



## Supporting Effective Parenting: Partnering with Parents

The world's hardest – and most important – job is being a parent. Parents want the best for their children. Many parents could benefit from counseling, mentoring, advice from a trusted professional, and other forms of support that can avert long-term social and family problems, saving money – and even lives – in the process.

By law, the state is required to intervene when family problems become severe and result in child abuse, neglect and delinquency, and Pennsylvania currently spends more than \$1 billion a year doing so. Pennsylvania is striving to prevent family problems by helping parents strengthen their parenting skills, but services remain limited.

**The goal: Pennsylvania should lead a prevention-based approach to support families by helping them gain the knowledge and resources they need to be the most effective parents possible.**

### The Problem is Real

Parenting skills do not come naturally. “If only they came with a manual,” could be the refrain of parents when confronted with a crying infant. In answer to their pleas, research has shown that parental support programs can have a real, measurable impact, reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

The first three years of life are especially important in the brain development of children. During this time, children are exceptionally responsive to parental and family support that helps them achieve positive outcomes and avoid negative ones. Despite the significance of this early development, many children under age 3 face risks that hamper development. In Pennsylvania, a significant number of children face one or more of these risk factors:

- One child in six lives in poverty.<sup>1</sup>
- The parents of one child in four don't have full-time, year-round employment.<sup>2</sup>
- One family in four is headed by a single parent.<sup>3</sup>
- One birth in three is to a single mother, and one birth in 11 is to a single, teenaged mother.<sup>4</sup>
- One child in 12 lacks health insurance.<sup>5</sup>
- The state substantiated more than 5,000 cases of child abuse in 2000, and 9,042 children were removed from homes where abuse was found.<sup>6</sup>

These risks confront children in both urban and rural settings. In rural Pennsylvania, for example, one child in six lives in poverty, and at a percentage actually exceeding urban showings, and one baby in

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six is born to a mother with less than a high school education, compared to one baby in seven in urban counties.<sup>7</sup>

A recent KIDS COUNT study determined that 283,000 Pennsylvania children – about 10 percent of all the state’s children – are “high-risk,” facing four or more of six widely-recognized risk factors: living in a single-parent household, a household head without a high school degree, living in poverty, an unemployed parent, family receiving welfare, and no health insurance.<sup>8</sup>

Child abuse, in particular, carries long-term consequences. Abused or neglected children are:

- 53 percent more likely to be arrested as juveniles.<sup>9</sup>
- 38 percent more likely to be arrested as adults.
- 38 percent more likely to commit a violent crime.<sup>10</sup>

It is important, then, to help parents build on their strengths and improve child development to counterbalance the risks facing so many Pennsylvania children.

Pennsylvania can partner with parents, helping them find the knowledge and resources needed to do right by their children. Investing in the success of children and families on the front end prevents paying for failure on the back end, with initiatives that promote child development, prevent abuse, and break the cycle of crime and violence by:

- Working with parents as partners and avoiding the spectre of government as a harmful intruder.
- Engaging and supporting parents as a child’s first teacher.
- Coordinating programs for maximum efficiency and effectiveness.
- Adequately funding programs that are proven to be effective and produce a return on investment.
- Emphasizing measurable child and parent outcomes.
- Allowing counties to use state funding to implement local prevention programs that are proven to improve the lives of children.

## The Solution is Clear

Undeniably, parents and families have a profound influence on children and their development. The family is a child’s first source of knowledge and the prototype for how a child learns about relationships. To improve the well-being of children and their opportunities for future success in school and the workplace, Pennsylvania must start by partnering with parents.

Pennsylvania’s longstanding policy is to investigate reports of child abuse or neglect and intervene when the allegations are proven. In law and in daily practice, Pennsylvania state government is responsible for protecting our children, confirmed by more than \$1 billion of annual spending to respond to abuse, neglect, or delinquent juvenile behavior.

But in recent years, Pennsylvania has begun a promising effort toward preventing child abuse, neglect, and delinquency with proven programs that help parents strengthen their parenting skills. Continued expansion would extend the benefits of parenting support to a broader community, starting with families at greatest risk.

Parental and family supports are important to the well-being of children and their families, contributing to:<sup>11</sup>

- Fewer incidents of child abuse and neglect.
- Fewer teenage pregnancies.
- Less juvenile delinquency.
- Improved behavior, school performance, and educational achievement.
- More families moving from welfare to work.
- Increased knowledge of child development and improved parenting skills among adults.
- Greater educational attainment among parents.

Family support programs also save taxpayers money. Studies from New York, Michigan, Colorado, and Pennsylvania all show that preventive programs pay for themselves in reduced government intervention costs, and over time save money.<sup>12</sup>

Parents listen to and turn to teachers, health

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care providers, and other professionals to answer their questions. That information can bolster parents' ability to better meet their children's health and developmental needs. So, any initiative to support parents and families should include two proven strategies: home visits by nurses and family centers. In addition, because family income and economic stability play a major role in the level of risk a child faces, tax strategies to increase the take-home income of working parents are another essential component of parent and family support efforts.

### *Home Visiting Programs*

Voluntary nurse home visiting programs bring professionals into the home to deliver valuable health and parenting information to first-time, at-risk parents. This in-home, one-on-one contact offers information in a non-threatening setting. Expectant mothers can receive health care, help to quit smoking, child development information and more. A substantial body of research shows the many advantages of effective home visiting programs on children and their parents. For example, 22 years of research on the Prenatal and Infancy Home Visitation by Nurses program has found that participating families experience:<sup>13</sup>

- 79 percent fewer verified reports of child abuse and neglect.
- 30 fewer months on welfare.
- 44 percent fewer maternal problems relating to alcohol and drug abuse.
- 56 percent fewer arrests of the children as they grow older.

While nurse home visiting programs can differ depending on the families served and other factors, they all focus on the importance of children's early years and the fact that parents play a key role as the "child's first teacher." They also share the perspective that in some cases taking services to young families in their homes is more effective than expecting them to seek out services outside the home.

### *Family Centers*

Family centers, like nurse home visiting, have been proven by research to be effective in improving the chances for success of both children and

parents. Family centers offer parent education, training, and other needed services to help parents become self-sufficient and provide opportunities for their children. Benefits include:<sup>14</sup>

- Increased family education levels.
- Increased family employment and participation in education courses.
- Full, on-schedule immunizations for children.
- Links to preventive health care.
- Improved parenting skills.
- Reduced recidivism for child abuse incidents.

### *Tax Strategies*

Parenting and family support programs, as effective as they are, can be enhanced with efforts to increase incomes of families in or near poverty. Poverty can undermine later-life success and is a compelling predictor of children's cognitive skills at school entry and an accurate long-term indicator of academic failure, high dropout rates, and low adult literacy, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

Tax programs that allow low-income families to keep more of their wages, like the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and Pennsylvania's Tax Back, are critical. They allow low-income working families to apply their own income toward a better life for their children. They are especially important in Pennsylvania, where nearly 600,000 children are in families considered to be "working poor."<sup>15</sup>

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a tax benefit for low- and moderate- income working families. Through the EITC, families get all or part of their tax payments back. Families with lower incomes get extra cash back from the federal government. Families with two children can qualify for the EITC if their incomes are as high as \$32,121. In 2000, nearly 663,000 Pennsylvania families received more than \$1 billion in EITC tax benefits.

Tax Back is Pennsylvania's new name for the special provision that waives the state's 2.8 percent personal income tax for low-income individuals and families. Under the 2002-03 state budget, a two-parent, two-child family can earn \$31,000 and pay no income tax, saving \$868 a year.

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While many families take advantage of the tax break, many other low-income parents don't know they qualify, or can't negotiate the application process.

### The Need is Great

The research is irrefutable: investments in parenting and family support programs help both children and parents. This conclusion is becoming more widely recognized across Pennsylvania.

- Pennsylvania's 48 family centers, in 30 of the state's 67 counties, have been level-funded for the past six years, and no expansion funding has been available to expand them to the other 37 counties.
- The state is now directly funding voluntary nurse home visiting programs, with a \$21 million commitment over three years.
- The state is funding 33 Parent Child Home Programs – a literacy-focused home visiting program – with \$12 million through 2005.
- Communities ranging from Philadelphia to Somerset County are using various funding streams to pay for their own family centers and home visitation programs.

These laudable efforts serve only a fraction of families and children who live in poverty or experience abuse or neglect.

### The Objective is Achievable

While he was governor of Ohio, U.S. Senator George Voinovich said it best:

“The only way to (stop the cycle of social problems) is to pick one generation of children, draw a line in the sand, and say to all: This is where it stops.”

Pennsylvania can draw that line in the sand by coordinating programs, expanding services, and extending tax relief to more families:

*Parent Support Pennsylvania – An expanded and coordinated network of home visiting programs and family centers*

Pennsylvania should build on the success of existing programs by establishing Parent Support Pennsylvania to create and implement a common statewide strategy for efforts that support chil-

dren, parents and families, including research-based voluntary home visiting programs and family centers. This strategy would consolidate Communities That Care, Family Services System Reform, family centers, the Community Partnership for Safe Children, and other child-serving systems under one umbrella and develop a single, local reform planning process for children and family support.

The strategy would also take steps to improve promising programs and expand proven programs:

- Increase the number of state-funded family centers from 48 to 58, and gradually expand the network so centers are accessible to parents in need.
- Increase the number of nurse home visiting programs from 16 to 26, and gradually expand the network so every infant born to a first-time, unwed teenage mother has access to voluntary home visiting services.
- Increase the number of Parent Child Home Programs for improving literacy skills from the original 33 sites to 58 sites.
- Establish a training and technical assistance network for parent and family support programs to help them implement best practices and performance standards.
- Work with parent and family support programs to evaluate programs' effectiveness in achieving outcomes, such as improved parenting skills, academic performance, and health behavior.

### *Expanding Targeted Tax Relief to Low Income Working Families*

Pennsylvania's Tax Back program now reaches families of four with incomes up to \$31,000. But Tax Back and the similar federal Earned Income Tax Credit are only available if families request it. Many do not. Efforts to promote these two targeted tax relief measures, and to further expand the Tax Back program, would benefit thousands of working families in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania should:

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- Increase the Tax Back threshold over time to \$10,000 per child dependent, from the current \$9,000, and index the threshold to inflation for future years.
- Target Tax Back outreach to every eligible family by utilizing the Revenue Department's database to identify families that qualify but don't file, and expanding Tax Back's promotional campaign.
- Include information on the federal Earned Income Tax Credit in Tax Back informational materials so more eligible Pennsylvania working families receive its benefits.

## The Time is Now

Most Pennsylvanians have had enough – enough poverty, enough failure, enough unemployment, and enough crime. But breaking that debilitating cycle, and liberating its victims, will take a concerted effort. Before we can substantially improve things for children, we must improve them for parents, who are, after all, a child's first teacher. Good parenting, linked with good health care and good education, packs a powerful punch. Ultimately, they transform young children into caring, healthy, well-educated parents, employees and citizens. Children benefit directly, but so does the entire state, when children grow into healthy, productive adults.

## Notes

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