

# Why does America invest so little in its children? <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Mongeau, Lillian

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## EXCERPTS

"He was very angry. He was scratching his face, kicking, and screaming," Carrie Giddings, a preschool teacher, said of one of her students during his first days in her class at Kruse Elementary School in northern Colorado.

The boy's father had been in and out of jail, Giddings said. She thinks the 3-year-old had witnessed abuse at home before he enrolled in preschool at Kruse. His family was poor. For a while, they had lived with relatives, unable to afford their own place. "Everything that could happen to a kid, he'd had it all," Giddings said, asking that the child's name not be used. "He was a year and a half behind."

A child like this boy will have a tough road ahead. Research has shown that unrelenting stress at a young age, known as toxic stress, causes long-lasting brain damage. The worse the damage, the harder it is for children to pay attention, absorb new information, or trust adults—all skills critical for success in school—as they get older.

In fact, the fate of all children is largely determined by their first years on this planet. Forming healthy relationships with adults early on lays the foundation for future healthy relationships. Exposure to language through stories, songs, and conversations sets the stage for academic achievement. Playing outside to master gross motor skills; creating art to master fine motor skills; pretending to be a doctor, chef, or firefighter to learn teamwork; building a tower of blocks to learn basic physics lessons—all of these activities are critical preparation for a successful school and adult life.

The most straightforward way to ensure all children have such experiences is to provide free or affordable high-quality preschool for them when they are 3- and 4-year-olds.

The idea is not as radical as it sounds. The United States has even provided universal public preschool before, for a few years during World War II. That program ended in 1946. Since then, a growing body of research has demonstrated the value of high-quality preschool for both children and their communities. Nearly every industrialized country has recognized that value and begun offering a version of universal public preschool for its children. Not the U.S.

On every level—local, state, and federal—this country invests little to nothing in the first five years of a child's life, putting it decades and dollars behind the rest of the developed world.

"I think we value our children less than other nations do," said Arne Duncan, the former U.S. secretary of education who pushed hard for increased federal investment in early care and education during his seven-year tenure in the Obama administration. "I don't have an easier or softer or kinder way to say that."

In 2012, the U.S. ranked 35th among developed economies in pre-primary- or primary-school enrollment for 3- to 5-year-olds, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international economic association.

The implications of failing to offer public preschool, especially for children from the highest-need communities, are "massive," Duncan said. "It's a loss of human potential. We don't truly believe there's tremendous talent in rural America or among black and brown children or among poor children. So we choose to under-invest."

But that may be about to change for the first time since 1971, when former President Richard Nixon vetoed a bipartisan bill that would have created universal daycare.

At least a dozen major cities, including New York, Seattle, and Denver, have recently started high-quality universal preschool programs. States are collectively spending more on early education year-over-year, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, a think tank. (See a map of public-preschool access and quality from The Hechinger Report here.) And this fiscal year, Congress even broke out of its partisan gridlock to increase federal spending on early childhood by about \$1 billion. That action followed a similar increase the previous fiscal year. And a growing chorus of voices—including those of academics, advocates, and politicians from both major parties—has begun to call for more and better preschool options.

Moreover, Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, continues to put a spotlight on early-childhood issues, as she has since she stepped on the political scene more than four decades ago. (So far, Donald Trump has not addressed any issues or programs related to early childhood.)

All told, advocates say there is a new momentum that could be enough to switch the conversation from whether the U.S. should provide public preschool to how best to provide it.

Still, though many have acknowledged the need for forward motion on preschool expansion, the overall pace of change has been glacial. "At the current rate, it will be another 50 years before states can reach all low-income children at age four, and it will take 150 years to reach 75 percent of all four-year-olds," writes Steven Barnett, the director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, in his introduction to the 2015 State of Preschool Yearbook.

Most existing public programs, including the federally funded Head Start program, are targeted at the poorest children and don't have enough money to serve every eligible child. Long waiting lists and complex regulations mean many low-income families are left trying to cover the cost of private care, which can be as much as 85 percent of a family's income in expensive states like Massachusetts.

That's why a comparatively small percentage of children from low-income families—the ones research shows benefit the most from preschool—attend center-based care before they start kindergarten. Only 44 percent of children in the kindergarten class of 2010 with a low socioeconomic status attended center-based preschool, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, which tracks thousands of children through their first year of kindergarten. That's compared to 69 percent of children with a high socioeconomic status who attended preschool, and 54 percent of middle-class children.

Upping the percentage of low-income children attending center-based programs could be an even bigger deal in the U.S. than it is in Europe, as America has a comparatively high ratio of children living in poverty. Despite continuing to rank as one of the richest countries in the OECD, behind only Norway, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. is roughly on par with Mexico when it comes to childhood poverty.

The same data that showed only 44 percent of children from low-income families attended preschool revealed that children who did attend center-based care did better in reading and math than children who had received informal care or care from a stay-at-home parent. And that is without controlling for quality, which varies dramatically, said Barnett.

"Access to real quality is pretty darn low," he said. The chance that parents without a high-school diploma will be able to place their child in a high-quality preschool program, according to Barnett, is one in 10. For parents with graduate degrees, the odds are slightly better: one in three. "And that's after 50 years of a policy of targeted preschool" programs for the lowest-income families, Barnett said. "Which I think means 50 years is enough. We need to try something different."

While middle-income families have better access to high-quality private preschool because they can pay for it, access to free or subsidized preschool is only available in a handful of cities and states. At the same time, many working families who do not qualify for public assistance struggle to pay for daycare for infants and toddlers and preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. Year-round private care averages \$18,000 a year for two children, according to Care.com. Thirteen percent of families pay more than \$30,000 annually. In some states, the cost of care for just one child is more than a year of tuition at a state college.

In part, the lack of preschool options is the result of a system built on the outdated notion that families are made up of one working parent who can provide for the financial needs of the family while another, non-working parent can stay home to care for young children.

Most families don't look like that anymore. In 2014, more than a third (35 percent) of children lived in homes headed by single parents, according to the Kids Count data center. Among single mothers, 71 percent worked outside the home in 2015, as did 82 percent of single fathers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And even in the majority (61 percent) of families led by married partners, both adults worked. For these families, some form of childcare, whether preschool or something more informal, is not an option; it's a necessity.

That's a reality the U.S. did once acknowledge. From 1943 until 1946, the wartime Lanham Act guaranteed quality childcare to the children of working women as part of the war effort. As soon as World War II ended, though, the program was shut down. With the war over, it was assumed women would stop working, which they did then—and have started to do again. The U.S. ranked 19th among OECD countries for percentage of female workers in 2014; in 2000, it ranked 15th. Research has shown that up to a third of the decline in female participation in the labor force relative to European countries can be attributed to America's family-leave and childcare policies.

In 1965, the federal government re-entered the preschool game and launched Head Start, a preschool program for the nation's poorest children. Conceived as a fix to poverty, the program focused on getting more mothers to work, teaching them to be better parents, providing health screenings for children, and preparing them for kindergarten. And while Head Start continues to this day, the program is run by independent local agencies, so quality and availability vary greatly.

As in later grades, teacher quality is a huge factor in the success of preschool classrooms. Historically, the complexity of educating young children has been discounted, and preschool teachers tend to be underpaid and poorly qualified as a result, said Marcy Whitebook, the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. "You don't hear conversations about, 'Do teachers really need to have a college education [to teach] in kindergarten on?'" Whitebook said. "Routinely, you hear that in early childhood."

Nationally, the median preschool teacher salary is \$28,570 a year, or about half (52 percent) of the median elementary-school teacher salary, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Childcare workers, mostly women who work in more informal settings that may or

may not involve a focus on education, make even less, earning a median of just \$20,320 a year. Forty-six percent of early childhood teachers are enrolled in a federal income-support program, compared to 13 percent of elementary- or middle-school teachers, according to the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. "I think that there's a disconnect between our expectations of high-quality preschool and the earnings and environment in which early educators are working," Whitebook said.

Therein lies a major hurdle to expanding public preschool: money. To pay early educators on par with K-12 teachers would be hugely expensive. Creating appropriate facilities for young children to learn and play would not be cheap, either.

While the return on such an investment could run as high as \$7.20 for every \$1 spent, according to research out of the University of Minnesota, the initial outlay would be substantial. Many cities and states that have beefed up preschool programs in recent years have levied new taxes to cover their costs. Obama's 2013 proposal to spend an additional \$75 billion over 10 years to expand preschool access called for a new federal tobacco tax. It died in committee in both houses.

Another major problem is that even if preschool access were greatly expanded, it's not entirely clear how to ensure children attend the highest-quality programs possible. It's not that there has been no research on the subject. Many studies have examined the impact of a preschool education, and advocates find the preponderance of evidence falls squarely on the side of expanding public access.

Some of the longest studies—those that have followed children from preschool graduation through adulthood—point to benefits that include a lower likelihood of incarceration, less need for public assistance, longer-lasting marriages, and a lower risk of heart disease. More recent, shorter studies of some public preschool programs, like the one in Washington State for children from struggling families, have found boosts to reading and math ability that last through fifth grade. (The study is ongoing.) And nearly every study finds that children who have attended preschool are more academically and socially prepared for kindergarten than they would have been otherwise.

But while it is clear that some programs can produce stunning results, especially for children from low-income families, it's less clear exactly which elements of those programs are the keys to their success.

It's also unclear what elements make for long-lasting impacts and which ones merely affect the number of facts a child knows on the first day of kindergarten. Some research also suggests that attendees of certain large public programs, including Head Start, are no better off by third grade than their peers who didn't attend such programs. Fueling the argument against rapid expansion of public programs, one Tennessee study found children who attended the state's public preschool program were actually doing worse in reading by third grade.

"I'm not saying that we know [preschool] is a failure," said Mark Lipsey, one of the lead researchers on the Tennessee study and a research professor at Vanderbilt University. "We just don't know."

And even assuming most preschool programs help more than they hurt, which even most skeptics concede, not everyone is convinced that it should be a universal offering or that it's the best way to invest limited dollars in the early years. "The strongest research points us to other approaches, like expanding voluntary home visiting to support vulnerable families, and improving child care, where many low-income children spend thousands of hours in the earliest, most crucial developmental years of their lives," writes Katharine Stevens, a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, in a Hechinger Report op-ed.

Backing up the idea that it makes more sense to invest in programs for infants and toddlers first, the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman—who is nevertheless a champion of expanding public preschool programs—routinely points out that the earlier a dollar is invested in a child's life, the higher return it has later. Assigning nurses or social workers to visit pregnant women at home and help them through pregnancy, childbirth, and the first years of their child's life has been shown to have enormous positive impact.

Expanding guaranteed parental leave to all wage earners—not just those who have worked at a company of 50 employees or more for at least 12 months—would be another measure that could help parents better nurture their infants well-ahead of preschool age. Right now, under the Family and Medical Leave Act, the U.S. guarantees some employees just 12 weeks of unpaid parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child. In contrast, Germany offers 58 weeks of paid leave. Making parental leave longer and paid, as it is in every other OECD member country, might make it easier for families to both care for infants and reduce the amount of paid childcare needed by shortening the period between the end of leave and the start of public school.

In the current political climate however, it is unlikely that any of these changes will be made on a broad scale at the federal level. "Political will is a major factor," said Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research. "In terms of the leadership capacity to make the change in states, we have more of that than we have the political will to give them the resources and marching order to do that."

The political challenge of passing preschool-focused legislation is unusual. Democrats at all levels have long been in favor of expanding and improving early-childhood education. Many Republican governors and state legislators have also been outspoken in favor of expanding and improving early-childhood education. Even Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a conservative Republican, made expanding his state's preschool program one of his campaign promises. Twenty-two states headed by Republican governors increased state spending on preschool in the 2015-16 fiscal year, along with 10 states headed by Democratic governors, according to the Education Commission of the States, a policy-research organization.

Despite the bipartisan support in cities and states across the country, though, preschool has become a Democrats-only issue in Washington, D.C. Former Secretary Duncan, who is now a managing partner of Emerson Collective, a philanthropy established by Laurene Powell Jobs, told of an incident that happened after President Barack Obama had mentioned expanding preschool in one of his State of the Union speeches. A high-ranking Republican senator approached him, Duncan explained, and said, "I love what you guys are doing. Our families need it. Our communities need it. Keep going. Don't stop. I'm so sorry I can't help you."

"It killed me," Duncan said.

To be sure, preschool attendance alone does not guarantee every possible educational, cognitive, and social benefit that can come from a high-quality early education. If a child attends a poorly run preschool program, there is little benefit at all. And even if a child attends a great preschool program, but then spends the next decade attending struggling schools, none of the biggest benefits are likely to accrue. Preschool is not an inoculation against the next 12 years of a kid's life.

But, says Giddings, the Colorado teacher, it's a start.

Her student—the boy who started out as an angry, kicking 3-year-old—was able to attend her class for two years. As a student at a well-staffed elementary school, he received behavioral therapy to address his tantrums, cognitive therapy to address his developmental delays, speech therapy to increase his ability to communicate, and occupational therapy to help him catch up on things like putting on his own jacket. Such supports have made all the difference, Giddings said.

She choked up remembering the transformation of the boy, now 5. "Now, he takes deep breaths, gives himself hugs and apologizes to friends," she said, wiping away tears. Today, the boy can count to 10, recognize his name, join in play with other kids, and build a zoo out of blocks, Giddings said. She and his therapists have met with his kindergarten teacher for next fall and told her what to expect and what teaching methods work best for him. Giddings expects him to "soar."

"When I look at him, I think 'this is exactly why I'm doing what I'm doing,'" Giddings said. "He's an extraordinary kid and this program mattered [for him]."

And while there was no luck involved in the sensitive, research-based care the boy received at his school, as an American, he was lucky to get such care.

-reprinted from The Atlantic

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[4]</sup>

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