



# CRS Issue Statement on Child Well-Being

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## Introduction

The nation's future depends in large part on its children's ability to develop into contributing adult members of society. For that reason, and for what many would consider a society's moral responsibility to care for the young and vulnerable, Congress and the nation take an interest in promoting children's well-being. It can be argued that children are the nation's most valuable resource, constituting the next generation of workers, taxpayers, and parents. Their well-being and ability to develop into productive adults in an increasingly competitive global economy is influenced by a variety of factors, and public policies can affect these factors to varying degrees.

A host of players, including parents, relatives, teachers, doctors, and social workers promote children's well-being by fostering their development. Public policies and government programs can also promote child well-being and foster aspects of child development. Child development encompasses a multitude of areas and life stages, and is often assessed according to a complex set of outcomes, divided into broad domains of health (physical development) and safety; mental and cognitive development; social and emotional development; and economic and material well-being.

Developmental outcomes are influenced by a myriad of environmental and social factors, including family structure, stability, and functioning; economic circumstances; early childhood care and education; health care, schooling, and the extent to which adolescent youth receive support in the transition into adulthood. They are also influenced by innate and inherited characteristics. Clearly, no single influencing factor or policy can ensure child well-being, and researchers from a variety of disciplines (psychology, neuroscience, sociology, genetics) still struggle to understand the complicated interaction of factors that carry different levels of influence during the various stages of infancy, early childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Even if researchers could (statistically) attribute the relative contributions of various factors (causes) to differences in child outcomes, policymakers would still be left to debate what aspects of family, school, and community life are appropriate targets for government intervention.

There are plenty of examples of public policies and programs that influence (deliberately or not) child well-being. However, most are not designed with explicit consideration of how the policy or program will impact child development. For example, debates over tax and transfer policies often focus on incentives and disincentives to work and save, without explicitly taking into account the impact of income adequacy and stability on the development of children in affected families. In the following paragraphs, we discuss current policy issues that relate to five important factors that influence child well-being, placing those factors in a context of children's development. The five factors are:

- Family Formation and Living Arrangements
- Child Protection and Family Support
- Economic Well-Being
- Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development
- Youth Transition to Adulthood

## **Family Formation and Living Arrangements**

Parents and family life exert a primary influence on children's well-being throughout a child's development and into adulthood. The family is the place where children develop their first attachments to other people, usually their parent(s) as their primary care giver(s). Early attachments have been shown to have consistent and enduring influences on children's social and emotional development. The family is also the economic unit that obtains and manages the resources that meet a child's basic needs, while also playing a significant role in stimulating the child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Of course, the family structure itself is subject to changes that can place children's well-being at risk. Divorce, the loss of a parent to death or incarceration, or being born to a single parent can change or create a family's composition and character and ultimately affect children's well-being.

The importance of the family's influence on child well-being naturally leads to questions about how the structure of the family—the presence and roles of parents and adults in the family—affects outcomes. There is a large body of literature indicating that children who grow up with only one biological parent in the home are more likely to be financially worse off and have worse socioeconomic outcomes (even after income differences are taken into account) compared to children who grow up with both biological parents in the home.

Reducing nonmarital childbearing, promoting marriage, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families are explicit goals that were stipulated in the 1996 welfare reform law. Although teen birth rates have fallen in fourteen of the last fifteen years, the trend may be reversing. Also, the proportion of children born outside of marriage has been increasing. Policymakers and analysts agree that more progress can be achieved in these areas. Historically, Congress has used direct funding, competitive grants, program demonstration authority, and government-sponsored evaluations to address family formation issues.

Government funding to support marriage promotion efforts remains a point of contention in the public policy arena. Government involvement in “family matters” is welcomed by some, while considered an offensive intrusion by others. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is currently conducting large-scale research projects to evaluate the impact of marriage promotion, but actual findings regarding the impacts of these programs are several years away.

The federal government also provides both state block grant funds and competitive grant funds for abstinence-only education programs. Although no federal funding is specifically earmarked for comprehensive sex education (which includes information on contraception), several federal programs can use their funds for activities or services that seek to prevent teenage pregnancy. Questions remain, however, about the best approach to preventing teen pregnancy, and the role the federal government should play in funding prevention programs.

Somewhat less controversial are federal efforts to improve the outlook for children in single-parent families through competitive grant funds for responsible fatherhood programs. The expectation is that these programs will promote the financial responsibility of noncustodial fathers to their children and increase the participation of fathers in their children's lives.

## **Child Protection and Family Support**

For children to develop to their fullest, a family of any structure must function in a way that supports children's well-being. At a minimum, adults are expected to ensure children's safety, and ideally, to provide them with stability (permanence). Without safety and permanence in their lives, children's development (physical, mental, emotional and social) is jeopardized. For many children, parents are the primary adults that bring safety, permanence and overall well-being to their lives. For others, kin provide these critical supports.

Preventive services and public health campaigns—such as those warning caretakers to never shake a baby or warning pregnant women on the dangers of drug or alcohol consumption—intend to protect and enhance the children's lives by broadly educating the public on specific risks to children's safety and health. By enhancing parents' knowledge of child development and teaching parenting skills, home visiting programs are a more intensive kind of preventive service and have been shown to reduce maltreatment and to improve behavioral and school outcomes for children, among other positive outcomes.

Some children, however, do not have parents or other adult kin they can depend on to keep them safe. In FY2006, an estimated 905,000 children were found to have been maltreated and, in the great majority of these cases, a parent was the perpetrator. Child protective services workers investigate reports of child maltreatment (including neglect, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse) and, when necessary, seek to ensure that services to protect the child's health and safety are provided. For some children and families, these services—including individual and family counseling, caseworker visits, and temporary help with budget emergencies—can be delivered while a child continues to live in the home. For other children, the home is determined (typically by a judge acting on the advice of a social worker) to be too risky. These children must be temporarily placed outside their homes, in foster care. On any given day in FY2007, just under half a million children were in foster care. The goal of foster care is to re-establish a permanent home for children. Permanence is achieved when, after successful provision of services, a child is safely reunited with his/her parents. Or, in cases where reuniting with a parent(s) is not a safe or appropriate plan for the child, permanence is achieved when a child is adopted, or placed with a legal guardian.

In short, families rear children, and strong family functioning plays a key role in all aspects of children's development. Because child rearing is, by tradition, a private function of a private institution (the family), public intervention is expected to be minimal or non-existent. Knowing what preventive services to offer, and how to offer them, is critical to protecting and enhancing children's well-being within their own homes. And, for some children, the public must intervene to protect their safety. Again, knowing how and when to intervene is critical.

Federal child welfare policy stresses both safety and permanency (stability) as primary goals of its activities (offered to children and families in their own homes or in foster care). Achievement of these goals is believed to be critical to child well-being. For a variety of reasons, including federal policies in support of foster child adoption and increased use of subsidized guardianship, the number of children leaving foster care for permanent adoptive homes has risen dramatically in the past decade. While families of any structure may benefit from services that strengthen and enhance their ability to meet their children's developmental needs, the growing pool of adoptive and guardianship families has unique needs for services that strengthen and stabilize the family (post-permanency services).

Given the recent attention to children in foster care or those leaving foster care for permanent placements with adoptive or guardianship families, Congress may choose to focus new attention on prevention of child maltreatment, in general, or prevention of placement in foster care more specifically. Child welfare advocates have long criticized the way federal funds are distributed, pointing out that the largest portion of the child welfare funding supports children who have already been removed from their homes, and arguing that this shortchanges support for prevention activities. Congress may expand efforts to fund home visiting or other kinds of family support programs intended to strengthen families and reduce child abuse or neglect.

## **Economic Well-Being**

Children are born into families of varying economic and social circumstances (and those circumstances are subject to change over the course of childhood). While some families have abundant resources to meet their children's needs, many parents work at jobs with low wages. Often, it takes two working parents to earn enough to escape low income, and one or both parents can be at risk of losing earnings because of illness, unemployment, or periods when work is not possible because of child-bearing or child care needs. Families of limited economic means may find it difficult to provide for their children's basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, medicine); to afford suitable child care so they can work and earn a living to support their family; and to afford housing in safe neighborhoods, with good schools. The ability to meet these basic needs can be further strained during economic downturns.

Poverty and low income place many American children at disadvantage of being able to attain their full potential as adults. By almost any indicator, poor children fare worse than their non-poor counterparts. Poor children are generally reported to be in poorer health than non-poor children, on a variety of indicators. At birth, infants of poor mothers are more likely to be of low birth weight, and to die as infants. Poor children are more likely to suffer from chronic asthma, and more likely to suffer from lead poisoning than non-poor children. These children are more likely to have stunted growth and anemia, and to suffer from obesity than non-poor children—all signs of inadequate nutrition. It has been hypothesized that poor health and nutrition in the early years of life may translate into worse outcomes in later years, by affecting children's cognitive abilities and school achievement. Poor children tend to score lower on standardized tests of IQ, verbal ability, and achievement, and are less likely to advance in grade and complete high school. Poor teen adolescent girls are more likely to become teenage mothers than their non-poor counterparts, contributing to a cycle of poverty from one generation to the next.

A brief spell of income loss due to bad luck, such as job loss brought about by economic downturn, may have immediate effects on families' sense of economic well-being, putting families under both financial and emotional stress. Prolonged or deep income poverty among families with children may signal more chronic problems than merely a lack of income. While income poverty is associated with poor child outcomes, lack of income in itself may account for only part of the reason why poor children face poor future prospects. Other factors are arguably as important, if not more so, than income, per se, in affecting children's life chances.

Income support policies, such as unemployment insurance and food stamps (now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)), may help reduce family economic stress during a recession, and mitigate potential negative effects on families and their children. The

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Block Grant provides a major source of funding for cash welfare for needy families with children, and is used for other benefits and services, including child care and refundable tax credits.

## **Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development**

Early childhood, from birth to the age of school entry, comprises important years in a child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. During those years, a child may be cared for by parents, relatives, foster families, child care workers, and preschool teachers, among others. Care may be provided in a variety of settings, and sometimes in combination. There is no single "system" of early childhood care and education in the United States, but rather a patchwork of arrangements experienced by children, and used by parents. Each arrangement provides a forum for a child's development, and therefore can benefit children—to the extent that they foster their physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.

Early childhood programs are increasingly being looked at from an overarching view of how they can benefit children, society, the economy, and the country's global competitiveness. Policy discussions include not only child development experts, but a growing number of economists and members of the business community. Participants in these discussions frequently cite research in psychology, cognition, and early brain development that demonstrates how important the early preschool years are for skill formation. Working from the notion that the skills children acquire in their early years lay the groundwork and set a pattern for acquiring life skills, a growing group is advocating for increased investment in early childhood programs. The aforementioned skills encompass not only the cognitive skills generally measured by achievement and IQ tests, but also non-cognitive abilities (e.g. motivation and "soft skills"), which some researchers show to be equally important in determining socioeconomic success later in life. The potential positive outcomes are measurable in the short term with respect to the individual child, and in the longer term to the contribution he/she makes as a productive adult member of society. Investment in quality early childhood programs has been shown to lead in the longer term to societal benefits in the form of lower likelihoods of welfare receipt, teen pregnancy and criminal activity.

Identifying what constitutes a "quality" early childhood program remains a difficult task. Effective programs, in the form of intensive intervention models, feature highly qualified teachers and small class sizes, and focus on disadvantaged three- and four-year old children. The federal Head Start program, also much-studied provides less intense, yet comprehensive services, tending to a child's nutritional and medical needs, while fostering cognitive and socio-emotional development, and promoting improved parenting. Could (and should) further investment expand on these models? Could (and should) early childhood investment be made more universally, with the recognition that all children benefit from quality care?

Policymakers are currently wrestling with these questions at the state and federal levels. While states increasingly invest in pre-kindergarten programs with varying degrees of "universality," federal efforts (with the exception of tax provisions) maintain a focus on serving disadvantaged children in the form of comprehensive child development programs like Head Start, and grants that fund child care subsidies that can be applied in an assortment of settings with varying levels of quality and emphasis on children's development.



## Youth Transition to Adulthood

Youth development emphasizes meeting young people's emotional and cognitive needs and building competencies for adulthood. Policymakers and scholars have increasingly focused attention on supporting services that promote youth development, particularly as the move from late adolescence to adulthood has become longer and increasingly complex. During the period of transition, young people cycle between attending school and working, living independently, and staying with their parents. They also use this time to explore career options and relationships with potential long-term partners. These choices enable youth to delay becoming independent by an age that society has traditionally benchmarked as the beginning of adulthood, usually 18 or 21. This is evident by the rising median age of first marriage, with 27.5 now being the median age for men and 25.5 the median age for women. Further, young people in their mid-to-late twenties continue to receive extensive financial assistance and other supports, such as child care and housing, from their parents.

For vulnerable youth populations, the transition to adulthood is further complicated by a number of challenges. Family conflict or abandonment, housing insecurity, problems obtaining educational supports and health care, and obstacles to securing employment that provides adequate wages and health insurance can contribute to negative outcomes including low income and poor academic attainment. Seven groups can be identified as being at high risk of experiencing these challenges: youth emancipating from foster care, runaway and homeless youth, youth in the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems, immigrant youth and youth with limited English proficiency, youth with physical and mental disabilities, youth with mental disorders, and youth receiving special education. Youth may be members of multiple vulnerable populations, and within these groups, the population is diverse. Not all vulnerable youth will experience negative outcomes in adulthood. However, factors such as poverty, and incidents of problem behaviors, increase the likelihood of these negative outcomes. Involvement in the child welfare system and problems in school also suggest that youth may experience heightened difficulties during the transition to adulthood.

The concept of "disconnected youth" has gained currency among scholars and policy makers with concerns about the negative outcomes these individuals face in adulthood. Disconnected youth are not embedded in social networks of family, friends, and communities that provide assistance in the form of employment connections, health care, housing, tuition and other financial assistance, and emotional support. Studies have focused on two measurable characteristics to indicate disconnectedness: the lack of high school and/or college attendance, coupled with not having a job for at least one year. At least two million youth ages 16 to 24 are considered "disconnected" under this criteria, a disproportionate share of whom are racial and ethnic minorities. Disconnected youth demonstrate the same risk markers and behaviors as other vulnerable youth. Concentrated poverty, community insecurity, and family structure are associated with their poor academic and employment outcomes.

Congress has increasingly focused attention on youth who are not in school or working. Congressional hearings have explored the pathways that lead young people to become disconnected, as well as the extent to which the federal government should assist the population. Some researchers and youth advocates assert that disconnected youth are most vulnerable during downturns in the economy, and that educational attainment and skills can mitigate the barriers they might face in securing employment in an increasingly competitive global market.

Determining which policies, if any, can help youth connect (or stay connected) to education and the workforce may be a challenge for policymakers.

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