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early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

Autumn 1997 | Volume 1, Issue 3

Child Care Policy

From the Director's Office: Public Policy, Private Needs

From Policy to Practice

Center Stage: A Textbook Example of Research to Policy

NCEDL News: Doors of Perception

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early developments

How are legislative policies affecting our children?

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

early *Developments*

Autumn 1997

Volume 1, No. 3



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Periodicals postage paid at
Chapel Hill, NC

Early Developments is published four times a year by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

6,500 copies of this public document were printed at a cost of \$5,000.00 or \$0.77 per copy.

Early Developments is funded in part by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in part by PR/Award Number R307A60004, administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Contents of articles do not necessarily represent the positions of the U.S. Department of Education. Endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.



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In this issue

of *Early Developments*, we look at child care policy from the national, the state, and the local levels. We also examine the role of *Early Childhood Research Policy Briefs*, produced by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL), and how policymakers and administrators function as NCEDL advisors.

We hope you enjoy this issue and find our information useful.

Early Developments is available online at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center (FPG) web site <www.fpg.unc.edu>

Fall is a busy time at FPG with many of our researchers involved in state, regional, and national conferences. For example, NCEDL, which is based at FPG, and the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) held a conference on “Early Childhood in the Carolinas: Research to Policy to Practice” in late September.

The conference was an intensive two-state dialogue between early childhood researchers and early childhood policy and program decision makers, focusing on critical issues concerning young children and their families and school readiness. Organizers are using the conference to set up a model to help state policy makers turn research into practice.

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From the director's office

The rules Public policy—private needs

Do the rules and regulations that allocate resources meet the needs of young children and their families?

This month's "From The Director's Office" is a guest column by Jim Gallagher and Robin Rooney, two investigators at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center. Jim, director of FPG from 1970 to 1987, is a nationally recognized policy researcher and head of the Policy Strand of the National Center for Early Development & Learning. Robin has specialized in policies pertaining to federal legislation and in personnel preparation in early intervention.

—Don Bailey
Director, FPG

POLICY SPEAKS THROUGH THE RULES AND REGULATIONS that allocate scarce resources to almost unlimited social needs. For the next few months the American public seems destined to hear much about young children and their development. This is probably because of a collective decision by the popular media, encouraged by key policy players, that early child development is a "hot" issue. How can we take advantage of this interest to create a permanent infrastructure for enduring policy that will outlast the predictably limited attention span of the media and the public?

Let's examine what key policy questions need to be considered as we review the rules and regulations that govern programs for young children and allocate resources to those programs.

Is there a public commitment to making things better for young children?

Judging by the public's actions to date, (allocation of society's resources) the current answer is: "No," or at best "Maybe." Unless we can convince the public that the answer is: "Yes, young children's needs are important," then all other discussion fades into a dialogue among professionals, not likely to yield major social changes.

Fortunately, we have a broad base of data, all of which clearly indicate that resources spent early in a child's development can pay off significantly. It is critical that we use those data to convince funding agents that this investment is a wise and lasting one.

How can we combine our existing resources to help young children develop more effectively?

President Eisenhower once said that we cannot afford to have the nation saved four times over, once each by the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Similarly, we cannot afford the expense, nor is it prudent, to give every agency devoted to young children, all that is requested. Our current policy problem is not that states lack plans for young children, it is that they have too many—five or six at least. What each state needs is a Comprehensive State Plan for Young Children which will identify common goals, combine available

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resources, and make clear what is needed for the future.

This is no small task. It will require the best thinking of many different professional disciplines and many different policy makers. The variety of laws passed at the state and federal level for different subsets of children, at different times, and for different purposes, each have their own rules and regulations that do not easily allow for collaboration. Yet, collaborative planning is a top priority if we are to achieve some practical outcome of all this current interest.

How do we build an infrastructure for quality services for young children?

Over the years service areas such as health, education and social services have learned what an infrastructure for quality consists of, and have created some isolated elements in such a structure. Let's review these components.

Materials Development

We clearly need to continue to develop materials and procedures that enhance the quality of child care, whether that care is in child care centers, family day care, or at home.

Personnel preparation

There is close to universal agreement that top quality early childhood personnel is a key to quality programs. But there are two enormous barriers to making this a reality. First, salary levels do not match our expectations of personnel. Second, we do not consistently integrate our major personnel preparation entities, such as community colleges or higher education institutions, to improve practices at the service delivery level.

Demonstration

High quality programs for young children are needed to demonstrate how effective practice can be made practical. Once effective practice can be seen in action it is easier to upgrade service delivery.

Research

We need to add to the knowledge base on child development and effective programs, including research on the developing brain and the various interventions that pay off in tangible benefits to the children and their families. This requires both basic and applied research.

Dissemination

A central communications network is needed to allow service centers for young children to communicate with one another and with professionals so that ideas can be exchanged, new methods passed along, and more effective dissemination of research-to-practice information. Currently, programs are isolated, and there are few provisions at the state level to create any kind of an intrastate or interstate network.

Financial

To determine what money is allocated, we need a mechanism to track money spent in early childhood from the level of the governor's office. North Carolina once had a Children's Budget that showed where all the money on children was being spent. Some similar device that fits the needs of individual states would seem to be required.

We also need to know what costs await us if we follow certain initiatives. Many proposals for helping young children have been generated by emotion. Good intentions need to be backed


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with fiscal responsibility so that the public has confidence that the plan being followed ties emotional intentions to the financial commitment made to children and families.

Accountability—Report Card on Young Children

If a state and its elected leaders commit to a comprehensive plan, there should be equal commitment to accountability. The people who pay the bills need a clear statement of how we are doing. On the report card, we should publish the number of children being served through various programs and services, the number of children entering kindergarten each year who can demonstrate that they are ready and able to learn, the number of children raised in poverty, the infant mortality rate, and so on. In short, the report card should tell what the public is getting for its investment.

Such a collaborative effort will create varying degrees of professional discomfort. Some disciplines and organizations will be forced out of their accustomed roles and routines. No one said that change and improvement would be easy, but for perhaps the first time, we will be able to say that we have the interest of the general public on our side. There is much to be gained for young children if we put our minds and hands to the task.

In another time, Benjamin Franklin remarked, "Gentlemen, we must all hang together or assuredly we will all hang separately." Fortunately, those of us who toil in early childhood programs do not face that violent result, but our hopes and dreams for services for young children are at similar risk if we do not collaborate across agencies and disciplines. 

Recent publications

by researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

Welfare Reform and You

R.M. Clifford. (1997). *Young Children*, 52(2), 2–3.

Partnerships with Families

R.M. Clifford. (1997). *Young Children*, 52(3), 2.

Partnerships with Our Colleagues

R.M. Clifford. (1997). *Young Children*, 52(4), 2.

Partnerships with Other Professionals

R.M. Clifford. (1997). *Young Children*, 52(5), 2.

Commentary: Personal Dimensions of Leadership

R.M. Clifford. (1997). In S.L. Kagan & B.T. Bowman (Eds.), *Leadership in early care and education* (pp. 103–104). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.