

POLICY BRIEF

**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION**

Protecting the Future of the Next Generation

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This brief is part of a series of policy recommendations for the administration of President Joe Biden. Focusing on a range of important issues facing the country, the briefs are intended to provide decision-makers with relevant and effective ideas for addressing domestic and foreign policy priorities. View the entire series at www.bakerinstitute.org/recommendations-2021.

Decades of research from a variety of disciplines, including neuroscience, economics, and anthropology, demonstrate that positive experiences and adversity in the first five years of life shape human development and are associated with health and economic outcomes in adulthood.¹ The health and well-being of children are vital to the future economic prosperity of a nation because early childhood experiences directly impact cognitive function, problem-solving, academic performance, and a host of other critical skills necessary for a nation's workforce to be competitive in a global market. Multiple factors influence developmental outcomes during early childhood, such as health, nutrition, early learning, parenting style, safety, and security, all of which interact with one another and create opportunities for intervention.² Although the United States is considered a world leader in many areas, the statistics regarding developmental outcomes for American children are concerning. For example, the U.S. has the worst child health outcomes of any other wealthy nation, despite spending more per capita on health care for children.³ Additionally, American children underperform academically—one measure of cognition, memory, language, and problem-solving skills—compared to children in other advanced, industrialized nations.⁴

Despite the evidence that American children are not reaching their developmental potential, the United States also lags behind other countries in ensuring access to evidence-based interventions to support healthy development. For instance, the United States ranks 28th in the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in preschool despite the plethora of research demonstrating the importance of preschool and early learning for development and academic success later in life.⁵ Moreover, although the U.S. recently enacted paid parental leave for federal workers,⁶ the U.S. is one of only five nations (i.e., Lesotho, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland) that do not guarantee paid parental leave for all sectors of the workforce.⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

The time for bold, decisive action is now. The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to irreversibly change the life course of millions of children in the United States. It has altered and exposed vulnerabilities in many of the systems that provide access to resources and opportunities that support human development. The massive loss of human life, economic and job losses for families, and closure of child care centers and schools created a trifecta for many



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families that could impact children’s long-term development.⁸ Therefore, children in the United States are at an increased risk for adverse outcomes now compared to prior decades, and policies to foster human development are long overdue. We have an unprecedented opportunity to improve the developmental potential of America’s children by enacting the following policies:

1. Bolster the child care industry through direct, forgivable small business loans

As witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, child care centers are vulnerable to closures due to small profit margins, regulatory requirements, and budgetary restraints that make it difficult for them to quickly adapt or pivot their business model in times of crisis. Yet, quality child care fosters brain development and kindergarten readiness in young children and promotes maternal employment; all are critical in ensuring a generation of healthy, productive youth. Federal loans could provide the stability and financial security many child care centers need. The loans should be structured such that the percentage forgiven is based on a tiered quality system that incentivizes child care centers to meet national quality standards and align their curriculum with best early childhood development practices.

2. Federal funding to support private-public pre-K partnerships, starting at age three

Decades of research demonstrate the importance of early learning in the trajectory of human development and economic success.⁹ Yet, access to pre-K is often limited for many families due to cost, availability, and quality. Moreover, state-funded pre-K programs often begin at age four, missing the critical window of exponential brain development that occurs from birth to age three. There are a few innovative examples across the country in which private investments have been leveraged to further public dollars and create access to quality pre-K for children most at risk of not realizing their full developmental potential.¹⁰ While those programs have demonstrated success, their overall impact

on the national scale is small. Federal funding to incentivize private investments in early childhood through tax incentives and a federal matching program would create a ripple effect throughout the country and thereby increase opportunities for early learning throughout the U.S.

3. Ameliorating inequitable barriers to education, jobs, and safe neighborhoods

The death of George Floyd reminded the country of the long-embedded racial inequalities that still remain in the United States. Yet, the development process for humans is similar across race, ethnicity, and cultures. Thus, differences in developmental outcomes are a consequence of the inequitable burden of adversities on certain populations and disparate access to enrichment opportunities across cultures. As the population of the United States rapidly changes across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines, it is imperative that this administration enact policies to ameliorate the effects of prior U.S. policies, which, even if they are not currently in effect, continue to have an impact. We recommend the creation of an Equity Task Force that is comprised of practitioners and researchers with expertise in housing and neighborhood revitalization, early childhood education, health disparities, criminal justice reform, and trauma. The Equity Task Force should have a mandate to examine existing U.S. policies for their disparate impact on U.S. residents and be able to influence the National Institutes of Health institutes and centers in soliciting research to address unanswered questions arising from the task force’s investigation. This will be the first evidence-based step toward enacting policies to ameliorate the impact of former U.S. policies on minority populations, helping to provide a safe, thriving environment for all children.

ENDNOTES

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