

# IMPROVING THE ODDS FOR AMERICA'S CHILDREN: FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

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## Overview

This important book, with articles by a recognized group of scholars and leaders in child and family policy, is dedicated to Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), in recognition of her four decades of work and the work of CDF to advance practice, policy, and social justice for all children in America. The book documents the benefits that occur when we work to close the gap between what we know and what we do for children. By combining the views of researchers with the experiences of leaders in policy and practice, the book highlights the benefits of aligning policies and practices for children with research findings about promising approaches and evidence-based practices. The volume reinforces the importance of not being pushed back or turning back when advancing the well-being of children and each chapter suggests a prominent pathway for moving forward to level the playing field and improve the odds for children.

In their recommendations for future directions in child and family policy and practice, the contributing authors to *Improving the Odds for America's Children* recognize, as the Children's Defense Fund has for decades, that children don't come in pieces and that many children and families need comprehensive and integrated supports of different types throughout their lives. The volume starts with prenatal and infant health and development, emphasizing the importance of a child's earliest years, moves through the school years and then onto the most vulnerable youth involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, while all along the way keeping the importance of poverty front and center. It reinforces the importance of never giving up on a child.

Throughout the chapters, whether the focus is on child and family poverty, child health, the early years, education, or the special challenges faced by children in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, common realities emerge when considering policy reforms:

- The importance of the impact of poverty and inequality on the well-being of children and the nation's ability to meet their multiple needs;
- The need for attention to the well-being of those charged with responsibility for children—first parents and other caregivers, but also early childhood and other educators, and staff of children's programs.
- The need to seek change for children and families often from multiple systems and multiple levels in an integrated manner.

- The importance of recognizing the developmental needs of children at birth, in the early years, and in adolescence, and the attention to brain development that must be given throughout.
- The impact of development across all domains throughout childhood on later adult development.
- The need for more intensive supports for children and parents with special health and mental health needs and for those facing special challenges created by substance abuse.
- Recognition of the tensions that exist between the need for increased access to and improvement in the quality of services and supports for children.
- Harms to children caused by the exclusion of assistance to children and adults who are not citizens nor legally present in the U.S.

The authors' recommendations from *Improving the Odds for America's Children* are summarized briefly below. Short summaries of each of the chapters are in Attachment A, and a one page list of the authors and editors can be found in Attachment B.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### ***Prenatal and Infant Health and Development***

- Children's coverage should be more completely nationalized through the creation of a single, unified system of health care financing that covers children from birth through adulthood and enables all families to simply enroll their children one time and maintain continuous coverage regardless of changes in family circumstances.
- Adopt a universal definition of pediatric coverage, like the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment benefit (EPSDT) that is free of arbitrary treatment limits and high cost-sharing.
- Enrich the scope and level of health coverage, and promote a broader and richer vision of quality health care and a workforce trained to meet the challenge.
- Use innovative intergenerational approaches to build the executive function and self-regulation skills of parents and providers of early care and education, strengthen caregiver mental health and enhance economic stability for families.

### ***Early Childhood Care and Education***

- Provide a comprehensive, aligned continuum of early opportunities for children from birth through age eight with a particular focus on the most vulnerable children that includes:

- For children under three, federally supported prenatal care, paid parental leave, parenting support including home visiting, quality child care and Early Head Start for the most vulnerable.
  - For children at age three, access to two years of quality preschool delivered by a network of providers, with comprehensive services for the most vulnerable.
  - The establishment of early childhood units for grades K-3rd that include specially trained teachers, enriched curriculum, engaged families, full-day services and partnerships with community-based organizations.
  - Networks of support for parents, including more intensive support in times of need, and for other caregivers and providers in communities and a system to track health, learning and behavioral outcomes for children at birth and at ages 3, 5 and 8.
- An American Family Trust for Future Growth to finance early childhood efforts across the early childhood continuum that includes a combination of increased federal and state taxes on consumer goods that harm public health, an expansion of state and local education formulas to include early childhood, the use of health funds for preventive early childhood development services and incentives for public-private partnerships and other innovations.
  - Investments in preschool education to promote the leadership, training and innovation necessary to transform preschool to improve sustainable development in the areas of economic development, social inclusiveness and environmental sustainability — all areas where the United States is currently lacking.

***Education: School Reform and Closing the Achievement Gap***

- Create a new vision for public education that: educates children well, focusing on both equity and high achievement; addresses, in collaboration with the larger community, the needs of the whole child; includes educators who all believe their children can get smarter; accommodates the special needs of children; and embraces innovation to help children move outside of their traditional school buildings and traditional school day to support global competitiveness.
- Change the mission of high schools to build multiple pathways to postsecondary success.
- Build a highly skilled teaching profession to reach goals aligned with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools that encompasses improved teacher preparation and professional training, mentoring and consultation for school district leaders.
- Restore education opportunities for children by providing income supports to families that recognize the importance of income on children’s development at different stages

and improve the quality of schools low-income children attend by improving the quality and consistency of the instruction and experiences offered.

- Implement strategies at the school district level that review performance data so district leaders and staff know where they are; promote agreement as to student achievement and the effectiveness of program, technology and resource allocation, eliminating what doesn't work; identify impediments to student success, including processes, attitudes, values and beliefs, and change them to create a culture of respect and a commitment to high expectations for all students; invest in high-quality early education and align the pre-K to grade 12 curriculum to a high standard; and keep repeating all of the processes above.

### ***Vulnerable Children***

Alternative recommendations for better meeting the range of needs of and risks facing children who come to the attention of Child Protective Services:

- ***Option 1:*** Help Child Protective Services better meet the needs of vulnerable children by: doing a better job of providing key preventive services, such as home visiting and child care for young lower risk children and families; expanding and strengthening differential response for low and moderate risk cases; and strengthening the services Child Protective Services provides to the highest risk families.
- ***Option 2:*** Restrict Child Protective Services to only cases requiring protection from imminent serious harm and refer child neglect cases, which represent the majority of child maltreatment cases, to health, education and related systems. Establish a new adequately funded and coordinated set of services managed by a single agency outside of Child Protective Services that is accountable for outcomes, and that includes active outreach, services to parents and some monitoring of parent conduct. The focus should be on families where improvements in parenting are most critical to achieving desired outcomes for children. Parenting programs should follow different tracks based on parents' needs, with the most troubled families being offered the most intensive services. Special incentives should be provided in policies to encourage poor and low-income parents to be involved in parenting improvement activities.

### ***Juvenile Justice***

- Reform policies and practices to recreate a system of justice for juveniles: divert youth from the juvenile justice system by finding other means to address problems that now bring them there; reduce the unnecessary use of institutional care; plan for and provide smoother reentry; reduce the use of the criminal justice system by youth;

expand evidence-based programs and services to prevent delinquency; and stop juvenile justice system involvement of youth from being a barrier to their later success.

- Keep juvenile justice policy and practice aligned with developmental science by pursuing further research about links between developmental differences in children and adults and their meaning for adolescents' legally relevant capacities and capabilities, amenability to rehabilitation, and likelihood of recidivism and responses to intervention. Examine the impact of different responses to juvenile offenses on juveniles' psychological development, mental health, social relationships, progress in school and plans for the future. Provide accurate cost-benefit analyses to demonstrate that alternative juvenile justice policies, such as prevention, diversion and community-based programs, produce comparable or even greater reductions in crime at considerably lower costs than traditional institutional care.

### *Child Poverty*

- Take steps in federal policy to alleviate child poverty by preserving existing protections from child poverty and increasing family income, including through subsidized jobs and job training; promoting easier access to expanded Pell grants; expanding quality child care assistance linked to other early childhood initiatives; adequate wages and job supports; offering more and better housing assistance; and making available better income assistance for parents with moderate disabilities. Also increase state level actions to increase funding for child care and early education; raise the minimum wage; use housing and transportation policy to help families live in safer neighborhoods; expand state EITCs and Medicaid; and promote alternatives to incarceration.
- Provide further study to increase the relevance of empirical work on children growing up poor by examining the consequences of poverty for immigrant children and families and the contextual and psychosocial moderators of the effects of child poverty and interventions. Evaluate further comprehensive interventions that are intended to protect children from toxic stress due to growing up with the chaos, deprivation and dangers of poverty. Assess other comprehensive interventions in the context of persistent poverty and stress, looking specifically at the levers for promoting child well-being despite growing up poor and factors such as parenting, early childhood education, and family-school-community collaborations. Explore further the contrast between wealthy families' investments in their children and what can be learned about the need for comparable investments for poor children.

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