of children and their parents into models, demonstrations and programs. Measures of success should have a return-on-investment time-frame of at least a decade, as well as interim metrics that chart progress along the way. (Executive-branch agencies, including Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, foundations and payers)
- Clarify to states through guidance the flexibility that exists under Medicaid to pay for evidence-based family-focused prevention programs, including parenting programs. (Department of Health and Human Services agencies such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Health Resources and Services Administration and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau)
- Ensure that federal children’s health programs, including the Maternal and Child Health Services Block Grant and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, support evidence-based parenting programs that are delivered through primary care settings. (Executive-branch agencies and states)
- Explore pathways to work with the existing flexibility under Medicaid to provide reimbursement for health care providers to implement evidence-based parenting programs. (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and state Medicaid agencies)
- Support reauthorization of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program with incremental annual increases to enhance the reach and impact of the program. (Congress)

Support parents and providers who care for children.

- Invest in cross-training of professionals who interact with children and families, including primary care providers, early childhood education providers and teachers. Systems of workforce and professional development should include technical assistance, and coaching and mentoring, so staff can better partner with parents, nurture their parenting competencies, and support their expressed needs. (Congress and foundations)
- Consider policy changes, such as paid family leave and childcare subsidies, that would enhance the living and working conditions of parents. (Congress)
- Ensure that effective parenting programs are available and affordable for all parents in primary care settings to promote the health and prosperity of America’s children. (Congress, foundations and payers)

CONCLUSION

As these recommendations highlight, a multipronged strategy of policies, programs and practices is essential to improve outcomes for parents and children. Making well-targeted investments now, evaluating them carefully, and adjusting as necessary, is a far sounder approach than paying the enduring costs of early childhood adversity. The engine of American democracy and prosperity depends on a commitment to strengthening the American family and supporting the caregivers who are nurturing the next generation.

REFERENCES


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