

PARTNERSHIP  
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SUCCESS

# Parenting Education is Economic Development



*The impact of good parenting goes far beyond its influence on individual children.*

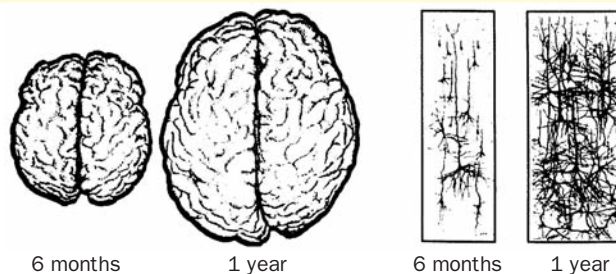
Our entire nation's economic health and societal well-being are significantly enhanced when parents have the tools they need to help their kids start school prepared to learn, develop the social skills necessary to pay attention and work in teams, and grow up to be productive adults. So for any business leader concerned about the quality of his future workforce, or the quality of the communities where her business is located and employees live, promoting good parenting is good business.

A growing body of research on the physical development of the infant brain, as well as evidence from behavioral and cognitive studies, shows just how important parenting is, from the very earliest days of life. Before they even open their eyes, babies start processing the world around them, and their brains rapidly begin to develop—or fail to develop—in response to the stimulation they receive.

## Brain Growth<sup>1</sup>

Physical Size

Neuronal Processes



A child's brain increases substantially in size and complexity between the ages of 6 months and one year. Giving parents the tools they need to ensure positive cognitive and behavioral development is an investment in future success.



Babies learn whether the world is a predictable, nurturing, safe place, or not, from what happens to them when they cry and seek comfort. Indeed, according to Harvard professor Jack Shonkoff, an infant's brain develops 700 neural connections—the connections that help her learn—every second. It is also well-established that parents with multiple risk factors—youth, poverty, single parenthood, lack of education and drug and alcohol abuse—are less likely to interact



with their babies and toddlers in positive ways that set them on a productive life course.

The good news is that parenting education can counter those factors. Two new studies on the impacts of effective parenting programs, one of which was conducted for the Partnership for America's Economic Success, clearly demonstrate a positive return on investment. In addition, longitudinal studies are beginning to paint a clear picture of which parenting supports have the most impact.

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## Understanding What Works

No single program can address the needs of all parents and communities. But examining the specific results of each type of parenting support enables policy makers to adopt or design programs tailored to the challenges they face, thereby reducing costs. In their review, Sharon McGroder and Allison Hyra found 10 parenting programs strong enough to have a possible economic impact. (The full report, available on the Partnership website, includes other promising programs.) Specific outcomes include:

### The good news.

While there is much more to learn, evidence strongly suggests that substantial benefits can be gained through investments in programs that focus on:

- **Establishing an early parent-child bond and helping parents set realistic expectations based on their child's developmental needs.**
- **Teaching parents how to nurture their children to reach their full potential.**
- **Helping parents manage behavioral and school-readiness issues with preschoolers.**
- **Empowering parents to establish boundaries and discipline effectively.**
- **Preventing abuse and neglect.**
- *Nurse Family Partnership*, a nation-wide program of nurse home visits serving low-income, pregnant teens from their first pregnancy through their child's second year, has been studied rigorously for several decades. It has consistently shown reduced abuse and neglect, parental welfare dependence, and drug- and alcohol-related impairments; and decreased the chance that children will run away or be arrested or convicted 15 years later.



- *DARE to be You*, a set of 10 intensive workshops for parents of children between three years and school age offered in diverse areas of the country, reduced parents' negative views of their kids and harsh parenting, and improved communication and limit-setting, leading to less oppositional behavior in their children.
- *Incredible Years*, parenting workshops conducted at 11 Chicago child care centers serving low-income, mostly minority parents, increased positive parenting strategies such as praise and physical affection, reduced children's poor behavior and improved their ability to interact positively.
- *Triple-P Positive Parenting Program*, which provided therapy and training on communications skills to parents in Australia, reduced both mothers' and fathers' tendencies to "under-" or "over-parent" and improved mothers' sense of parenting competence. It also substantially reduced children's disruptive behavior. A recent U.S. study found significant decreases in abuse, neglect and out-of-home placements.<sup>2</sup>
- *Reach Out and Read*, a national program in which pediatricians encourage parents to read to their kids, improved word recognition and vocabulary among low-income toddlers.
- *Families and Schools Together*, an eight-week program for Native American children ages 4-9 and their parents in the Midwest, reduced children's aggression, withdrawal and anxiety, and improved their attention and academic competence.
- *HIPPY*, a nationwide, two-year program of visits to low-income mothers to teach skills around reading and stimulating play, improved preschool children's cognitive skills, reading scores and overall classroom adaptation.
- *Family CheckUp*, a three-session counseling service in Pittsburgh to assess needs of low-income families and support parenting, increased maternal involvement and reduced boys' destructive behavior.
- *Parent Education and Support for Teen Mothers*, which provided group support for at-risk teen mothers in Virginia, substantially reduced rates of child abuse and neglect for a period of at least three years.
- *Early Head Start*, a federally funded program providing early learning and parent support for low-income infants and toddlers across the United States, led to more books in participants' homes, more daily reading to kids, better parent teaching activities and overall home environment, and higher household income, as well as children with fewer behavior problems and better approaches to learning when they entered kindergarten.

Some of these programs have calculated dollar savings; for example, benefit-cost ratios for Nurse Family Partnership averaged almost 3:1 for the full sample of participants, with a much higher ratio of almost 6:1 for high-risk mothers, resulting in an average lifetime cost savings of approximately \$32,875 per family in 2007 dollars.



## Good Parenting and Crime Reduction

In addition to short-term societal benefits, researchers have long cited the capacity for effective parenting education programs to reduce later criminal activity.

Criminologist Alex Piquero and his colleagues pooled results from 55 rigorously-designed studies from a range of countries and found a very strong relationship between participation in a high-quality parenting program and lower crime rates.<sup>3</sup> **Children of parents who participated were as much as 22 percent less likely to later commit a crime.**

**This policy brief** is part of a series documenting both the societal costs of adverse early childhood conditions, and the short- and long-term economic benefits of public investments in young children. ■ **This brief**, written by Elaine Weiss and Grace Lee, is based on two papers: *Developmental and Economic Effects of Parenting Programs*, by Drs. Sharon McGroder and Allison Hyra at the Lewin Group (available at [www.PartnershipforSuccess.org](http://www.PartnershipforSuccess.org)), and *Family Programs Implemented up to Age 5: Effectiveness in Reducing Later Antisocial Behavior/Delinquency* by Alex Piquero, et al. (available at [www.campbellcollaboration.org](http://www.campbellcollaboration.org)).

## Conclusion

High-quality parenting education programs, implemented wisely, can sharply increase children’s odds of healthy social, behavioral and cognitive development, helping them become the engaged citizens and productive workers our country needs. In addition, reductions in costs related to crime—from victims’ costs to police, court and prison expenses—are substantial. These findings make a strong case for greater investment in effective parenting programs and highlight the need for further research to more fully understand how and why promising initiatives achieve positive outcomes.

- 1 These images are from research by Dr. Paul Lombroso, M.D., “Development of the Cerebral Cortex: VI. Growth Factors” *I, J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 37(6):674-675, 1998. Used with permission.
- 2 R.J. Prinz, et al. “Population-Based Prevention of Child Maltreatment: The U.S. Triple P System Population Trial.” *Prev. Sci.* 10(1):1-12, March 2009.
- 3 The meta-analysis team identified 55 studies on parenting programs of varying sample sizes that used rigorous methods to determine programs impact. Most of these studies were carried out in the United States (n=39), with the remainder in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand and China. They span over 30 years, from 1976 through 2008, and most (37) had samples under 100.

### For more information

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**The Partnership for America’s Economic Success** was created by a group of business leaders, economists, advocates, and 13 funders to document the economic impacts to the nation of investments in children from before birth to age five. The Partnership is housed at and managed by the Pew Center on the States.