

Early Childhood: Where Our Future Begins

The marvelous years from birth through age eight is truly where our future begins. For young children, each moment is an opportunity to learn more about the world, practice social skills, and gain critical thinking skills and knowledge.

Early childhood experiences lay the foundation for later learning and shape whether children succeed in school and into adulthood. A good early childhood prepares children to take full advantage of their educational opportunities and to become effective citizens, capable workers, and loving parents of the next generation.

When we help create a better childhood for children, we help create a better future for everyone.

What Parents and Families Can Do

- Take time to watch, listen and appreciate your children.

Do your conversations with your children often sound like this, "Not now, I'm busy!" or "Hurry up, we're late!" or "Shh! I'm on the phone?"

Stop for a moment. Take time to really listen to your child. Quietly observe her as she plays by herself or with friends. You will get powerful clues about her thinking and her level of understanding.

You may also rediscover the simple joys of childhood. Your genuine interest in your child and her activities sends a powerful message that says, "I care about you!" and encourages her continued learning.

- Recognize the learning potential of play and everyday activities.

When your child plays, he is learning physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Respect and encourage his play. Through play children develop curiosity, self-esteem, language, problem solving, cooperation, mathematics understandings and much more.

Everyday activities also are good learning opportunities—matching socks, playing with measuring cups in the bath, preparing a grocery list, shopping. Aim for appropriate challenges: If the activity is too simple, your child may be bored; too difficult, he may feel overwhelmed and give up. Watch. As long as he remains interested, you're probably on the right track!

- Read with your child every day.

From simple picture books for infants and toddlers to chapter books for school-agers, reading together not only increases your child's language and knowledge but also creates stronger emotional bonds between you and your child.

Keep tabs on the amount and type of television your child watches. Watch TV with her and talk about what you've seen. Speak out in support of more television programming that promotes children's learning and social development in positive ways, and support limits on TV violence—especially during the hours that children are likely to be watching.

- Work with your child's teachers and others to improve the quality of early childhood services.

Spend time in and get involved with your child's school or care and education program. Talk to your child's teachers and program administrator. What steps are needed to make the program a better place for children to learn and adults to work?

Enlist the support of other parents and concerned adults. There are many ways to help out. For example, volunteers can offer their time and labor to build a new outdoor play structure or organize a scholarship fund. Your specialized skills or donations may be particularly welcomed.

- Help make your state and community more attuned to children's needs.

Speak out about what families need to help children grow and learn. Share your own story and encourage other parents to do the same. Urge local employers and businesses to assist families with young children by providing flexible scheduling, parental leave, and child care assistance.

Support public officials who demonstrate that they are willing to move beyond words to action by providing better services for young children and their families. Make it a priority to consider each candidate's track record on children's issues before voting in any election.

What We All Can Do

- Look for specific ways to support young children.

If you don't have young children at home, volunteer to lead or to simply spend time with children in programs sponsored by a local library, faith-based organization, school, center or other group serving children. Encourage employers and businesses to adopt family-friendly practices, such as flexible leave policies, assistance for dependent care, and paid parental leave.

- Find out more about the needs of young children and families in the community.

Talk to families you know who have young children. What are the

issues affecting them and their children? What steps do they think would make the community more supportive of children's development and of families in general? How can you translate these concerns into concrete action?

- Work to improve early childhood care and education programs in your communities.

Find out what strategies are needed to improve services for young children in your community. Funds can be established to help community-based early care and education or out-of-schooltime programs better recruit and retain qualified staff. Consider establishing funds to purchase developmentally appropriate classroom materials for these programs as well as local kindergarten and primary grade classrooms. Work

to ensure that all young children have access to preventive health care, including immunizations.

- Make our communities and states better places for young children and families.

Take part in planning efforts to develop strategies for improving the quality of life for children in your community. Your individual efforts are even more powerful when combined with others'. Encourage the service organizations, religious groups, neighborhood associations, or social clubs to which you belong to work to improve or expand services for children.

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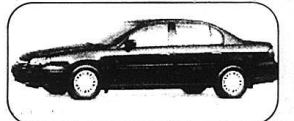
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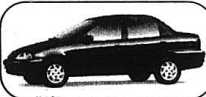
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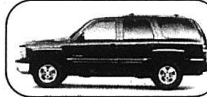
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