

Parent Education and Family Life Education: A Critical Link in Early Childhood Education Policy

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between parent and child and the family environment sets the stage for a child's well-being and ability to learn. Positive early child care and educational experiences further contribute to their learning and development. Thus, an increasing number of early childhood programs now include parenting education. This policy brief contains a review of policy and discusses research on the role and effectiveness of parent education and Family Life Education. Recommendations emphasize the importance of two-generation early childhood programs and a continuum-of-services model that acknowledges the diversity of parent and family needs based on social location.

A review of research on early childhood programs over five decades shows a decline in the impact of programs on school readiness.¹ Early brain development research sheds light on the importance of parent-child relationships and the family environment to children's mental health and well-being, and school success.^{2,3} However, a review of federal spending on early childhood programs reveals that limited funds are designated to support parent education and Family Life Education. The lack of funding for parent education and Family Life Education as part of early childhood education discounts the role of parenting practices in early development and school readiness. It also raises the following question: **What is the role of parent education and Family Life Education in early childhood policy and supporting effective programs and practices?**

Importance of Parenting and Parent-Child Relationships to Children's Development

Brain development research in the earliest years points to the importance of children's experiences and their impact on future cognitive, social, and emotional development as well as physical and mental health.⁴ Research also tells us that parents' sensitive and responsive interactions with their children are necessary for early brain development and a secure attachment, which influences healthy development and learning throughout life.⁵

Positive parenting practices and a safe and stimulating home learning environment are strongly related to addressing the achievement gap during the early years.^{5,12,13} Specific parenting practices associated with secure attachment stimulates children's cognitive development and promotes school readiness. These practices include the following:

- Showing warmth and sensitivity
- Engaging in contingent responsiveness
- Providing parental guidance and discipline

- Providing materials in the home
- Providing for organization of the home environment and predictable routines
- Engaging in shared book reading and talking with children
- Directly teaching skills

Background on Early Childhood Education Policy

Longitudinal cost-benefit research on early childhood programs and their impact on adult outcomes make a strong case for increased spending on early childhood programs that focus on children's learning and school readiness.¹⁴ Figure 1 provides an overview of federal spending on early education proposed by the Obama administration for 2016.¹⁵ Five different program areas receive most of the current funding:

- 1 Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit for families with young children to assist with child-care costs (workforce and family financial support)
- 2 Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding for child care for low-

TALKING POINTS

- Research shows that the parent-child relationship and the family environment are the foundation of a child's future well-being and development.
- Two-generation early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programs focused on young children and their parents are a powerful way to address both parents' learning and needs and provide support for positive child growth and development.
- Early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programming should recognize and support fathers as capable parents and partners in diverse family systems.
- The quality of parent education and Family Life Education depends on parent educators and Family Life Educators and the knowledge and competencies they bring to their interactions with families.

income families (workforce and family financial support)

- 3 Head Start/Early Head Start funding for low-income families (school readiness)
- 4 Federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grant funding for home visiting (healthy child growth and development)
- 5 Part B & C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) for young children with disabilities (early intervention services)

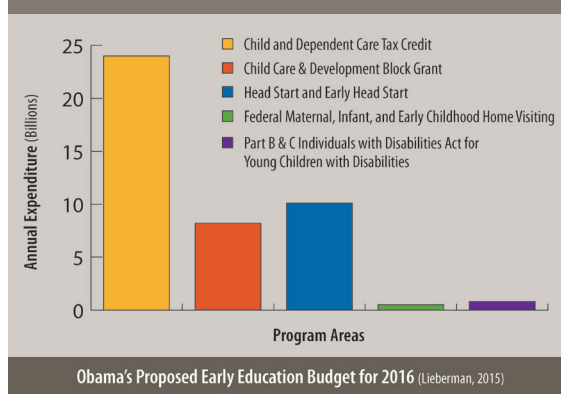
The spending pattern of federal dollars reflects the emphasis on programs for young children with *limited focus on parenting and Family Life Education*.

Research on Parent Education and Family Life Education Practice

The practice of parent education and Family Life Education varies across health, education, and child welfare sectors. Research has begun to define components related to effective practice.^{13, 19} Parent education and Family Life Education programs, for example, include teaching parents about child development and specific parenting skills.^{10, 13} Research also has identified curriculum and program-delivery components that support desired outcomes for parents and children.^{13, 18, 20}

- Consider the *timing* of parenting programs when preparing to offer parent education. Parents are more open to learning and

FIGURE 1: PROPOSED FEDERAL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM FUNDING (2016)



in need of support during the prenatal period, the transition to parenthood, and the early years.^{4, 9}

- *Build a relationship* with parents as it is the foundation for engaging them in parent education and Family Life Education.¹⁷
²¹ Also key is the readiness of parents to engage in and benefit from parent education and Family Life Education.
- Know the research on *parenting practices*.^{19, 12, 13} Research creates a clear set of outcomes for parent education and Family Life Education during the early years. These include the parenting skills of sensitivity, responsiveness, providing guidance and discipline, communication, and behavior management.
- *Adapting programs for diverse groups of parents* is critical because the needs and

values differ for various cultural groups. Some core content may be relevant across various cultural groups but still need to be “translated” to be relevant to particular groups of parents and families.¹⁰

- Identifying relevant *program delivery* options is critical for parental learning (e.g., providing opportunities for active engagement, modeling, discussing videos of parent-child interactions, and practicing skills).
- Involve *fathers*, as they are often missing partners in supporting a child's development and providing a safe and stable environment.¹⁰
- Carefully select the *staff* person who delivers parent education and Family Life Education.^{29, 30} A review of evidence-based curricula reveals that most recommend the use of experienced mental health, education, or health-care professionals to deliver the programs. A parent and family educator teaching license is required of parenting educators in Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs. The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) offers the Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) credential that reflects the educator's knowledge and experience in the 10 Family Life Education content areas, including parent education.

Conclusion

Research on universal access to early childhood education, parent education, and Family Life Education suggests that childhood education policy initiatives are most effective when they *focus on the whole family* and build the capacity of parents, rather than focusing solely on children's academic achievement and school readiness.

Please see the full brief for a complete list of references. References also are available upon request.

Author Bios

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Integrate parent education and Family Life Education into early childhood education programs for all young children.
- Engage fathers as partners in early childhood parent education and Family Life Education.
- Tailor early childhood parent education and Family Life Education to family, community, and cultural values and needs that consider timing and teach research-based parenting skills.
- Build the capacity of program staff to deliver early childhood parent education and Family Life Education.
- Create new models of research and development to support continuous improvement of early childhood parent education and Family Life Education programs.



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