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Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support  
of the House Committee on Ways and Means

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It is a pleasure to be here today, addressing the members of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support. I will be considering the evidence for the effectiveness of programs for young, first-time mothers, both in terms of their impacts on the mothers themselves and their infants, toddlers and preschoolers. As a developmental psychologist, I have spent the last 30 years examining the life courses of families, both parents and their children, with a special focus on what might be termed vulnerable families. These would include families whose parents are young, are poor, are unmarried, and/or have low educational levels. I am interested in identifying what conditions are likely to enhance the success of parents who are rearing their children under the often difficult circumstances. I have also designed and evaluated a set of programs which aim to enhance the well-being of parents and children. These include the Infant Health and Development Program, the Early Head Start National Evaluation, and the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY).

References and documentation of the comments made in this testimony may be found in articles in *The Future of Children* ([www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org)) from Issue 15 (2005, on Racial and Ethnic Gaps in School Readiness, edited by C. Rouse, S. McLanahan and J. Brooks-Gunn), Issue 9 (1999, on Effectiveness of Home Visiting, edited by D. S. Gomby), and Issue 19 (2009, article by K. S. Howard and J. Brooks-Gunn on The Role of Home-Visiting Programs in Preventing Abuse and Neglect). A list of publications by Brooks-Gunn is available at [www.policyforchildren.org](http://www.policyforchildren.org).

#### The Problem

The families being considered today are those with young, first-time mothers. Each year, almost one-half of a million children are born into these families. Young, first-time mothers, as a group, have relatively low levels of education, which limits their access to stable, well paid employment. These mothers, often living in precarious economic circumstances, are also more likely to exhibit harsh parenting, inconsistent parenting, and insensitive parenting, all of which are associated with lower cognitive and emotional capacities of their children than mothers who are older and have more education. The children of young mothers are also more likely to experience child abuse or neglect than those born to older, more educated parents. In brief, young, first-time mothers are likely to have low levels of education and more financial hardship as well as to exhibit less optimal parenting. Their children, in turn, are less likely to develop the capacities necessary for success in school and in later life. All three outcomes (maternal education, parenting behavior, and child capabilities) have been, and should be, targets of intervention.

#### Enhancing the Lives of Young Mothers and Their Children

Is it possible to help young mothers improve their educational status and/or their parenting capabilities? The answer, from both longitudinal studies and intervention programs, is yes.

Is it possible to improve directly the educational success of their children (most often measured by how well prepared their children are for entry into school)? The answer is yes. Well-developed early childhood education programs do so.

Is it possible to enhance school readiness of young children by improving maternal education and/or parenting capabilities of young mothers? The answer is yes. It is most likely that such enhancements will occur if both the young mothers and the children are both provided intervention services.

### Strategies for Enhancing Young Family's Lives

Several different types of programs have been developed for improving young mothers' education and parenting capabilities as well as their children's school readiness. Each has demonstrated effectiveness, although not every program has been effective.

Maternal education programs provide supports and incentives for the continued education of young mothers. Welfare demonstration programs focusing on maternal education report small to modest impacts on education, as have some home visiting programs and some programs offering home-visiting services to the parents and center-based educational services to the children.

A variety of programs, usually home-based, demonstrate modest consistent effects on parenting capabilities (reductions in harsh parenting and increases in sensitive parenting). Many but not all programs provide such evidence.

Some programs also have, as their aim, preventing child abuse and neglect. Of those programs that look at child abuse and neglect directly (i.e., substantiated cases), only a few have reduced child abuse and neglect. However, given the incidence of child abuse and neglect, program evaluations often do not have the power to detect such differences (while they do have the power to detect differences in parenting capabilities).

Home-visiting programs often target child health and safety, child cognitive development, and maternal mental health. Child health and safety have been enhanced by several programs. Fewer home-visiting programs have altered child cognitive development (unless they are coupled with center-based child care; but see, for exceptions, the Nurse Family Partnership in Denver and Memphis and Early Head Start and one Healthy Families evaluation).

### Effectiveness Factors

Effective programs for families with young children (indeed, for programs generally) have the following characteristics—

Specific curricula with clearly defined goals and educational methods to achieve such goals

Intensive services (home-visiting programs that provide services less than weekly in general are not effective; although see Early Start as an exception)

Well-trained staff (training prior to implementation as well as on-going training including evaluation during home visits themselves)

Well-educated staff (programs using paraprofessionals are less likely to be effective than those using professionals and more educated staff)

Services provided (some programs are designed to be intensive, even though most families do not receive the expected number of home visits; programs in which the delivered dose is low are likely not to be effective)

## Best Bets for Investments

Based on the current literature, young first-time mothers seem to benefit most from home-visiting programs. Thus, targeting this group is a good bet.

Also, home-visiting programs (if well-developed) are most likely to alter parenting practices than child abuse and neglect. Several of the programs also have the potential to enhance school readiness.

It is likely that two-generation programs, that combine home-visiting programs with child care, will be necessary to alter maternal education. Programs might also need to provide other specific educational supports (help in the navigation of post-secondary education institutions in a specific community, tuition assistance or conditional tuition assistance).

It would be ideal if states were allowed to mount demonstration programs that combine educational and parenting supports to see if combinations of services provide greater impacts on parents and children than just parenting support alone. The same might be true if parenting capabilities were enhanced via home-visiting and, at the same time, child care assistance were provided.

In general, any programs that are implemented must be able to document and continue documenting, fidelity to the effectiveness factors outlined above. Otherwise, the investments are unlikely to impact the families which are being served.

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