



# High-Quality Early Childhood Programs are Key for a Strong South Carolina

Child care and home visiting for infants and toddlers can help grow the economy, increase public safety, and enhance national security

## Summary

**High-quality early childhood programs can contribute to public safety, help build a strong economy, and enhance national security.** Research shows that experiences children have in their first three years, during a period of critical brain growth, set the foundation for future development.<sup>1</sup> Infants and toddlers who experience warm, responsive parenting and nurturing child care programs that stimulate their development are set on a path to productive adulthood. Young children who lack these quality environments early in life often arrive at school already behind their peers and may never catch up—underperforming in reading and math, more likely to be held back in school, and less likely to graduate from high school on time.

Children's early experiences also have consequences for our state and our nation. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to

serve in the U.S. military. However, issues like educational deficits, health problems, substance abuse, and crime prevent 73 percent of South Carolina youth from qualifying for service.<sup>2</sup> South Carolina's jails are full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes, many of whom lack high school diplomas that would qualify them for legitimate employment.<sup>3</sup> South Carolina's businesses need a steady supply of educated, skilled young people to build a strong workforce to compete in the global economy.

South Carolina policymakers must support high-quality early childhood programs, including home visiting and child care, to provide our infants and toddlers with the strong foundation they need to contribute to the future strength of our state and our nation. In particular, legislators should ensure equitable access across the state to high-quality, age-appropriate early childhood programs led by providers who are well-



trained and adequately compensated, and support parents in their vital role as young children's first and most important teachers.

## **Early Childhood Policy Priorities for a Stronger South Carolina**

### ***Support families through voluntary home visiting programs***

Parents are children's first and most important teachers. However, some parents face multiple challenges, such as poverty, mental health issues, or single parenthood, that can require additional support. To provide parent education and support, home visiting programs pair a trained professional with young families. Research on several different home visiting models shows that they have a range of benefits for children and families, including: reductions in child abuse, improved child health, enhanced academic outcomes, and lower spending on social services.<sup>4</sup> Impacts on child abuse<sup>5</sup> are especially important, given the link between child abuse and later

criminal behavior.<sup>6</sup> More than 4,000 families are served by several home visiting programs in South Carolina.<sup>7</sup> However, there is much unmet need, with only 10 percent of families in need in at-risk counties able to access services.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Grow access to high-quality early care and education (ECE)***

Two-thirds of South Carolina's children under age 3 have mothers in the workforce.<sup>9</sup> Working parents depend on child care so they can go to work and support their families. Infants and toddlers need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development, both at home and in ECE while their parents work.

Decades of research have shown the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality ECE programs for young children's development along several dimensions, particularly for those from families with low incomes.<sup>10</sup> Benefits include increased school readiness, enhanced academic performance, fewer behavior problems, and higher educational attainment.<sup>11</sup> The fact that 60 percent of prisoners nationwide do not have a high school diploma illustrates the importance of education for crime prevention.<sup>12</sup>

Despite demonstrated need and research-backed benefits, too many of our state's children lack access to high-quality child care.<sup>13</sup> The problem is particularly acute for families with very young children, as infant and toddler care is the least available and most expensive. Infant care in a center in South Carolina averages \$9,048 per year, putting it out of reach for many families, especially those with low incomes.<sup>14</sup> Only three percent of low- to moderate-income infants and toddlers are in child care subsidized by the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).<sup>15</sup>



The considerations around high-quality ECE transcend even impressive educational outcomes. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating, access to nutritious foods, and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity, a major disqualifier for military service.<sup>16</sup> Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our state's correctional system is full of people serving time for serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path to success in school, so they will be ready for the workforce, and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.<sup>17</sup>

## **South Carolina Policymakers Must Support Early Childhood Programs**

High-quality home visiting and child care are critical to ensuring South Carolina's infants and toddlers get the best start possible. State policymakers must continue to invest in these programs as a matter of public safety and national security, and to support our state's current and future workforce. In particular, legislators should ensure statewide, equitable access to high-quality, age-appropriate early childhood programs led by providers who are well-trained and adequately compensated, and support parents in their vital role as children's first and most important teachers. Action now can improve the experiences of South Carolina's young children today and strengthen our state in the years to come.

## Endnotes

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