



STRENGTHENING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THROUGH HIGH-QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION

– WHO WE ARE –

SHEPHERDING THE NEXT GENERATION is a nationwide movement of Shepherd Advocates: evangelical pastors and ministry leaders who are committed to speaking out on behalf of children at risk so that each child will have the opportunity to grow up in a strong, stable and healthy family.

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.” Proverbs 31:8a (NIV)

SUMMARY

As pastors and ministry leaders, we know that the Bible teaches us that the family was created as the primary place for educating a child on how he or she is to live. That’s why we support effective services that strengthen families and have the power to transform the lives of at-risk children, such as high-quality pre-kindergarten programs.

Children attending high-quality pre-kindergarten are more likely to succeed in school, go to college, be married and be employed. Fewer babies were later born out-of-wedlock among young women who attended high-quality pre-kindergarten, and young men who attended were less likely later on to have fathered children they are not raising. High-quality early education can help ensure at-risk children thrive and strengthen families.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

The Bible teaches us that God created the family to be the primary place for educating a child on how he or she is to live. It is within the context of the family where values are taught and nurtured (Dt. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:5-8; Pro. 1; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5). However, some parents have a more difficult experience in child rearing than others, often lacking the knowledge, the resources or the support of a spouse to raise their children towards lives of health, opportunity and values.

Nationwide, 35 percent of children live in a single-parent household.¹ This leaves many single mothers struggling with the stresses of single-parenthood and fighting against the economic odds to provide for their children.



As Christian leaders, we try to teach the religious values that will build strong families and offer a helping hand to those in our pews and our communities. But many parents need additional help. Research shows that early education can play a critical role in helping disadvantaged parents raise children who grow up to complete high school and higher education, get married and hold jobs.

American families continue to face tough financial challenges and, as they try to make ends meet, they are often unable to afford high-quality early education programs for their children. The result is that too many at-risk children start school behind their classmates who attended pre-kindergarten. For example, one study found that by age three, children with professional parents already have a larger vocabulary—knowing twice as many words as children of lower-income parents.² And, by the time these children reach kindergarten, too many are not only far behind in vocabulary, but also on pre-literacy, pre-math and crucial social skills they will need to follow teachers’ directions and work with classmates. These problems can create a pattern of failure lasting a lifetime.

HIGH-QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN CAN STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

Research shows that high-quality pre-kindergarten programs can help children get a strong start in life and help them grow up to have strong families of their own:

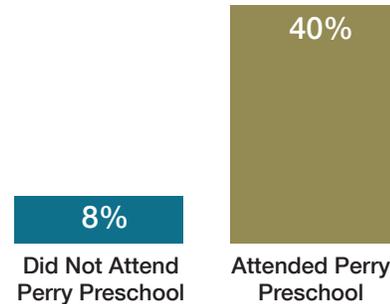
- A long-term study of the Perry Preschool in Michigan showed that women who had attended the Perry Preschool as children were five times more likely to be married and living with their husbands by age 27 than the women who did not attend. The girls who participated in Perry Preschool also ended up having one-third fewer births out of wedlock.³
- An evaluation of New Jersey's pre-k program found that participating children in at-risk districts were three-fourths of a year ahead in math and two-thirds of a year ahead in literacy when they reached the fourth and fifth grades. They were also 31 percent less likely to be in special education, and 40 percent less likely to be held back in school.⁴
- Perry Preschool participants had high school graduation rates that were 44 percent higher than those left out. In contrast, by age 27, youth left out were five times more likely to be chronic criminal offenders with five or more arrests. By age 40, males who had not enrolled in the Perry Preschool were one-third less likely to be employed and 63 percent more likely to have fathered children they did not raise.⁵
- Another carefully studied program, the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, also found that, compared to individuals left out, participants were 42 percent less likely to have had babies before the age of 20.⁶ They were four times more likely to have earned a four-year college degree and over 40 percent more likely to have been consistently employed by age 30. They were also 80 percent less likely to have used public assistance for extended periods of time.⁷

Not enough children are served in high quality pre-kindergarten:

Nationwide, 63 percent of lower-income three- and four-year-olds are not enrolled in preschool.⁸ Meanwhile, among those who are enrolled in a state-run program, states spend an average of \$4,000 per child annually—less than half of what the National Institute for Early Education Research estimates is necessary for high quality education and care.⁹ A greater investment in pre-kindergarten is required to achieve high-quality and to reach more disadvantaged children.

Savings: This investment in early learning for our children will pay off, and not just in terms of strengthening families. A well-respected and independent cost-benefit analysis of 49 rigorous studies of state- and district-funded preschool programs showed that preschool can return, on average, a net return to society of \$26,000 for every child served.¹⁰

Girls attending the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely by age 27 to be married and living with their husband



Source: Schweinhart, 1993

Bipartisan support: More than 25 states with both Republican and Democratic leadership expanded or made new investments in high-quality early education and care in 2013. This trend continued in 2014, with increases for pre-kindergarten funding passed in at least 21 states, again with both Republican and Democratic leadership.

OUR CALL

Pastors and ministry leaders are already working in a variety of ways to strengthen families and help children at risk in their own communities. But they need help from national, state and local policymakers to ensure vulnerable children have access to pre-kindergarten programs. Maintaining and increasing investments in proven programs like high-quality pre-kindergarten are necessary to help at-risk children live up to their God-given potential; make positive contributions to society; and someday, raise strong, healthy families of their own.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kids Count. (2013). Children in single-parent families. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?ind=106>
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- 10 Kay, N., & Pennucci, A. (2014, January). Early childhood education for low-income students: A review of the evidence and benefit-cost analysis. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved from: <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/reports/531>

