

# **Child Rearing in America**

## *Challenges Facing Parents with Young Children*

Edited by

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## Introduction and Overview

Neal Halfon, Kathryn Taaffe McLearn,  
and Mark A. Schuster

### RECENT PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD

The well-being of young children has become a popular topic as expansions of knowledge in the neuro- and behavioral sciences have documented the importance of the first three years in children's long-term learning, behavior, and health. Recent scholarly books and national research conferences have examined these issues from a variety of perspectives. In 1997, the National Academy of Sciences convened a three-year, multidisciplinary commission to examine and report on the science of early childhood. In 1999, RAND issued *Investing in Our Children*, which documented the benefits and savings associated with targeted early intervention programs. In 1996, 1997, and 2000, *Time* and *Newsweek* devoted entire special issues to the development of the young child. In 1997, the White House hosted conferences on childcare and on early child development and learning. Federal agencies have signaled their interest by expanding data collection on the early life predictors of educational success and supporting expansions of the Head Start program for children from birth to age 3. Numerous states have initiated aggressive early childhood agendas, focusing on childcare, health care, universal preschool, home visiting, and family support (Cauthen et al. 2000). All these efforts are evidence of a recognition of the importance of early child experience and a growing commitment to public policy that fosters the healthy development of our youngest children.

The burgeoning focus on early childhood issues in the United States must also be understood in a broader context of concern expressed by the American public about children and their families. Recent polling data from Public Agenda suggest that 82 percent of Americans believe it is harder to be a child today than in past years. By a margin of almost two to one, Americans believe that most parents face times when they really need help raising their children (*Public Agenda* 1997). The current domestic

policy focus on improving educational opportunities and outcomes, and a constellation of related political factors, all suggest that the coming decade presents a window of opportunity to address the concerns and needs of families with young children.

This strong interest in the lives and potential life trajectories of young children is also being driven by concerns that many young children are seriously and predictably at risk for poor long-term developmental and educational outcomes. For nearly 20 years, poverty rates for children younger than 6 years of age have exceeded 20 percent nationally; in several major urban areas, poverty rates continue to exceed 30 percent. These high rates of early childhood poverty have persisted despite sustained economic growth for most of the 1990s. The deleterious effects of growing up in poverty on child health and development are increasingly well recognized (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). And there is evidence to suggest that poverty may be especially damaging to the child in the early years (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

Of related concern is the growing recognition that disparities in health and social outcomes of children, youth, and adults have their origins in disparities that begin early in life (Keating and Hertzman 1999). Disparities in health and emotional states that develop early in life not only persist but are often compounded over time. As one economist writing about policies to foster the growth of human capital observed, "Early learning begets later learning and early success begets later success just as early failure begets later failure" (Heckman 1999). A host of short- and long-term research studies in various fields is providing empirical evidence that disparities in human development manifest early in life and persist across decades. For example, the British 1946 National Birth Cohort Study, which followed more than 5,000 children over half a century, clearly documents that events in early childhood are independent predictors of cardiovascular, respiratory, and neurological health in mid-adulthood (Wadsworth and Kuh 1997; Smith 1999). Children in the cohort who experienced frequent lower respiratory infection in the first two years of life were much more likely to have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in middle age. Other research studies on emotional and cognitive development have also established links between early life experiences and long-term emotional and intellectual functioning.

As the scientific evidence has grown, theoretical constructs to explain the role of family and environmental contexts on child health and development have also evolved significantly. Subtle and important differences in approaches persist, yet a remarkable consensus has emerged. Researchers in a range of disciplines generally accept that family contexts, relationships, and activities play an important role in determining child development and health outcomes (Boyce et al. 1998).

## Changing Views of Childhood and Family

Our understanding of childhood and the social roles of children has changed dramatically over the past century. Children are shaped by the culture in which they grow, and American children do not all begin with the same chances for success. What parents bring to the job of nurturing their children's development, especially in the early years, is recognized as a critical influence, but so too are political forces, practical economics, and implicit ideological commitments to children and their families. As such, childhood has become a focus of study in many different academic disciplines, each providing a unique perspective on the roles, needs, and prospects of children and their optimal development.

- Economists have focused on the cost of raising children and on household inputs needed to produce the circumstances necessary for children's attainment (Becker 1973). Some studies have examined economic incentives that influence family choices of child care arrangements, health care, and other factors that directly impact the ability to provide for children (Leibowitz 1974; Haveman and Wolfe 1995). Recent research has also focused on the effects of certain *kinds* of jobs and work relationships on how parents feel, and therefore on how they are able to support their children's development when they return home from the workplace.
- Sociologists have focused on family and social structures and their influence on children's development and life course transitions. Studies such as Glen Elder's classic *Children of the Great Depression* demonstrate that historical forces shape the social trajectories of families, determine the availability of educational and employment opportunities, and thus influence behavior and development (Elder 1974). More recently, Robert Sampson studied adolescents coming of age in Chicago's inner city in order to dissect the webs of social processes and relationships that influence the life courses of adolescents (Sampson 1997).
- Psychologists have examined emotional and cognitive development and the determinants of the onset of psychopathology (Sroufe 1997; Rutter 1996). A range of longitudinal studies display the impact of early life experiences and specific traumatic events, such as childhood sexual abuse, on the developing self.
- Pediatricians and child health specialists have focused on the determinants of health status and risks to child health (Hoeklema and Pless 1988), and especially on changes in those areas over the past century. Epidemiological studies had documented dramatic reductions in infant mortality due to improved living conditions and medical care, decreases in childhood infection as a result of immunizations and antibiotics, and the persistent threat of injury as a cause of morbidity and mortality.



Changes in the epidemiology of childhood health and disease have also given rise to what some pediatric researchers have termed the “new morbidities” – conditions such as child abuse, learning disorders, and psychopathology that may be heavily influenced by social factors (Haggerty 1975).

While each of these research traditions approaches the subject of children and childhood differently, using different conceptual models and analytical tools, each has also necessarily focused on and highlighted the changing nature of the family. While families still play an essential role in the lives of all children, families are changing in size, structure, earning potential, and expectations. Children born in the year 2000 are much more likely to experience divorce, to live in a single-parent household, and to feel certain stresses and demands than were children born 50 years earlier. Today’s children are also more likely to be raised by parents who are better educated, who are more isolated from extended family relationships, and in two-parent households, who are both employed to support the family.

What we expect parents to know and do to promote and support their child’s development has also changed. Social norms for parents and parenting expectations have shifted dramatically over the century, and these changes seem to have accelerated over the past decade. Norms regarding acceptable childcare, discipline, and education have been redefined, even during the past two decades. Parents have access to growing volumes of information about child development, discipline, and parenting techniques from a range of professional and eclectic purveyors. Talk shows, specialty magazines, and now the internet have the capacity to provide non-stop information on what to do and how to encourage a child’s future development. Yet little is known about how good this advice is, whether parents who need it are gaining access to it, or whether they are able to act on it in ways that actually promote the development of their children. Is this information helping parents be better parents? We simply do not know.

### **The New Focus on Early Childhood**

Just as childhood and children have become the focus of study and debate, early childhood has grown to become a field in its own right, with its own areas of research focus and public policy concern.

- Economists have highlighted the wisdom of investing in the youngest children, when the potential for return is greatest (Heckman 1999). Recent reports from RAND and the National Bureau of Economic Research have reviewed the economic assumptions that underlay the provision of intervention services early in childhood and calculated the costs and benefits of programs specifically targeted at improving the development of children from birth to age 3 (Karoly 1997; Heckman 1999).

- Developmental psychologists have suggested that young children 0–3 learn more about the world, other people, and language than what was previously understood (Gopnik 1999). They have outlined mechanisms that “program” various behavioral response strategies, as well as the role of critical relationships in providing the emotional scaffolding that supports learning and cognitive development (Dawson 1994; Sroufe 1997).
- In neurobiology, researchers have highlighted the exceptional flexibility and activity of the brain of the young child, and how profoundly its neuronal structure and function can be influenced by experience. The early neurobiology of cognitive function is coming into greater focus, as are the neurobiology of early emotional states and the influence of selective experiences in the “wiring” of the brain (Schoore 1994; Fox 1995).
- Epidemiologists and child health researchers have highlighted the origins of adult conditions and disease states that begin early in life. This work suggests that metabolic pathways and response patterns set forth during the first years of life may influence the onset of coronary artery disease, diabetes, and hypertension five or six decades later (Barker 1998; Kuh and Ben-Shlomo 1997). One study, for example, traced the possible programming effect of breast milk on cholesterol metabolism, while another explored the possible influence of early nutrition and growth on non-insulin dependent diabetes (Lucas 1998).
- Sociologists and developmental psychologists have juxtaposed the fact that most American parents are now employed outside the home against the fact of young children’s dependence on others for caregiving and nurturing. Even the youngest children are now likely to be cared for by non-family members and childcare centers.
- Last, a growing number of studies have demonstrated that life course trajectories can be altered by interventions that change the dynamic relationships within a family early in life (Olds 1997; Ramey 1992; Campbell and Ramey 1995). Although enriched early intervention programs do not seem to alter long-term cognitive outcomes measured by IQ, they substantially alter noncognitive skills and social attachments of participating children and families.

### Public Policy and Leadership in Early Childhood

At the beginning of the 1990s, *Beyond Rhetoric* (National Commission on Children 1991) and the Carnegie Corporation’s *Starting Points* (1994) set a new and broader public policy context for considering the needs of families with young children. And in late 2000, the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council released a seminal report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), which

provided a guide to what science-based policies and programs could mean for our nation's youngest children. The 1997 White House conferences examined the public policy implications of new findings from brain research literature and the role of childcare as more women are employed as full-time workers. Several federal agencies have focused new attention on the development of young children, collecting new data, launching new programs, and expanding oversight and support for states and local communities that are trying to make a difference in the lives of young children.

Over the past 15 years, federal legislation has formed the basis for a more defined set of social policies on young children. Each legislative effort not only demonstrated a concern with the development of young children but recognized that the most important single instrumental method for supporting the development of young children is to build family capacity.

- Passed in 1986 and fully implemented in the early 1990s, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C legislation has funded states to identify and address the needs of young children with developmental disabilities and those who are at risk for having developmental disabilities through a comprehensive family-focused approach.
- Head Start has grown and expanded during the 1990s, and the federal government created Early Head Start for children 0–3 in 1996. The Early Head Start model also employs early intervention to build family capacity, drawing on home visiting techniques that have been developed and tested over the past two decades.
- The 1992 Family and Medical Leave Act allows mothers and fathers to take an unpaid leave of up to 12 weeks in a 12-month period without penalty in the workplace after the birth, adoption, or foster placement of a child and when they need to care for a sick child.

At the state level, there has also been widespread policy activity focused on young children. A few examples illustrate the range of these new state initiatives.

- North Carolina's Smart Start Program is an early childhood initiative to promote school readiness in children.
- Vermont has created Success by Six, a statewide health and developmental improvement campaign that has had a significant impact on several child outcomes.
- California's Proposition 10, the Children and Families First Act, passed in 1998, is a major initiative that will provide about \$700 million annually to improve services focused on children 0–5. Proposition 10 also builds a new quasi-governmental infrastructure in each county to serve as a community outcomes trust for young children.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is about families with very young children. It offers a broad and in-depth look at families with infants and toddlers: how they prepared for parenthood, how they spend their time together, the nature and patterns of their routines and practices, their relationships with extended family members and their other supports, and the stresses and strains they experience. Its perspective is multidisciplinary, exploring the range of social, economic, family, and individual factors that interact to alter and shape the development of young children. The contributors include scholars and practitioners from different disciplines, including economics, sociology, developmental psychology, psychiatry, pediatrics, and health policy.

The impetus for preparing the book was a unique survey conducted in 1995–96 by The Commonwealth Fund. The Commonwealth Survey of Parents with Young Children provides a representative snapshot of the conditions of families with young children – and the pressures and concerns faced by parents in shaping the home environments and lifestyles of those families. A national sample of more than 2,000 mothers and fathers answered questions about a broad spectrum of topics, including preparation for parenthood, birth of a child, family economic structure, participation in the workforce, child-rearing practices and discipline, child and family health, and access to and satisfaction with child health and developmental services. Their responses were the starting point for many of the analyses presented in this book. The survey did not focus on child-care issues since so many other surveys, national studies, and books have recently been written about the subject. In fact, the decision was made to focus on more neglected topics relevant to the parents of young children – what they do and believe and the resources they need, especially from the health care system.

The contributors were encouraged to complement their analysis of the survey data with other national datasets, a wide range of published studies on families with young children, and relevant theoretical frameworks. Each chapter builds on the survey data to provide a well-rounded analysis of an important area of family life and to examine policies and programs that address the needs of young children and their families.

The book is also unique in its focus on the role of the health-care system and health-care providers in supporting the child-bearing and child-rearing needs of families. While other recent studies have examined the influence of child-care environments, there has been much less attention paid to health-care providers—representatives of one of the main societal institutions with continuous and ongoing contact with families and young children. Their interactions are sufficiently intense during the first three years of life to provide a unique access point for transferring information and initiating interventions that can benefit children's health and well-being.