

# Harnessing the Power of Parents to Support Our Youngest Learners

## Why Businesses Should Support Parent Engagement in Early Childhood

When children don't get off to the right start, it's hard for them to catch up and become the productive adults we need. Society and businesses suffer when we let kids slip through the cracks. What do the most effective efforts to help young children succeed have in common? *They work with parents.*

### Parent Engagement: A Key Component of Many Successful Early Learning Interventions

Nurturing conversations with young children matter. One study found that professional parents, on average, spoke three times as many words to their young kids as low-income parents. As a result, by age 3, their children **had an average vocabulary of 1,116 words, compared with 525 words for the children of parents receiving welfare assistance.**<sup>1</sup> Another study using a brain scan showed that children who had been read to more often had more oxygen-rich blood going to sections of their brain that help with imagery and comprehension.<sup>2</sup>



It would be easy to feel discouraged by the evidence on how quickly children can fall far behind—if we didn't also have evidence on how successful parent engagement efforts can be in helping them catch up.

The following programs have been shown to improve positive outcomes related to children's early reading and math skills, as well as their behavior, while reducing negative outcomes such as child abuse:

- **READY4K!** sends weekly texts to parents of preschoolers, offering short



literacy tips and easy, specific activities they can do with their kids. It worked: the impacts on children's literacy skills were equivalent to two to three months of growth, preparing the kids to succeed in kindergarten.<sup>3</sup>

- **The Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP)** helps young, pregnant and at-risk women with comprehensive support and parent coaching through home visits. Rigorous studies of NFP in Memphis and Denver found that the children of these parents had greater language development by age 4—and better grade point averages and test scores in reading and math throughout elementary school—than children not in NFP. Another study showed NFP cut child abuse and neglect in half.<sup>5</sup>
- **Triple P**, the Positive Parenting

Program, offers parents of young children tools and techniques to reinforce positive behaviors in their young children through voluntary options such as reading a newsletter, brief consultations, or up to 10 weeks of parent coaching. South Carolina counties randomly assigned to Triple P averaged 25 percent fewer cases of abuse and neglect, 33 percent reductions in foster care placements, and 35 percent reductions in emergency room visits or hospitalizations for abuse, compared with the counties not in the intervention.<sup>6</sup>

## Early Education and Parent Engagement in Preschool

The most **successful early care and education programs** with long-term results—such as the Perry Preschool, the Chicago Child Parent Centers, New Jersey's Abbott Preschools and the Nurse-Family Partnership—**actively chose to work with parents**, encouraging them to engage with their children and supporting them in school-family partnerships.

**The Chicago Child Parent Centers (CPC)**, for example, make use of Parent Resource Rooms, full-time parent-engagement staff, and home visits. Researchers found that “**Enhancing early parent involvement [helps set] the child on a trajectory towards positive achievement in school and high motivation towards academics.**” That, in turn, feeds into an ongoing cycle of continuing parent involvement and positive student achievement in elementary school.<sup>7</sup>

This is good for business: The disadvantaged children in these early education programs did better in school and earned higher incomes later in life.<sup>8</sup>



## How Business Leaders Actively Encourage Parent Engagement With Young Children

### 1. Pressing for state and federal policy change

Over the last three years, ReadyNation's members have conducted more than 500 direct state and federal policymaker communications in support of high-quality early childhood investments that often involve parent engagement, including the programs above. These contacts include Congressional testimonies, meetings with policymakers and Governors, and sign-on letters.

### 2. Publicizing the importance of early childhood

Former CEO of Procter & Gamble, **John Pepper**, has **toured the country** speaking to high-level audiences about the importance of home-visiting and early education programs that support parent engagement. ReadyNation members have published op-eds in media outlets including the *New York Times*, *Roll Call*, and *Chamber Executive*.

### 3. Supporting community efforts to help parents engage with their children

**Toyota** supports the **Born Learning Academy** across Kentucky, providing six **workshop sessions** to parents on the tools they'll need to help their children succeed in kindergarten and beyond.<sup>9</sup> **IKEA's** "Early Steps to Success" initiative in the United States provides home visits, books, and parenting groups for children from birth to age 5.<sup>10</sup> **Read Aloud 15 MINUTES** has engaged corporate partners such as **Home Depot** and **UPS** in sharing its message about the goal of every child being read to, every day.<sup>11</sup>

### 4. Educating employees and giving them more time with their children

A business group in Colorado, **Executives Partnering to Invest in Children**, has



## Easy, Free Ways Companies Can Share Key Information with Customers, Employees, and Community Members

### [www.JoinVroom.org](http://www.JoinVroom.org)

Hundreds of free, downloadable parenting tips in Spanish and English.

### [www.MindInTheMaking.org/Firstbook/](http://www.MindInTheMaking.org/Firstbook/)

Free tips in English and Spanish for turning behavioral challenges into new executive function skills.

### [www.Text4baby.org](http://www.Text4baby.org)

Daily texts to promote a healthy baby.

### [www.ReadAloud.org](http://www.ReadAloud.org)

Communications materials that promote reading.

### [www.TooSmall.org](http://www.TooSmall.org)

Tips for parents on simple activities to nurture young children.

designed a **lunch series with information for new parents** on topics such as appropriate developmental milestones, the importance of reading to young children, and how to advocate for early childhood programs.<sup>12</sup> Other corporations, such as **Hilton Hotels** and **Vodafone**, are providing flexible work schedules and family leave, including to lower-income workers.<sup>13</sup> Many more examples are chronicled by the Families and Work Institute ([www.familiesandwork.org](http://www.familiesandwork.org)) and the Society for Human Resource Management through its When Work Works award program (<http://www.whenworkworks.org>).

## 5. Giving customers information on the importance of parent engagement

Broadcasting company **Univision** created a major messaging campaign designed to encourage Hispanic parents in the U.S. to actively engage with their young children to lessen the vocabulary gap.<sup>14</sup>

**H-E-B** grocery chain in Texas sponsors family literacy events in its stores, to encourage parents to read to their children.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

When organizations or policymakers try to help disadvantaged children succeed, their parents are too often neglected as a crucial resource. Lack of transportation, lack of knowledge, job schedules, and many other barriers can make family engagement a real challenge. But the payoff for helping them do so is well worth it: parents want the best for their children, and effective supportive programs can help them and their children prosper.<sup>16</sup>



## Endnotes

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