

Early Care and Education: A National Security Imperative

Greater access to high-quality child care and preschool in Arkansas can help improve military readiness

74 percent of young adults in Arkansas cannot join the military.¹ Our national security depends on young adults who are ready, willing and able to serve in the U. S. military. However, military leaders are increasingly concerned that there are not enough qualified candidates to defend our nation, due to problems including education, obesity, crime and drug abuse.

Early brain development sets the stage for children's future success.² Sixty-four percent of Arkansas children ages five and younger have parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and many of these children are not in high-quality child care or preschool.³ Without improvements to early education, our nation risks an even smaller military recruiting pool in the future.

High-quality child care and education can help improve military readiness

Research shows that high-quality early education can support children's success, and military readiness, in three categories:

1. Education

A longitudinal study of over 1,300 children found children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age four

compared to those in lower-quality care. At 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.⁴ High-quality pre-K can improve early math and literacy skills, putting children three to nine months ahead in elementary school compared to their peers who did not attend pre-K.⁵ An evaluation of Arkansas Better Chance found that pre-K attendance improved children's literacy and math scores, with benefits sustained through second grade for literacy and math, and through third grade for literacy. Children who attended were less likely to be held back in school by the end of 3rd grade than those who didn't attend pre-K.⁶

2. Obesity

Child care emphasizing healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's obesity risk. A study of the Abecedarian early care and education program found that girls

“ 64% of young children in Arkansas have parents or a single parent who works outside the home.”

who participated were less likely to become obese as adults and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.⁷ Two randomized studies of Head Start nutrition programs found that participating children had a lower risk of obesity two years later.⁸

3. Behavior

The aforementioned study of over 1,300 children found those in higher-quality child care had significantly fewer behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.⁹ Studies of two high-quality pre-K programs found that participating children were less likely to have criminal records as adults.¹⁰

Arkansas policymakers should continue to promote access to high-quality child care and preschool

Policymakers must commit to strengthening the quality of early care and education in our state and ensure that more young children have access to it. Attention to the needs of infants and toddlers is particularly important, as care for our youngest children is the least available and the most expensive. Support for high-quality child care and early childhood education is an investment in our future national security.

¹ Department of Defense (2017, November). Qualified Military Available (QMA). Acquired through personal communication with the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Also see: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945>

² National Academies Press. (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods. <https://www.nap.edu/read/9824/chapter/1#ii>

³ Kids Count Data Center. (2018). Children under six with all available parents in the labor force. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org>; New America (n.d.). The second pillar of care: quality. <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/second-pillar-care-quality/>

⁴ Vandell et al. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2938040/>

⁵ Ladd, H. F., et al. (2013). Early childhood initiatives and third grade outcomes in North Carolina. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pam.21734>; Barnett, W. S., et al (2013). Abbott Preschool Program longitudinal effects study: Fifth grade follow-up. National Institute for Early Education Research. <http://nieer.org/research-report/201311apples205th20grade-pdf>

⁶ Jung, K., Barnett, W. S., Hustedt, J. T., Francis, J. (2013, May). Longitudinal effects of the Arkansas Better Chance Program: Findings from first through fourth grade. <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Arkansas20Longitudinal20Report20May2013n.pdf>

⁷ Campbell et al. (2014). Early childhood investments substantially boost adult health. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4028126/>

⁸ Fitzgibbon et al. (2005). Two-year follow up results for hip hop to health jr. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15870664>

⁹ Vandell et al. (2010). Do effects of early child care extend to age 15 years? <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2938040/>

¹⁰ Reynolds, A. J., et al. (2001). Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest. JAMA, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11343481>; Schweinhart, L. J., Barnes, H. V., & Weikart, D. P. (1993). Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED366433>

Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble.

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

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