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Joanna Venator and Isabel V. Sawhill | November 13, 2014 12:56pm

5 Policies That Help Children By Helping Their Parents



It should be common sense to say that programs which improve well-being and increase stability for parents will also help their children. Two-generation approaches to child welfare, a topic we highlighted in last spring's issue of *Future of Children*, are the focus of a new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Balancing work, parenting, and education are, as the KIDS COUNT report aptly puts it, a 'juggling act.' The report highlights the ways in which parents are stretched thin working in low-paying jobs, the effects of inflexible employment on a parent's ability to provide the emotional and physical care vital for early childhood development, and the detrimental effects of parental stress on children's cognitive development.

What are the biggest challenges facing parents?

Too often, programs focused on improving children's lives and programs focused on improving adult's lives do not complement each other. Many employment and training programs do not factor in the need for child care. The efforts of early childhood programs to provide a stable learning

environment may be stymied by an unstable home environment. Accessing the public-benefits that a child is eligible for often requires a parent to understand and apply to many different programs.

Five Two-Generation Policies to Improve Mobility

1. Home Visiting Programs: Programs such as the Nurse Family Partnership or Parents as Teachers pair parents with home visitors who both assess the well-being of the child and teach the parents best parenting practices. Virginia's Comprehensive Health Investment Project (CHIP) combines this approach with home visitors who assist the parents in self-sufficiency goals (e.g., getting a GED).

2. Training Health Professionals to Identify Risk Factors: Pediatricians are often well-positioned to assess children's well-being, but do not ask about parental risk factors to children's health, such as smoking. One example is the SEEK Project which trains health professionals to screen for parental risk factors and then refer the family to appropriate resourced to address the problems.

3. Streamline the Process for Accessing Benefits: Child- and adult-focused state and federal agencies should make it easier for families to understand the overlap in the programs and access benefits available to them. For example, Louisiana uses SNAP eligibility data as an automatic enrollment tool for their Children's Health Insurance Program.

4. Connect Fathers to their Kids: Our country's child support system is broken – too many fathers disengage from the labor market because of the disincentives to work put in place by child support requirements. A series of pilot programs are trying to incentivize job training and labor force participation for fathers while also improving their parenting skills.

5. Childcare and Family Leave: Family-friendly policies on the parts of state and businesses, such as paid family leave, flexible work schedules, and access to high quality child care, make it easier for low-income families to earn a living without sacrificing their ability to provide the emotional and developmental support their children need in their early years.

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