

4 good reasons why ECE is not just important, but essential

by Anne W. Mitchell

As new president, Barack Obama said in February in his first address to the nation:

“... [I]t will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education from the day they are born to the day they begin a career. Already, we have made an historic investment in education through the economic recovery plan. *We have dramatically expanded early childhood education and will continue to improve its quality, because we know that the most formative learning comes in those first years of life.*”

President Obama understands that we in the United States are part of the global economy and the global community. All of our children are important, in



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every nation on earth. He ‘gets it’ about the importance of the early years.

These words are music to the ears of any child advocate — “a complete education for every child from the day they are born” and “expand and improve the quality of early childhood education.” Wow! It’s been a long time since our national leaders were this articulate about early childhood education.

As early childhood educators and advocates, we know that early childhood matters. It’s what we do every day with children; it’s our life’s work, and for many of us, it’s our driving passion:

- We know that learning happens through relationships.
- We know that social and emotional development is directly linked with intellectual development.
- We know that positive early learning experiences lead to later success in learning.
- We know that families are the strongest influence on young children and when early childhood educators partner with families, children do better.

As advocates for young children and families and advocates for our profession — early childhood education — we have long argued for improving

quality and for investing more public dollars:

- We want higher standards for programs; that’s why quality rating and improvement systems are sweeping the country and why thousands of programs in centers and homes are nationally accredited.
- We want better and more accessible professional development, so that every teacher can advance their practice.
- And most of all, we want overall greater public investment, per child, in early education so that we can achieve respectable compensation.

To make our case, we have used several different arguments alone or in combination.

The moral argument

We sometimes use the moral argument. Early education is a right for children. All children deserve great places to be every day and great people to be with. Children deserve good parents, good health, and good early learning experiences. Children deserve to have delightful and joyous childhoods that lead to bright futures. It’s the right thing for society to invest in young children. Families deserve support to raise chil-

dren. After all, families are doing the work and paying to raise their children, who will grow up to become the leaders and workforce of tomorrow and support us all. The care of children that happens outside the early childhood education market, in families, is valuable to the economy. The feminist economist, Nancy Folbre, has written eloquently about these issues (Folbre, 1994, 2001, 2006).

As a society, we can help by investing in family supportive policies like paid family leave and family-supportive workplaces. Most nations (168 out of 173 in a recent report) have generous paid family leave for mothers (Heymann, Earle, & Hayes, 2007). Many provide paid leave for fathers as well as mothers. Only a few of our states have any paid family leave and the United States has no national policy.

The workforce productivity argument

We are very familiar with the current workforce productivity argument and have used it for years. Parents need to work to support their families and they need dependable, quality programs for their children while they work. We usually add that employers benefit by having a dependable workforce, and that parents are more productive when they have good stable child care (Shellenback, 2004). Now we have good evidence that the benefits go well beyond the individual family and employer.

Investing in early care and education is an investment that strengthens the overall economy (Liu, Ribeiro, & Warner, 2004). In fact, higher quality is correlated with higher economic impact. Numerous economic impact studies have shown that early childhood education is a significant industry in every state, comparable to those that get a lot more economic development attention and public investment, such as tourism and hospitals.

A great resource with information on all 50 states is The Linking Economic Development and Child Care Project (see Resources).

Early childhood education is an industry that is worth about \$50 billion nationally, and contributes to the economic health of local communities (Stoney, Mitchell & Warner, 2007). This money stays in the community; it is not a product that is shipped out and sold elsewhere. And early childhood education jobs are the jobs of the future — early childhood education is a service that people need that cannot be done electronically from any place in the world.

The brain research argument

We've used the findings from neuroscience, or as we usually called it 'the brain research,' to make our case. The brain research argument is that the early years of a child's life, from the prenatal period onward, are when the brain is developing and growing faster than any other time. This period is critical and sets the stage for all of later learning and adult functioning. The baby's interactions with humans and the environment shape the brain's architecture. Positive and nurturing early relationships develop healthy well-functioning brains. As Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips (2000) put it, "All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn."

In those first months and years, the comfort, reassurance, and gentle stimulation that come through relationships with families and caregivers help babies and toddlers begin building self-control, persistence, curiosity, caring, and a sense of confidence. These are important concepts in their own right. They are precursors to essential skills that children will need to succeed in school and in life, such as emotional intelligence, empathy, ingenuity, conflict resolution, teamwork, and the ability to get along with others. A great resource on these

issues is the Center on the Developing Child and their recent publication, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy* (see Resources).

The return on investment argument

We have used the return on investment argument for a long time to argue that quality matters. The Perry Preschool and Abecedarian longitudinal research shows that high-quality early childhood programs have financial benefits much greater than their costs — investing in low-income young children is a good investment with high public returns. Recently, Nobel prize-winning economists such as James Heckman have delved deeply into this body of research, analyzed the accumulating evidence and brought its conclusions to a larger audience than we can usually reach. Federal Reserve bankers like Ben Bernanke have become articulate messengers, propelling this argument onto the national stage.

We need to be careful in using this argument for two reasons: this evidence pertains primarily to low-income children, and it is high-quality that produces the positive long-term effects on children, not the quality of an average program. As advocates for all young children, we need to couple this argument with the facts about the benefits of early education for all young children (Barnet, Brown & Shore, 2004).

We also need to be clear about quality. There are three basic ingredients that make a high-quality program:

- Structure: small classes, enough adults, stable adults
- Environment: a supportive learning environment guided by well-designed curriculum

- Process: effective teachers, who interact positively with each child, supported with professional development, reflective supervision, and good compensation.

This kind of quality costs.

The primary reason high-quality costs more is that better qualified teachers deserve to be paid well. College-educated workers command higher salaries and have options other than working in early education.

Lately, some in the early childhood research community have questioned the strength of the relationship between teacher credentials and program quality, and ultimately child outcomes (Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2005). It is still absolutely true that higher levels of college education, that is, degrees, especially when the content is early childhood education, are generally related to higher program quality. The question is: exactly what level of education ensures high quality? A bachelor's degree? An associate's degree? The "bachelor's degree debate" has been widely misinterpreted. It has been reduced to an either/or situation: either degrees matter or good training does.

Anyone who works in early childhood education, especially those who hire and supervise teaching staff, knows that the truth is *both* matter: the more educated you are, the better teacher you can be. If that education was specific to early childhood development and learning. And that reflective supervision, mentoring, and coaching — to implement what is learned in ongoing professional development — are what help teaching staff keep doing a good job.

A useful education focuses on how infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and primary grade children learn and grow, and how adults facilitate and promote children's learning and growth through

interaction. A useful education is practical; it deals with real situations and has lots of fieldwork in real everyday settings where children are. Ivory towers don't produce good teachers. The real issue here is how we ensure that higher education is effective and practical and specific to early childhood. We need to make bachelors' degree programs better, not throw the bachelors out with the researchers' bathwater.

Finally, an important point that has been largely overlooked in this debate among researchers is that a college education has societal value that translates into economic value. Degrees are necessary if we are ever to achieve worthy compensation throughout this industry.

In an article entitled Smarter Reform: Moving Beyond Single Program Solutions to an Early Care and Education System, my colleagues and I have combined all of these rationales into a coherent agenda (Stoney, Mitchell, & Warner 2007). We call for financial support for institutions (the providers of early childhood education), financial aid for families, support for non-market care, and a publicly-funded infrastructure.

We have a President who has publicly committed to advance access to early childhood education and its quality. States are rapidly designing and implementing quality rating and improvement systems that provide a framework for unifying all the disparate sectors of early care and education. It's time to build the early learning system we need. Now is the time to use all four of these arguments to achieve greater public investment and good public policy for early learning. Let's start with the moral argument: It is right for society to invest in young children and their families.

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Resources

The Center on the Developing Child
www.developingchild.harvard.edu
A Science-Based Framework for
Early Childhood Policy

The Linking Economic Development and
Child Care Project
<http://government.cce.cornell.edu/doc/reports/childcare/>