

# WHEN IT COMES TO CHILD CARE, QUALITY MATTERS MORE THAN YOU MAY THINK.



First Five Years Fund  
www.ffyf.org



Access to affordable and reliable child care is critical for working families, offering parents better job stability and overall economic security.

But thinking about child care as a benefit to working parents without considering the potential impact on children is not just a wasted opportunity—it also potentially poses risks to a child’s healthy development. Quality early learning and care is vital for children, particularly those from low-income families, to achieve success in school and throughout their lives. Unfortunately, in the United States, less than half of the children living in poverty have access to the high-quality early childhood programs that could dramatically improve their lives. Research shows both short- and long-term benefits for children who attend high-quality programs, including lasting gains in both IQ and social-emotional skills. These gains prepare individuals to earn higher wages as adults, live healthier lives, avoid incarceration, raise stronger families, and contribute to society. Quality matters, and low-quality care can be detrimental to children, families, and society.

## WHAT IS HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE?

**While no one program is a silver bullet, investing in high-quality early childhood education is a solution that creates upward mobility through opportunity, and there is a set of common elements that define high-quality early childhood education—regardless of program.**

Research shows that programs that begin at birth, incorporate and recognize the importance of health and nutrition, develop cognitive and character skills, and incorporate factors such as the presence of a qualified teacher and assistant, small class size, and low teacher-to-student ratio<sup>1</sup> lead to the best outcomes for children. Children in these settings during their most formative years are more likely to be prepared for school and do better later in life than children who did not receive quality early childhood education.

<sup>1</sup> Barnett, W. S., Weisenfeld, G. G., Brown, K., Squires, J. H., and Horowitz, M. “Implementing 15 Essential Elements for High Quality: A State and Local Policy Scan.” July 11, 2016.

## LOW-QUALITY CARE CAN HAVE ADVERSE EFFECTS.

Although all children benefit from high-quality care, research shows that low-income children can be harmed by low-quality care.

In *Gender Differences in the Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program*, Nobel Laureate James Heckman found that children in high-quality settings had significantly better life outcomes than those who received lower-quality care.<sup>2</sup> However, low-income males who were in low-quality settings experienced reduced health outcomes and earned lower wages later in life than those who attended quality programs or were able to stay home with a parent or family member. What's more, low-quality child care has the potential to exacerbate the adversity and sustained toxic stress children face that are often associated with living in poverty. According to analysis from Dr. Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal at the University of Pittsburgh, the amount of time children spend in low-quality care arrangements is related to elevated levels of externalizing behavior problems.<sup>3</sup> Young children—particularly boys—are susceptible to the effects of low-quality care; therefore, early childhood programs must be of higher quality.



## QUALITY PROGRAMS CAN CLOSE THE INCOME/ACHIEVEMENT GAP.

The sad truth is that family income in the United States has a dramatic effect on early childhood development and subsequent school achievement.

In fact, by the age of four, an 18-month gap is apparent between a child living in poverty and her more affluent peers. That gap is still present at the age of 10 and continues throughout high school.<sup>4</sup> Once this gap opens, it is difficult and expensive to close. The solution is through access to quality early childhood education programs that are proven to prevent and close the achievement and learning opportunity gaps across the various socioeconomic positions. A wide body of research shows that quality early childhood education can bring disadvantaged children to parity by kindergarten, reducing children's timidity, improving attentiveness and IQ scores by up to 10 points, reducing the percentage of children repeating a grade, and lowering the rate of special education placement by 10%.<sup>5</sup>

## QUALITY MORE THAN PAYS FOR ITSELF WHILE LOW-QUALITY CARE HAS LITTLE PAYOFF.

Simply put, high-quality early childhood education is an investment that creates upward mobility for a child through increased achievement, and gains for society in increased productivity and reduced social costs.

Every dollar invested in comprehensive, high-quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children from birth through age five provides a 13% return on investment to society.<sup>6</sup> But that return only exists when the care is high-quality. The value far outweighs the cost—and the more we invest in quality, the more we gain in quality outcomes that strengthen families, children, our workforce, and our nation. Investing in low-quality programs is not the investment we owe American families—and can, in fact, hurt them.

<sup>2</sup> García, J. L., Heckman, J. J., and Ziff, A. "Gender Differences in the Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program Paper." *The Heckman Equation*. May 11, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Votruba-Drzal, E., Levine, R., and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, P. "Child Care and Low-Income Children's Development: Direct and Moderated Effects." February 03, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Cascio, E., and Whitmore Schanzenbach, D. "Proposal 1: Expanding Preschool Access for Disadvantaged Children." *Brookings Institution*. June 19, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "School Readiness." *First Five Years Fund*.

<sup>6</sup> García, J. L., Heckman, J. J., Ermini Leaf, D., and Prados, M., "Quantifying the Life-cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program." *The Heckman Equation*. May 26, 2017.