



Questions About Early Childhood Education & Let's Grow

These are questions that you may have about early literacy. If you choose to champion this cause, you may get asked these questions yourself. We want you to have the facts at hand – just in case. You should refer child development-specific questions to United Way staff or an early childhood expert.

1. I don't see how early childhood education really shapes school or life success. How can a child's experiences in the first five years overshadow everything else learned over the next 15 years?

The brain reaches 85% of its adult weight in the first five years. Healthy brain development is facilitated by loving, nurturing families and everyday learning moments. Early childhood experiences exert a dramatic impact and physically determine how the brain is “wired.” Stress on a child – like that from poverty, homelessness, absent parents, substance abuse in the home etc. – during those early years can damage the brain architecture irretrievably. That can lead to problems in learning, behavior and increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness over time. Just like with a house, the sturdier the basic framework, the sturdier the house.

2. Why are we talking about government programs to fix what parents ought to be doing?

Parents should be the child's first, best and most important teacher. We want all caregivers prepared, especially parents. Some parents – especially those in single parent or low-wage homes – need support to give their children the chance for success others have. Others may undervalue their role in school readiness – 1 in 3 parents incorrectly believe their loving interaction has little impact on their child's academic success. Any early childhood program in our community should involve parents, so that they learn how to support their child's learning, language and pre-literacy skills and school readiness

3. Why should I be spending tax dollars on poor children when I am struggling to keep my household income stable?

In Polk County, the family income is the number one predictor of academic success. Even if they aren't born into the best circumstances, every child deserves a fair chance. Growing up in poverty increases the likelihood that children may be exposed to inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, maternal depression, unsafe environments, abuse or poor quality day care. I believe we are all accountable to each other. We have a moral responsibility to help parents who may lack important child-rearing skills in order to make sure that all of America's children have the opportunity to succeed in life.

4. Is this really more important than strategies to rebuild our economy?

No population should be pitted against another – it's not children vs. seniors, or homeowners vs. auto workers. But just as we view infrastructure improvements as supports for the economy in the short-term, we have to look at building young children's brains as a support for the economy in the long-term. Researchers at the Federal Reserve Bank have found that there's a compounding effect – which means that improving early childhood education expands the development of human capital, so it expands skill-based economic growth. High school graduation rates discourage new business growth in Polk County. Investing in early childhood education will improve school performance and graduation rates.



5. Why should we invest money in early childhood when everything is in such dire shape?

Children will continue to enter school – ready or not – as we tackle our economic problems. In 2007, 38% of Polk County’s children enter kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed. Disadvantaged children are another year or two behind, in language. That’s not going to change if we put our kids on hold. It will only get worse – with dire consequences. Researchers say most children struggling to read in kindergarten will still be struggling in third grade. And studies show that third graders who cannot read on track are more likely to drop out of high school. There is a clear correlation between school readiness and high school graduation.

6. The government hasn’t done such a good job with any programs – why do we think this will be different?

Churches, nonprofits and public-private partnerships fund many early childhood programs. United Way of Central Florida is facilitating a collaborative effort that includes partners from all areas of the community. Every partner reports measurable benchmarks and annual progress.

7. We’re already spending so much on K-12 education – and look at the state of our schools. Can we really afford to invest more in children before they even get to school?

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, at the University of Chicago, says our society is not investing enough in early childhood intervention programs. His research shows we’re spending too much in the later years (adult remedial education) with little return on investment when we could prevent them more inexpensively in the early years. As Harvard University’s National Scientific Council on the Developing Child says: the older a child gets, the more money it takes to make a difference.

Money for education can be better spent. Early childhood interventions can reduce the need for special education and lower the likelihood of being retained in the first grade. Children benefiting from these services and programs are much more likely to be literate by 3rd grade, to complete high school, and get a good job. I have come to see early childhood investments not just as something we should invest in, but also as a smart investment. It really is “pay now -- or pay more later.”

8. I’m focused on today’s bottom line, not tomorrow’s workforce. Why should I care about early childhood education?

Early childhood education supports the bottom line. Workers need peace of mind that their child is in a good, safe place. Good, affordable childcare reduces absenteeism and turnover. Studies show that lack of child care leading to employee absences cost employers \$3 billion a year. That’s why some economic developers think of early learning as part of our economic infrastructure -- as critical to economic development as good schools, roads, water, sewer and other incentives.