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Early Childhood Matters:

Recommendations for Messaging and Policy for Early Childhood Brain Development



The first three years of life are a critical and sensitive period for brain development that can shape biology, behavior, and health across the lifespan.¹ Therefore, these early years impact educational outcomes, economic productivity, and the successful parenting of the next generation.^{2,3} The positive and negative experiences and interactions in our early years become the foundation for our future.^{2,3}

With funding from the Episcopal Health Foundation, Child Trends and TexProtects spent six months between September 2019 and February 2020 conducting a survey to better understand policymakers' knowledge and attitudes about early childhood brain development (ECBD).

Overall the survey found much consensus from policymakers at the state and local levels around what young children and their families need. It also revealed information about knowledge gaps and differing positions on the role of government in ECBD. The full report on the survey process and findings can be accessed at the end of this report.

The global impacts of COVID-19 have dramatically altered the landscape and priorities in our families, our communities, and our state. For caregivers who were already struggling to make ends meet, find affordable childcare, access behavioral health support, or otherwise meet the needs of their children, the challenges added by COVID-19 have increased their stress exponentially. Stressful historical events, like the pandemic, can result in increased domestic and family violence, substance use, child abuse and neglect, and mental health challenges.⁴ And now, more than ever, the experiences in the early years will set either a strong or unstable foundation for all development that follows.

Early childhood brain development is a rapid period of brain activity from the prenatal stage to age 3 in which early experiences can have lasting consequences on learning, behavior, and health due to the plasticity of the brain during this critical period of development.

This report applies newly acquired research about Texas policymakers' understanding of ECBD to inform and develop targeted messaging strategies and policy recommendations. While the intent of the report is not to thoroughly outline the science of ECBD, it should resource advocates with consistent terminology, talking points, and policy solutions so that, as a state, we can better capitalize on the opportunities of the early years and ensure brighter futures.

Messaging Tactics

The science of early childhood is a critical tool for policymakers and program leaders in determining the path toward improved outcomes for our children; however, the science does not always speak for itself. Translating complex science into actionable policy recommendations requires thoughtful communication and relevant strategies. Like any educator, it is critical for advocates to understand the values, experiences, and prior knowledge of their audience in order to effectively increase understanding and motivation. Our survey results provide that context for Texas policymakers.

As outlined in *Table 1*, the survey identified areas of strong understanding and priority by Texas policymakers, as well as areas where there is less knowledge or rationale for continued investments. Overall, the value and impact of health care, positive

relationships, early childhood education, and nutrition and food security seems well established by survey participants; however, family support, home visiting, developmental screenings, workforce supports, and childcare subsidies were less understood and valued in regard to their benefit to young Texans and their development.

The survey results provide critical data on policymakers' knowledge and prioritization of ECBD. Using this information, as well as best practices and research from leaders in effective messaging, the following five tactics offer concrete strategies and sample messaging for communicating with Texas policymakers.

Table 1

ECBD Concepts that Policymakers Are Most Likely to Understand	ECBD Concepts that Policymakers Are Least Likely to Understand
Children’s experiences between ages 0 and 3 have long-term impacts on their health and well-being.	Parents’ level of chronic stress affects young children’s brain development. Chronic stress describes situations like regularly needing to choose between buying groceries and paying the rent.
Good health care and having a positive relationship with a parent or caregiver is important for healthy brain development.	Young children’s brains can recover from adverse experiences and trauma, particularly through a close relationship with a warm, responsive caregiver.
Investing in services for families and children results in long-term social and fiscal benefits.	The brains of young children who experience chronic neglect are different physically than the brains of young children who do not experience neglect.
	Investing in services for families and children results in long-term fiscal benefits.
Programs Policymakers Believe Are Most Valuable and Beneficial for ECBD	Programs Policymakers Believe Are Less Valuable and Beneficial for ECBD
Medicaid for mothers during and after pregnancy.	Childcare subsidies.
Children’s health care and health care for mothers during and after pregnancy.	Workforce supports for parents such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), paid family leave policies, or a living wage.
Early childhood education like Head Start and Early Head Start.	Family support home visiting programs such as Nurse-Family Partnership and Parents as Teachers.
Access to comprehensive primary and pediatric care.	A high-quality childcare workforce including good training and adequate compensation.
Nutrition and food security.	Early and consistent developmental screenings.

Messaging Tactic #1: Create outcomes-based messages

Survey results indicate that Texas policymakers overwhelmingly favor evidence of effectiveness, cost, return on investment, and long-term impacts when making decisions about programs and services for children 0 to 3. This is good news as high-quality services in the early years have proven return on investment across multiple domains. When considering program examples in your messaging,

choose those with demonstrated effectiveness and be clear about the research supporting those claims. It’s not enough to say “Research shows that these programs are effective.” Rather, you can share details of specific studies or a documented return on investment.

Additionally, elevating outcomes in both the short-, mid-, and long-term, when available, and tailoring your points of emphasis to the known values and priorities of the policymaker to whom you are speaking can be powerful. To understand the

demonstrated effectiveness of a particular program, you might visit the [Results First Clearinghouse Database by Pew Charitable Trust](#).⁵ To access return on investment information for a particular program, the [Washington State Institute for Public Policy](#)⁶ may also be a useful resource.

Messaging that works

- ❖ Investing early works now and saves money later.
- ❖ When we invest in the first three years of a child's life, we reduce the need for more expensive and less effective interventions later in life.³
- ❖ Investments in high-quality early childhood education, starting at birth, provides taxpayers with a return of \$7.30 for every dollar invested.⁷ This return has compounding benefits through better education, health, social, and economic outcomes later in life.⁷
- ❖ Evidence-based home visiting has shown to reduce child maltreatment by up to 50% while increasing child and maternal health, family self-sufficiency, and protective factors.⁸ Home visiting programs generally return \$1.26 to \$8.08 per dollar spent. Nurse-Family Partnership reports a \$5.70 per \$1 spent return to the government.⁹
- ❖ Family Connects has a return of \$3.02 in emergency room costs alone for every dollar invested.¹⁰ In addition, enrolled families reported 28% less clinical anxiety in mothers as well as increased positive parenting behaviors and safer home environments.¹⁰

Protective factors like social connections, concrete supports for basic needs, knowledge of parenting and child development, social and emotional development of children, and resilience provide the key to ensuring that risk and adversity in childhood are not predictive of negative outcomes later in life.³

Messaging Tactic #2: Leverage areas of strong understanding to build awareness for topics that are less understood

It is often said that it is important to meet people where they are, and this is true in effective messaging as well. Our survey results highlight areas of understanding and priorities for Texas policymakers that provide helpful context when considering how to deepen and develop policymakers' knowledge and motivation about ECBD. For example, the surveyed policymakers across parties and levels of government ranked health care for mothers and children as being beneficial and having a high return on investment. Access to comprehensive primary and pediatric care was ranked highest for its benefit to children ages 0 to 3. However, developmental screenings were not highly valued by those surveyed. This may indicate a lack of understanding the value that screenings offer in early identification and intervention for young children. There may also be a misunderstanding of how many children are being screened. In Texas, only 38% of children under age 2 were screened to ensure they were meeting developmental milestones across physical and social-emotional domains.¹¹

As a result, it may be effective to frame discussions about developmental screenings in a health care context rather than just an educational one. It may also be important to point to access points in the health care system for developmental screenings and opportunities to strengthen screening practices for health care providers.

Another opportunity presented by the survey findings is around childcare. Policymakers reported valuing access to early childhood education, but indicated they believed childcare subsidies had a low return on investment. Helping policymakers understand the ways in which childcare subsidies and a high-quality workforce impact and advance access to high quality childcare is important for improving support around these programs and policies.

Finally, policymakers understand that young children need positive experiences and relationships with parents or caregivers to thrive later in life; however, they did not seem as clear about the ways in which negative experiences could impact development, brain development, and future success. This makes clear the need to communicate more often and more clearly about the potential negative effects of early adversity. However, this also provides helpful information so that we can start the conversation

from a place of mutual understanding - early experiences and caregivers matter!

Messaging that works

- ❖ **Early experiences provide the building blocks for healthy development, but chronic and uncontrolled stress can disrupt development.**^{3,12}
- ❖ **The quality of childcare impacts a child's ability to learn, build healthy relationships, and thrive.**¹³ However, many children do not have access to high-quality care due to cost, availability, and workforce challenges.¹⁴ Investments in the childcare workforce and childcare subsidies can ensure that more children can spend time in environments that will support their cognitive, emotional, and social development.¹⁵
- ❖ **Every child develops at their own pace, but disability, developmental delay, or environmental exposures can negatively impact development.**² As part of comprehensive pediatric care, developmental screenings catch delays early so that children can be referred to community services like Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) where they can get the assistance they need to be ready for school and avoid costly interventions later.¹⁶ Children who miss these screenings have also missed a critical window for successful intervention and treatment.¹⁶

Messaging Tactic #3: Choose words carefully

Language matters and that is even moreso the case when working to educate or build momentum on an issue that is not universally understood. Because the science around ECBD is relatively new and may be unfamiliar to many policymakers, it is important to be intentional and consistent in our choice of language and messaging to avoid confusion and potential misunderstandings. With survey results exposing the need for more understanding about the negative impact of early adversity on brain development, it is particularly important that

advocates are strategic and accurate in their use of language to discuss that part of the research.

In a recent brief, Child Trends made clear the differences in key terms that are often used to describe how negative experiences can impact brain development.¹⁷ Those terms, noted in the box below, have key differences that must be taken into account as messages and campaigns are developed. Some terms like childhood adversity and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹⁸ are the experiences that can happen to children; trauma and toxic stress,¹² on the other hand, are the possible results of those experiences. It is important to note in each case that these terms are used in the context of events that pose a serious threat to a child's physical or psychological safety, often in ways that are chronic and pervasive. This is an important

Key Terms

Childhood adversity is a broad term that refers to a wide range of circumstances or events that pose a serious threat to a child's physical or psychological well-being.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is a term coined by researchers Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues in their seminal study conducted from 1995 to 1997. ACEs are a subset of childhood adversities that were found to be correlated with increased likelihood of negative health outcomes across the lifespan.

Trauma is one possible outcome of exposure to adversity. Trauma occurs when a person perceives an event or set of circumstances as extremely frightening, harmful, or threatening—either emotionally, physically, or both.

Toxic stress occurs when a child experiences adversity that is extreme, long-lasting, and severe (e.g., chronic neglect, domestic or family violence, severe economic hardship) without adequate support from a caregiving adult. Toxic stress is the primary way that adversity damages a child's development and well-being.

distinction as many stakeholders may misunderstand the differences between typical childhood challenges and tolerable stress and the kind of stressful experiences that can alter brain development. In addition, it's important to always reiterate the fact that a child's past does not have to define their future and that positive relationships and other protective factors and healing environments can mitigate the negative effects of early adversity.¹⁹

Messaging that works

- ❖ ACEs, like child abuse and neglect, can disrupt brain development in ways that can influence biology, behavior, and health across the lifespan.¹⁸ By ensuring healthy beginnings, supported families, and access to high-quality early education and care, policymakers can mitigate the negative impacts of ACEs and increase a child's opportunities for cognitive and emotional development, health, productivity, and economic well-being.¹⁸
- ❖ Adversity and trauma do not dictate the future of a child.
- ❖ Children with protective factors (e.g. healthy attachment to parents, access to community resources, and supportive school and home environments) can build the resilience needed to thrive despite adversity.³
- ❖ Voluntary home visiting programs, such as Nurse-Family Partnership, can help children and families by improving the quality of the home environment, parenting practices, and children's development.⁹ These programs build a family's resilience and can mitigate the effects of ACEs.

Messaging Tactic #4: Connect with shared values

When discussing areas of disagreement or discomfort, it is effective to connect first on areas of agreement and begin with shared values. Our survey showed that Texas policymakers recognize the value of the parent-child relationship and that investments in children ages 0 to 3 offered long-term societal and

fiscal benefits. However, there was some disagreement about the role of government in supporting healthy brain development. Therefore, it will be effective to highlight the importance and the needs of families in advocating for public policy solutions to support ECBD.

The Frameworks Institute suggests connecting ECBD to the values of prosperity and ingenuity.²⁰ Pointing out the ways that our future success is dependent upon the health of the next generation and high-quality programs that are solving problems and showing long-term improvements help focus policymakers on the urgency and opportunity to get it right in the early years.

Messaging that Works

- ❖ Resilience can be improved by supporting families.
- ❖ ECBD is a community issue, not just a family one.
- ❖ Supportive relationships and positive learning experiences begin at home but can also be provided through a range of effective programs and policies.^{3,9,8,10} The government can effectively provide parents and their communities with support at this especially critical and stressful time.
- ❖ A parent is a child's first and most important teacher; however, many families are stressed and strained during a child's critical years of development. Programs that help families get connected to community resources and develop protective factors can empower families to be stronger and safer despite challenges.

Messaging Tactic #5: Include public awareness campaigns and outreach to local/county officials in your strategy

To make meaningful impact for Texas children and their families, our approach must be comprehensive; however, current advocacy efforts may be overly focused on state policymakers.

Multiple funding streams and opportunities are available at the local and county level to promote healthy beginnings, supported families, and early education and care (see the *Local Impact Opportunities for ECBD*²⁷ box); however, not all local policymakers and advocates are aware of opportunities to support ECBD at the city and county level.

For example, Counties play a significant role in ECBD through their support of health, education, and childcare programs - particularly for families with children under age 3. Programs funded and administered at the county level can include: a) food and nutrition assistance, b) health care, c) pre-kindergarten programs, d) family support home visiting programs, e) immunization programs, f) childcare services, and g) prenatal screening.

Because of their proximity to families and knowledge of their local communities, county and local policymakers are often tapped as administrators for federal funding streams and initiatives. They can create flexibility to innovate by blending and braiding funding to meet the unique needs in their communities. These opportunities cannot be overlooked as advocates identify potential avenues for increasing access to high-quality services for families with young children.

In addition, policymakers at all levels pride themselves on being responsive to the voices and concerns of their community - so building awareness among constituents may be the first step. When parents, providers, business leaders, and other stakeholders understand the value of early childhood investments and begin advocating for change to their representatives, priorities will shift.

Messaging that Works

- ❖ **Brains aren't born, they're built. And they are not built alone.**
- ❖ **Supporting families requires elected officials, policymakers, and multiple systems coming together—health care, childcare, and family support services—to ensure that all parents, particularly those with high needs, get the appropriate resources to nurture their children's healthy development from the very beginning.**
- ❖ **Healthy communities create healthy childhoods.**

Local Impact Opportunities for ECBD

The National League of Cities has the following suggestions for ways municipal leaders can support ECBD:

- **Assess community needs** to identify how children and their families are currently being served and identify innovative solutions to improve service delivery and access.
- **Make early childhood a priority** by raising awareness, augmenting and leveraging local funding, and designating an early childhood advisor or coalition.
- **Strengthen families** by starting a home visiting program, developing a community resource guide, offering parenting classes, or helping to connect families to federal or state benefits.
- **Promote child health and safety** by creating new parent information kits in partnership with local health agencies and childcare providers. Kits can include information on immunizations, health insurance, child development and well-child checks, nutrition, community resources, and environmental safety hazards.
- **Enhance early learning** by launching new Head Start programs, building support networks for childcare providers, and providing wage and professional development support for childcare workers.
- **Expand access to childcare** by providing information about its availability, develop creative partnerships to fill service gaps, or make childcare more affordable.

General Messaging Tips

Incorporate simple visuals and stories to increase connection to complex topics

Graphics and visuals are powerful tools for communication. Because ECBD is an emerging field in science, it's important to simplify the concepts and add visual touchpoints that offer a frame for the research and stories that are shared. The Frameworks Institute suggests using brain architecture language and images which offer a concrete and easily understandable analogy without oversimplifying the concepts.^a This analogy also offers opportunities to talk about both the positive and negative potential that is inherent in a child's early experiences.

Activate systems-level thinking

ECBD is a community issue, not just a family one; therefore, it is effective to frame the problems and solutions as community based—affecting not only the child but the entire population. Zeroing in on a child may activate ideas that every family is in a bubble rather than providing a way to engage systems-level thinking. No one builds a healthy family alone, and when children are healthy, we all benefit. This approach may even inform the visuals that you choose. When possible, include graphics that show community involvement rather than just parent-child interactions.

Be positive and proactive

Policymakers are well acquainted with existing problems and many advocates focus too much on creating a case for the problem rather than presenting a solution. For maximum effectiveness, be positive and proactive. Avoid rhetorical questions or partisan language. Express gratitude for the policymaker's focus on young children and their families, pointing to current or recent work, if possible. Be solution-oriented and ask lots of questions rather than making assumptions.

The science of ACEs or the prevalence of trauma can be quite overwhelming. Make it a point to spend just as much time pointing to what works. The first three years of life are a sensitive period in which children are uniquely impacted by negative experiences but they are also uniquely impacted by positive experiences. Interventions can be highly effective when provided early.^b Emphasize the effectiveness and power of services and programs that empower families to better engage and respond in healthy ways to the potential and power of the earliest years of life.

Develop your core story of early childhood brain development with key talking points

Preparation is key. To assist in your planning, see the handout [The Story of Early Childhood](#) for an example of graphics and facts that capture the core story of ECBD. This example is based on work done by the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University.^c Outlining key messages that highlight the problem and the solution will prove an invaluable tool for meetings and presentations to highlight the importance of investing in ECBD.

Sources:

^a Frameworks Institute. *Framing Early Child Development Message Brief*. Retrieved from http://frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/ECD/ecd_message_brief_2009.pdf

^b Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/from-best-practices-to-breakthrough-impacts/>

Policy Recommendations

Public policy has an important role in supporting ECBD by funding supports for families as well as creating infrastructure, accountability, and evaluation to sustain and improve programs and services.

The upcoming legislative session will be unique due to the impacts of COVID-19 on interim and legislative processes, budgetary constraints, and priorities; however, the experiences and impact of the pandemic have only increased the need to ensure policymakers understand the critical window of opportunity during the first three years of a child's development. The ongoing challenges associated with the virus have served to shine a bright light on the large number of Texas families who chronically lack connections, education, and support to ensure safety and well-being for their children.²² The science has made clear the cost of leaving families and our children to face adversity alone, but it has also made clear the path forward. To maximize the potential in our youngest children, families must have access to needed support systems in order to prevent and/or minimize chronic stressors and adversity that can impact their children's development.² Ensuring each child has access to a responsive, healthy caregiver is paramount.

Policy solutions should align with strategies for supporting ECBD and build on Texas policymakers' priorities and knowledge while leveraging community innovation. To create a comprehensive and feasible policy agenda to support ECBD, it will be essential to include the following:

Healthy beginnings

A healthy beginning for a child starts before birth with a healthy mother. To improve chances for a strong start in life, all expectant mothers need access to comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care,

screenings, and services to ensure infants are born safely and continue to thrive.

Supported families

The most effective way to support a young child is through their family.²¹ A system of supports for families should be in place to reach every parent and child at or before birth with needed information, assessments, and referrals that offer each child a strong start. Capacity within in-home parent support programs like home visiting and Early Childhood Intervention should be increased so eligible families can access needed supports.

Early childhood care and education

High-quality childcare—whether it takes place in a childcare center or with home-based providers—should provide real developmental experiences that are interactive and stimulate engagement, building a solid foundation during the earliest years of life. Responsive relationships build a sturdy brain architecture that becomes the foundation for core social-emotional skills, self-regulatory skills, and literacy skills.²

Developing recommendations and effective advocacy campaigns on these agenda items will be dependent on increasing public awareness and policymakers' understanding not only of the importance of the early years, but also the costs, ROI, and impacts of programs that can put science into action and make a difference both now and long term. Strong ECBD policies will ensure that families with young children have access to a wide range of supports that empower them to provide a strong foundation for their child's early learning and healthy development.

Conclusion

The science is clear. Early childhood matters.

The data is clear. Many families face challenges in providing safe, nurturing environments and responsive relationships that can best support ECBD.

It's time for policy solutions.

Our survey demonstrated policymakers' value for the opportunities of early childhood, for a family's role in ECBD, and for health care as a critical element of support for young children and their families. However, there were significant differences in how policymakers viewed the way forward and the information needed to inform their positions.

This information and the outlined recommendations in this report should enable advocates to better craft messages and solutions that can capitalize on

policymaker understandings and values while driving progress toward stronger prioritization of early childhood and a more diverse and evidence-informed perspective about the potential for policy solutions to issues we all care about deeply: the health, safety, and future success of Texas children.

For More Information

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Appendix 1: Resources

Read more about the Early Childhood Brain Development Survey results [here](#).

You can access TexProtects' one-pager on Early Childhood Brain Development [here](#).

To contact your policymakers to advocate for continued and evidence based investments in families with young children, [click here](#).

For more information about the Prenatal To Three Collaborative, [click here](#).

To stay connected to policy, research, and educational activities that can improve the lives of children in Texas, sign up for our newsletter and advocacy updates [here](#).

For more information on Early Childhood Brain Development, see resources by the [Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University](#).²³

For more information on messaging tips for early childhood, see resources by the [Frameworks Institute](#).²⁴

Appendix 2: Key Terms

Childhood adversity is a broad term that refers to a wide range of circumstances or events that pose a serious threat to a child's physical or psychological well-being.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is a term coined by researchers Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues in their seminal study conducted from 1995 to 1997. ACEs are a subset of childhood adversities that were found to be correlated with increased likelihood of negative health outcomes across the lifespan.

Early childhood brain development (ECBD) is a rapid period of brain activity from the prenatal stage to age three in which early experiences can have lasting consequences on learning, behavior, and health due to the plasticity of the brain during this critical period of development.

Resilience is the process of positive adaptation to adversity that arises through interactions between children and their environments.

Protective factors are events, conditions, and characteristics of children, families, and broader environments that increase an individual's chances of healthy development and positive outcomes despite exposure to adversity.

Trauma is one possible outcome of exposure to adversity. Trauma occurs when a person perceives an event or set of circumstances as extremely frightening, harmful, or threatening—either emotionally, physically, or both.

Toxic stress occurs when a child experiences adversity that is extreme, long-lasting, and severe (e.g., chronic neglect, domestic or family violence, severe economic hardship) without adequate support from a caregiving adult. Toxic stress is the primary way that adversity damages a child's development and well-being.

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