

INTRODUCTION

“The experiences children have between birth and age eight shape the developing brain’s architecture and directly influence later life outcomes, including economic stability, work productivity, and mental health. Positive early childhood experiences improve developmental and school readiness outcomes, increase K–12 achievements, and contribute to higher rates of high school graduation,” (Maine’s Early Childhood Development Standards, 2015).

The growth that happens during the first few years of life provides a unique opportunity for shaping and influencing our children and the people they will become. The brain undergoes significant growth during the first few years, doubling in size by the age of two and reaching nearly adult size by the age of four (Why 0-3 Matters [1], UCI). As it grows, the brain undergoes a process of strengthening connections that are used and “pruning” those that are not. This process impacts how a child thinks, learns, remembers, and interacts with the world. It lays the foundation for the adult that child will become (Why 0-3 Matters [1], UCI).

Positive experiences within the first few years of life help to support healthy brain development, while negative environments with high levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty interfere with this process (Why 0-3 Matters [2], UCI). Research indicates that the brain develops sequentially, starting with the senses: vision, hearing, and touch. Then moving onto areas that control language, and more complex processes including self-control and self-confidence (Why 0-3 Matters [1], UCI). A toxic environment early in life causes the brain to focus on survival functions, at the expense of developing more complex connections in other parts of the brain associated with language, self-control, and good decision making (Why 0-3 Matters [2], UCI).

Early childhood is an opportune time to prevent achievement gaps from developing (Educate Maine 2016). Whether the objective is to reduce crime, increase high school graduation rates, or provide children with an equal shot at success, evidence shows that early investments can make a difference in the trajectory of a child’s life (Issacs, 2008). It’s been shown that the quality of early care is the most consistent predictor of a child’s behavior and development (Cooper 2012). Those who participate in high-quality early education settings and experience regular, positive interaction with adults and other children, show up to school better prepared than those who do not (EducateMaine, 2015).

CHILDREN WHO PARTICIPATE IN HIGH QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION SETTINGS AND EXPERIENCE REGULAR, POSITIVE INTERACTION WITH ADULTS AND OTHER CHILDREN, SHOW UP TO SCHOOL BETTER PREPARED THAN THOSE WHO DO NOT.

- Educate Maine, 2015

Economists agree: investing in early learning programs, produces a higher rate of return than trying to remedy achievement gaps later in life (Cooper 2012). University of Maine Economics Professor, Phillip Trostel, was commissioned in 2012 to conduct a fiscal cost-benefit analysis of

the impact of high-quality early education investments for Maine. To conduct the analysis, Dr. Trostel assumed an integrated system of high-quality early education for ages birth to age four, full day, year round. He estimated this would cost approximately \$26,200 per child. He estimated

FOR EVERY DOLLAR INVESTED IN EARLY LEARNING, THERE IS MORE THAN A SEVEN-DOLLAR RETURN. - Trostel, 2012

that the initial public cost would be fully recovered by the time the child is 14 years old. The total lifetime government savings/benefit would be \$125,400 per child, an internal rate of return of 7.5% (Trostel, 2012). The savings are estimates, drawn from “longitudinal studies [which] show children who attend quality preschool programs are less likely to require special education, become a teen parent, commit crimes and are more likely to graduate from high school, and go to college,” (Trostel, 2012). Trostel argues that quality early education is a wise investment for Maine. “For every dollar invested in early learning, there is more than a seven-dollar return,” (Trostel, 2012).

Children who receive high-quality child care have better developmental outcomes and an increased likelihood of lifelong success (Cooper 2012).

STRATEGIES

A child’s environment plays a vital role in how a child grows, learns, and develops. The direct effects of poverty, including poor nutrition and unstable housing, along with more indirect effects, including high levels of toxic stress, and punitive and coercive parenting practices are associated with lower levels of kindergarten readiness (Why 0-3 Matters [2], UCI). For these reasons, the following sections include strategies for poverty and parenting, in addition to early childhood education and school age strategies.

POVERTY

Research in psychology, sociology, public health, and economics, have found that children are adversely affected by poverty, particularly in early childhood (Walfogel 2016). Poverty is closely linked to food and housing insecurity, and children are particularly affected by these conditions (Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children, APA). As shown in the Chart 1, the five-county region has some of the highest rates of poverty in the state, exceeding state averages (U.S. Census, ACS v2014).

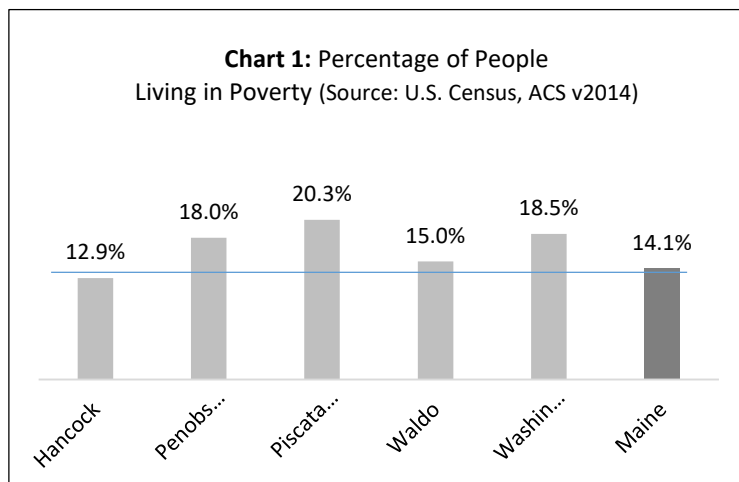


Chart 1: Percentage of People Living in Poverty, replicated from UWEM Community Needs Assessment, August 2016

Housing is a concern for all families, but for those living in poverty, finding safe, decent and affordable housing is a struggle. Poor quality housing is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in children. Residential instability is also important for children’s health and well-being. Multiple moves over time lowers a child’s ability to continually adapt (Levine Coley, 2013).

Poverty and economic instability often lead to food insecurity, thus impacting the quantity and quality of a child’s nutritional intake. Nutrition has a significant impact on brain development (Walfogel, 2016). Nearly one in four children in Maine are considered to be “food insecure” by

**NEARLY ONE IN
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FOOD INSECURE.**

- USDA, 2016

the US Department of Agriculture (Coleman-Jensen, 2016). Households that are defined as “food insecure” often face economic hardship that can lead them to skip meals or choose to purchase food that lacks nutritional value due to economic hardship. Hungry children lack the energy to focus and learn. Maine ranks 1st in New England and 18th in the nation in terms of child food insecurity (Educate Maine 2016). Two of the highest percentages of food insecurity occurs in

Washington and Piscataquis Counties (17% of the population). However, due to how population is distributed in Maine, the number of food insecure households is higher in Penobscot County (Hunger Pains, 2017).

Evidence shows that increasing a family’s income can reduce hardship, increase parents’ investments of resources in their children, and lead to increased achievement in school (Damon). Research and advocates recommend a variety of means to increase a family’s income so they can provide the supports necessary for their family.

Possible Actions

- Support programs that increase family income through
 - Housing vouchers or subsidy programs;
 - Childcare vouchers or subsidy programs; and
 - Healthy, nutritious supplemental food programs.
- Assist families in claiming the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits;
- Advocate for Family Income-Support Policies, increasing the Child Tax Credit, and minimum wage;
- Advocate to increase the number and availability of Housing Choice Vouchers for families;
- Support the local food movement; advocate to improve the food quality in schools and statewide efforts to address hunger; and
- Advocate for Family Income-Support Policies that extend federal programs and increase benefits to families, including extending and increasing the Child Tax Credit, increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and increasing the minimum wage.

PARENTING

In 1954 Dorothy Law Nolte wrote a poem- *Children Learn What They Live* - explaining that children develop based on their environment and the relationships in the lives, which is confirmed by current neuro-scientific research (Why 0-3 Matters [1], UCI). Maine’s Early Learning and Development Standards (2015) confirms that “all children can learn and learning is rooted in strong relationships. Families are early childhood educators’ strongest partners.”

Improving the style and quality of parenting can create a healthy living environment that helps children learn and thrive. Changing habits may require education and not all parenting programs are effective. New studies show that low-cost approaches have proven effective and can be meaningful to change specific parenting behaviors. For example, the Urban Child Institute, encourages parents to touch, talk, read, and play with their children. They argue these four activities are the most important for parents to consistently engage in with children. **Touch** allows your baby to feel safe and loved and instills trust between the two of you. **Talk** encourages language development, communication skills and voice recognition. **Read** aids in language development and the reading and writing that will blossom as your baby grows. **Play** has a key role in the development of problem solving, decision-making and creativity, and it can better a child's attention span.

The following approaches are encouraged by experts: parental programs, community-based group programs, and behavioral nudges (Sawhill and Putnam, 2016).

- *Parental Programs.* Research indicates that certain parenting programs have substantial positive impacts on families. According to the Institute for Research on Poverty, one of the most successful parental programs is an Nurse Family Partnership Program, a home visitation program for low income mothers of newborns and young children. Through this program, nurses conduct regular visits to low-income mothers starting during pregnancy that continue through the first few years of life. During this time nurses teach mothers about healthy behaviors, parenting skills, and long-term planning strategies to improve health and development outcomes for children. The program has been found to lower levels of abuse and neglect and to improve children's outcomes even into adolescence (Damon).
- *Programs in community group settings.* Group parenting programs provide an opportunity to address the isolation new parents sometimes feel by providing an opportunity to meet, connect, and learn new parenting techniques. Parents are more likely to be open to new ideas, change behaviors, or adhere to commitments made when reinforced by the group. Social media can be used to augment the group, help connect parents to each other while helping them access parental supports. (Sawhill and Putnam, 2016).
- *Behavioral nudges.* Providing information on norms, how to frame options, set goals, and provide timely reminders can have big impacts on behavior without a big investment of resources. Social Media can be used as a tool to share information on norms and encourage certain behaviors (Sawhill and Putnam, 2016).

CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

by Dorothy Law Nolte (abb.)

If children live with criticism,
they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they
learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they
learn to be shy.

If children live with tolerance,
they learn to be patient.

If children live with acceptance,
they learn to love.

If children live with honesty, they
learn truthfulness.

If children live with security, they
learn to have faith in themselves
and others.

If children live with friendliness,

Improving a child's environment at home and their relationship with their parents can have a

positive impact on their development and trajectory in life. The following are possible actions which focus on economic stability and parenting practices identified in the research.

Possible Actions

- Create materials and messaging to help inform parents and promote healthy behaviors, parenting skills, and long term parenting strategies;
- Support parenting programs similar to the Nurse Family Partnership program;
- Create or support group parenting programs to help new parents connect, learn, and access resources; and
- Utilize social media, 2-1-1, doctor's offices, or other outlets to help provide or promote the materials and messages developed.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Several decades of research demonstrate that high-quality, developmentally appropriate, early childhood programs produce short- and long-term positive effects on children's cognitive and social development. (NAYCE A Renewed Call to Action). At the same time, childcare is essential in single parent and dual-earner households. Thus, the demand for early childhood care and education programs continues to increase.

QUALITY

The quality of early childhood education programs varies substantially, throughout the country and here in Maine. There are a large percentage of child care classrooms and family child care homes that are mediocre or poor quality (A Call for Excellence, NAYCE). High quality child care can predict academic success, adjustment to school, and reduced behavioral problems for children. Developmentally appropriate teaching in preschool and kindergarten is a key indicator in a child's success. The first few years of school often predict how a child performs later in schooling, making the early grades even more important (A Call for Excellence, NAYCE).

HIGH QUALITY CARE CAN PREDICT ACADEMIC SUCCESS, ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL, AND REDUCED BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS FOR CHILDREN.

- A Call for Excellence, NAYCE

The State of Maine has created a voluntary **Quality Rating System** for early care and education providers that provides financial incentives for agencies to improve their programs.

The rating system involves four steps, from step 1 (the agency meets basic safety and licensing needs) to step 4 (the agency has structured programming, training for staff, parental involvement, policies, etc.) (Educate Maine 2016).

Unfortunately, only half of Maine's licensed child care providers are even enrolled in the system; and of these, only 17% have reached the highest standard of quality. Since 2004, Maine has dedicated very little public funding to supporting child care providers to advance along the quality rating scale (Educate Maine 2016). The Maine Quality Rating and Improvement System publishes monthly enrollment data. Table 1 lists the five counties, the number of Family Childcare Providers (FCP), the number Enrolled in QRS, and the numbers who have achieved the highest rating. Likewise, it includes the same statistics for Center Based Providers (CBP). Data was provided by Quality for ME as of April 2017.

Counties	Number of FCP	FCP Enrolled in QRS	FCP of Highest Rating	Number of CBP	CBP Enrolled in QRS	CBP of Highest Rating
Hancock	38	13	0	33	16	2
Penobscot	85	34	1	67	50	12
Piscataquis	9	6	0	10	8	4
Waldo	36	14	2	21	18	12
Washington	17	12	0	13	6	3

Table 1: Maine Quality Rating and Improvement System, Data for April 2017

High quality early childcare education exists throughout the five-county region. However increased enrollment in the QRS System, which encourages providers to progress along the rating system towards higher quality, ensures that high quality early education is available to more families.

ACCESSIBILITY

Access to childcare, especially high quality child care, is out of reach for many families (A Call for Excellence, NAYCE). Families often face multiple barriers to finding childcare including location, work schedules, transportation, and lack of information regarding the quality of childcare in their area. Lower wage families specifically have shifting schedules and non-traditional work hours. Other challenges include cost, cultural or linguistic factors, and availability of slots (Malik 2016). Researchers have defined access to early care and education programs to mean that parents can enroll their children in an arrangement that supports the child’s development *and* meets the parent's needs (Friese 2017). The four dimensions of Early Childcare Education access are: 1) requires reasonable effort, 2) is affordable, 3) supports a child’s development and 4) meets the parent's needs. The researchers further explain that access is especially important for higher needs populations in which high quality early childcare education could have the biggest impacts on school readiness and long term outcomes (Friese 2017).

PARTICIPATION

Enriching early education programs for three- and four-year-olds has shown to be both cost-effective and improve short- and long- term outcomes for children. There is strong evidence that the initial investment in these programs is cost-effective due to societal savings in the long- term (Damron). In Maine, early education participation among lower income children is below average, and even among higher income families fewer than half (48%) of 3 and 4 year olds are enrolled in preschool, which is below the average throughout New England. (Educate Maine 2016).

Maine law stipulates that every school district will have voluntary, universal public Pre-K for 4-year-olds available by the 2017/2018 school year. There has been steady progress towards this goal, but not all school districts have Public pre-k available, and enrollment is still low in many locations. The biggest barriers to creating public Pre-K programs are startup funds, space, and transportation (EducateMaine 2016)

Expanding publicly-funded programs for 4-year- olds will help Maine increase the number of

children who are kindergarten ready. To support this, Maine must also increase participation in high-quality child care programs among children from birth to age three (EduateMaine 2016).

Possible Actions

- Encourage and support childcare and early education programs to enroll in the State of Maine QRS system and progress to higher quality ratings;
- Create a collaboration of community partners to assist and overcome barriers that school districts are facing in expanding public pre-kindergarten; and
- Support or create high quality teacher training programs in order to create a pipeline of highly qualified early childhood education teachers to work in the five-county region.

SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

Early childhood experiences are cumulative, and children use the foundation created in early childhood to continue to build upon and expand their learning. As defined in the literature, early childhood lasts into third grade. This marks a time in life when students begin to transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Eduate Maine 2015 Report). At this point, students can use reading, and other skills they have accumulated, to build their knowledge, critical thinking, and problem solving skills in addition to learning to work in teams. These skills help to prepare them throughout school and beyond (Eduate Maine 2015 Report).

Students enter school with vastly different levels in vocabulary, skills, language, and preparation. They live in different environments, come from different families, and grow up in different neighborhoods. Their environment, including the skills, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors they learn, have a lasting impact on their educational experiences and trajectories in life (Phillips, 2016).

SCHOOLS DO NOT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO EQUALIZE VAST DIFFERENCES AMONG STUDENTS ON THEIR OWN.

- Closing the Opportunity Gap, 2016

Schools do not have the capacity to equalize vast differences among students on their own (Closing the Opportunity Gap 2016). Intervention outside of school is needed to help students get to where they need to be, and the earlier the intervention, the better. Low income students require greater support to close the opportunity gap because many start school further behind their more affluent counterparts (Phillips, 2016). Researchers have recommended three strategies including: tutoring, wrap around supports for youth, and enrichment and extracurricular activities (Phillips, 2016).

- **Tutoring** is a proven strategy for improving test scores, especially among low-income students. Competent, properly trained tutors, can effectively improve students’ academic skills in any grade. A well-designed tutoring program can provide students with a consistent, caring individual who will support them and encourage them and help them develop the skills to succeed in school.
- **Wrap around services** connect students to needed social services. Caring, competent adults assigned to students can assess their needs and strengths, and efficiently refer students to a coordinator of services or a direct service provider for needed supports.
- **Extracurricular activities** assist students in developing skills like teamwork, grit, and communication that will help them succeed in activities beyond school. Some schools have adopted a “pay-to-play” model that charge parents for children’s participation. Low income

students often cannot pay the additional fees to participate thus creating a gap between those who can, and those who cannot pay (Phillips 2016).

Possible Actions

- Support programs that assist students, especially lower-income students, to be successful in school at no cost to them, including: tutoring, wrap around services and connection to resources, and extracurricular activities.

INITIATIVES BY OTHER COMMUNITIES

Communities around the country have started Early Education initiatives that help to address many of the questions and issues identified throughout this report. Researchers stress the importance of providing funding for proven, high quality early childhood education programs; connect volunteers to existing programs; and create greater demand for private and public investment in early childhood (Walfogol, 2016). Below is a list of initiatives that align with the goals of this project.

- **Success by 6®** is a program implemented by communities across the country and supports a “whole child” approach to education focusing on cognitive skills, in addition to social and emotional development. The program focuses on raising the quality of early childhood centers, educating parents of their role in their child’s development, and intervening with specific children who need additional support.
- **United Way Center for Excellence in Early Education**, located in Miami-Dade Florida, is an innovative educational and professional learning initiative dedicated to elevating the quality of early care and education in the surrounding region. The center focuses on sharing practices with families, early childhood educators, and early care providers. They also work with business leaders and lawmakers to raise the standards of early childhood education.
- **Early Childhood Impact Council**, Berkshire, MA, engages its community through a model called Collective Impact: “In today’s environment, we can only achieve significant sustainable improvements when we unlock the strength of the entire community.” The Council set specific benchmarks for early childhood education: increasing percentage of children birth to five enrolled in early intervention, home visiting, and licensed childcare centers; increase the percent of early education programs that have reached a level 2 or better on the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRS) scale; increase the percent of Grade 3 students who report college aspirations; and increase family engagement.
- **Portland ConnectED**, located in Portland Maine, is a cross-sector partnership of organizations and individuals working together to build a civic infrastructure that will help our children navigate the journey from cradle to college, career, and community. The pathway to success is marked by four fundamental milestones: school readiness, third grade reading proficiency, high school graduation and post-secondary completion.

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