



Investing in Our Future: Critical Ways Philanthropy Can Help Every Young Child and Family Thrive

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Case for Investing in Young Children and Their Families.....	3
The State of Early Childhood Today: Progress Points to Opportunities.....	6
Four Critical Opportunities for Philanthropic Investment in Early Childhood.....	9
Approaches to Philanthropy in Early Childhood.....	15
Endnotes.....	17

Introduction

In 2015, The Bridgespan Group and the Pritzker Children’s Initiative published a guide that made the case for philanthropic investments that ensure all children in the United States arrive at kindergarten fully ready to learn and thrive.¹ Drawing on a well-established base of multidisciplinary research, national child outcome data, and program outcomes, as well as input from nonprofit leaders and funders, the publication described the conditions, experiences, and resources that drive healthy developmental outcomes from the prenatal period through a child’s fifth birthday. The guide synthesized the compelling research that establishes the lasting significance of healthy development in early childhood and the returns to society. Finally, it laid out a range of investments that philanthropists could make.

A decade later, expanded private and public investment has driven progress and further research has sharpened the case. We set out to refresh our guidance with this new publication, hoping it will help foundations, individual donors, and the advisors and staff who support them as they discern and make investments to support our youngest children and their families.

What about funders not currently investing in families and children in their earliest years? Keep reading! Whether your giving has focused on K-12 or postsecondary education, women’s or children’s health, gender equity, housing, economic mobility, or select geographies, you will find a compelling rationale for investing in the earliest years in ways that will strengthen your impact in your priority areas.

To develop this guide, we dug into the most recent empirical research, spoke with leaders in the field, and drew from our own work with funders and organizations.² Building on that base, we summarize the case for investment and the ways in which progress over the past decade points to new opportunities for that investment. We then describe four investment opportunities that could make a big difference in helping more children and families thrive.

The Case for Investing in Young Children and Their Families

Decades of research across multiple disciplines have demonstrated that the foundation for success in life begins from pregnancy to age 5. During these critical years—and particularly in the first three years of life—children’s brains form more than a million new neural connections per second.³ Their nervous, metabolic, and immune systems; cardiovascular pathways; emotional regulation; and relational capacities are rapidly developing in ways that shape the rest of their lives.⁴

Specifically, research shows us that early experiences and relationships shape long-term health, educational attainment, economic mobility, and overall well-being.⁵ Positive early experiences, starting during pregnancy and through the first few years of life, reduce preterm births, improve nutrition, and strengthen social and emotional development.⁶



Children who have nurturing, high-quality birth-to-5 experiences are

25% more likely to graduate high school

4X more likely to complete a bachelor's degree or higher

Can earn up to **25%** more in wages as an adult

Source: "[Why Early Childhood Education](#)," Start Early.



Strong, nurturing relationships with trusted adults are fundamental not only to healthy brain architecture during this time, but also to the regulation of stress and the development of executive function—the “air traffic control” system for learning and behavior regulation.⁷ As such, fostering emotional connection between caregivers and infants influences how a child’s body develops and leads to lasting improvements in brain development.⁸

These early conditions also shape long-term health, helping to reduce risks of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and depression.⁹ And the benefits extend to cognitive and educational gains: children who experience quality early learning and care are 25 percent more likely to graduate high school, four times more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher, and can earn up to 25 percent more in wages as an adult.¹⁰

The impacts of healthy development in the earliest years extend beyond the child and the adult they will become. When children thrive during the earliest years, so do their parents and communities. Parents who have the freedom to nurture their children make choices about work and education that strengthen their family’s future.¹¹ As families gain stability, communities benefit from greater economic prosperity, a stronger workforce, and lower long-term costs associated with crime, poor health, and remedial education.¹² The returns even extend to society as a whole: Nobel Laureate James Heckman’s research demonstrates a 13 percent annual return to society on investments in comprehensive birth-to-5 early childhood education, a larger return than interventions at any other point in life.¹³

Research and lived experience point to the conditions essential for a child’s thriving. Investing in the early years means supporting the “whole child” and the “whole family”—recognizing that children’s development is inseparable from the environments and relationships that surround them from pregnancy through the early school years. That means ensuring mothers and babies have comprehensive health care—before, during, and after birth—including support for maternal mental health.¹⁴ It means providing families with time to bond with newborns and with financial stability to support their well-being. It means families have access to affordable, high-quality child care of their choosing, and children have access to early learning opportunities that reflect their families’ cultural, financial, and community contexts.¹⁵ And it means providing developmental screenings that help identify each child’s strengths—and specific supports that could help that child.¹⁶

On the other hand, adversity—such as insecure housing, food instability, or other traumatic experiences—in early childhood can have lasting effects. For example, young children who experience homelessness tend to develop language and literacy skills later.¹⁷ Their social-emotional development also tends to be slower, and their physical and mental health suffers.¹⁸ Thus, families at risk of adverse childhood experiences need support in navigating the risks and building resilience from the start.¹⁹ And, of course, families benefit from being able to find necessary supports and from services that are integrated with one another.

Together, the research points to some of the most critical foundations for thriving young children and families:

- Healthy births for mothers and babies
- Nurturing and responsive caregiver-child relationships
- Family stability and economic well-being
- Children's emotional and social well-being
- Age-appropriate development—often reflected in being healthy and ready to learn by age 3 and well-prepared to thrive in kindergarten by age 5

These elements describe a childhood where all children are safe, healthy, emotionally secure, and supported to reach their full potential, and every family has what they need to make that possible.

Across the country, however, many families do not experience these conditions or milestones and struggle to access basic supports. Recent findings show that material hardship and the stress it creates have persisted beyond the pandemic, and ongoing disruptions in child care and health care continue to shape family well-being.²⁰ About 1 in 12 women nationwide live in communities without birthing hospitals or obstetric providers.²¹ Black mothers, in particular, are less likely to have access to high-quality health and prenatal care.²² Many parents return to work before they or their infants are ready because paid family leave remains out of reach for them.²³



Child care is scarce and unaffordable to many

Over half of US residents live in child care deserts
Care for two children costs more than rent in every state

58% of working parents who leave the workforce do so because they can't afford child care

Sources: “[Do you live in a child care desert?](#)” Center for American Progress; “[Infant-Toddler Child Care Fact Sheet](#),” ZERO TO THREE, May 6, 2025; Stephanie Ferguson Melhorn, “[Understanding America’s Labor Shortage: The Impact of Scarce and Costly Childcare](#),” US Chamber of Commerce, June 26, 2024.

Child care, the backbone of both family and economic stability, is scarce and unaffordable to many: over half of US residents live in child care deserts, care for two children costs more than a year's rent in every state, and 58 percent of working parents who leave the workforce do so because they can't afford child care.^{24, 25, 26} Economic losses stemming from both unfilled care jobs and from parents and caregivers forced to leave the workforce could reach \$290 billion annually by 2030.²⁷

To be sure, many families do receive the supports they need. But access is uneven, and disparities persist by income, race, and geography, with gaps across indicators showing little improvement in recent years—including preterm birth rates, parental and child stress, and participation in education. Today, fewer than half (48 percent) of the nation's low-income children start kindergarten with the skills and supports they need to thrive.²⁸ Black infants are twice as likely as white infants to be born at low birth weight, which has consequences for health, learning, and life outcomes.²⁹ And rural areas face higher levels of adverse childhood experiences and limited access to early childhood programs.³⁰ These disparities reflect persistent differences in opportunity that have long separated communities along socioeconomic, racial, and geographic lines.

When these supports fall short, children's development suffers. Children who enter school healthy and ready to learn—meaning age-appropriate development in early learning, social-emotional skills, self-regulation, physical health, and motor skills—are more likely to attend school consistently, engage deeply, and sustain positive learning trajectories.³¹ Those who do not may have trouble concentrating, struggle with schoolwork, and face behavioral and emotional challenges that can compound over time, showing up as poor academic performance, frequent absences, and difficulties with social interactions.

The State of Early Childhood Today: Progress Points to Opportunities

The early childhood field in the United States is in a different place today than it was a decade ago. Among the most significant advances:

Programs and approaches that work for many. Today, we have an array of evidence-informed programs that have been shown to help a wide range of children and families across the nation. Some have been locally created, while others have the support of national organizations. Some programs focus on prenatal care (e.g., [CenteringPregnancy](#), [HealthConnect One](#), [National Black Doulas Association](#)) or use a home visiting model to support parents and children (e.g., [Child First](#),

**Fewer than half
of low-income children
start kindergarten ready
to learn given uneven
access to supports**

Source: Julia B. Isaacs, "[Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children](#)," Brookings, March 19, 2012,



[Family Connects](#), [Nurse-Family Partnership](#), [Parents as Teachers](#), and [other models that meet criteria for federal funding](#)). Others promote healthy child development (e.g., [HealthySteps](#), [Nurture Connection](#), [Reach Out and Read](#), [upSTART](#)) or deliver high-quality child care (e.g., [All Our Kin](#), [Home Grown](#)) and preschool education (e.g., [Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors](#), [Educare](#), [Jumpstart](#), [Sesame Workshop](#)).

One of the most striking aspects of this evolving portfolio of programs is that they respond to a wide array of family circumstances and work for a wide range of people, including first-time parents, immigrant and non-English speaking families, and Black women, who face greater risks during pregnancy and birth. There are also several national organizations that promote innovation and support the continual evolution and improvement of these types of programs (e.g., [Promise Venture Studio](#), [Stanford Center on Early Childhood](#)). Yet, despite so much progress, these programs are only reaching a small fraction of families who could benefit from them and do not yet effectively support the full range of child and family circumstances, such as Indigenous or rural families.

Integrated supports for families. An increasing number of initiatives and campaigns have made real progress in building connections and integrating supports across local organizations and government agencies (e.g., [Nurture NJ](#), [Ready for School](#), [Ready for Life](#) in Guilford County, North Carolina). Alongside these local initiatives, researchers and practitioners have come to understand that designing programs with and for the most marginalized families—an approach called “targeted universalism”—strengthens outcomes for all families.³²

Yet many services remain fragmented, so most families with young children must look separately for discrete supports—such as how to pay for rent, put food on the table, cover their bills, and find child care so they can work. Few supports are designed to seamlessly and comprehensively support the needs of the whole child and whole family.

Public awareness and political momentum around the importance of early childhood. In recent years, advocates, parents, and grassroots leaders have elevated the needs of young children and families in ways that have generated broader public awareness, mobilized communities, and influenced policymakers. National and state organizations dedicated to advocacy and policy change—including the [Alliance for Early Success](#), the [First Five Years Fund](#), the [Impact Fellows Action Fund](#), the [National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers](#), and [ZERO TO THREE](#)—have collectively advanced this movement by building advocacy capacity, sharing effective tools and strategies, and helping to secure policy and political



Other wealthy developed countries spend 2–6X more of their GDP on early childhood education and care than the US; the US is the only high-income nation without mandated national paid leave

Sources: “[International Investments in Early Child Care and Education](#),” Bipartisan Policy Center; OECD Family database, https://webfs.oecd.org/els-com/Family_Database/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf.



gains across states. New leaders and champions are stepping forward at every level of government (e.g., [bipartisan paid family leave working groups](#) formed in the House and Senate in recent years) and in philanthropy.

Still, early childhood often fails to receive the funding, policy attention, or community support needed to drive lasting change. In part, that's because of prevailing cultural narratives—the shared stories and belief systems that shape societal values and individual behaviors. Think, for example, of seeing the care of young children as a private matter rather than a [collective responsibility](#), a mindset that influences public investment.

Policies grounded in evidence of what works. As a result of continued research, advocacy efforts, and influence strategies, nearly every state has made some changes in policies and funding flows to support children and families over the past decade.³³ Many of these policies bolster family economic security, including child and earned income tax credits, guaranteed paid leave for working parents, and [universal pre-kindergarten](#) in some states. Organizations such as the [Buffett Early Childhood Institute](#), Harvard's [Center on the Developing Child](#), [The Hunt Institute](#), and the [Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center](#) have played a critical role in providing research and guidance on the impacts of early childhood-focused policies and in developing policy recommendations.

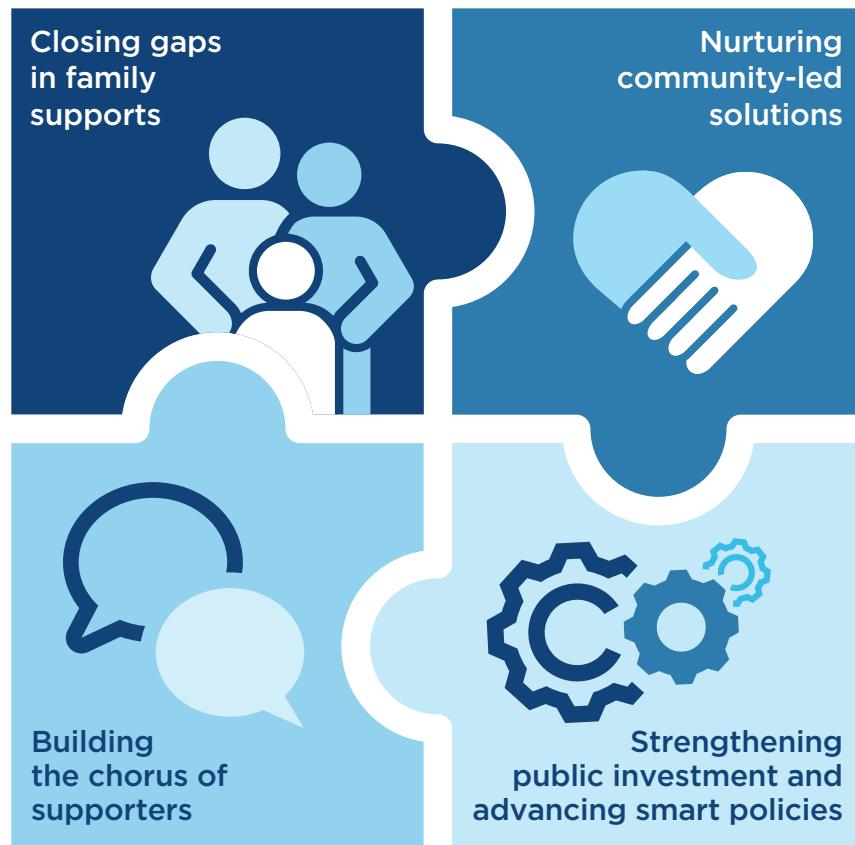
Public investment has generally strengthened alongside these policy changes over the past decade. Federal funding for child care, [Head Start](#), and home visiting increased or held steady for much of that period, and many states and localities increased their own commitments.^{34, 35, 36, 37} However, these proven policies and approaches—including Head Start, home visiting, child tax credits, and paid parental leave—still reach only a fraction of eligible families, and many of the gains made in recent years are now vulnerable to fiscal pressures and shifting budget priorities.

At the same time, the broader social safety net that supports children and their families is under strain. Challenges such as the maternal health crisis, rising rates of family homelessness, and the continued lack of child care in many communities underscore the pressures facing families.^{38, 39} And although whole-child and whole-family support is fundamental to healthy development, safety net investments don't flow toward the periods in a child's life when support matters most.⁴⁰ Despite broad recognition of the strong returns generated by early childhood investments, other wealthy developed countries spend two to six times more than the United States does on early childhood education and care—about 0.6 percent to 1.8 percent of GDP, compared to 0.3 percent in the United States.⁴¹

Four Critical Opportunities for Philanthropic Investment in Early Childhood

Building on the progress of the past decade, we have identified four especially critical areas for philanthropic investment.

Four Critical Areas for Philanthropic Investments in Early Childhood



None of these opportunities on its own will guarantee that all families and children in the United States will thrive. However, each represents a significant contribution to that future. We hope that the range of approaches described on the next pages provides specific ways for donors to get started or to go deeper across issue areas and geographies.

For each area, we describe how philanthropists can drive further progress, and we provide examples of organizations and initiatives that are advancing this work in the field. We also provide a list of resources for further learning in the [Early Childhood Resource Guide](#) on Bridgespan.org.



Closing gaps in family supports, ensuring all families with young children can access evidence-based services tailored to their needs

While programs have been developed and proven to work over the past decade, many families do not have access to them, nor do they serve all families. To close the gap, philanthropists are helping organizations innovate to meet the needs of more families, advance policies to increase access, and expand service delivery by providing growth capital.

- 1. Innovations that improve programs and expand the menu of approaches to meet all families' needs.** To do this, organizations may want to adopt a range of approaches to innovation. Some collect and analyze outcome data, informing program extensions and growth. Others design and test entirely new ideas, such as using video and voice technologies or engaging trusted community helpers, to help hard-to-reach families.
- 2. Policies that fund and implement programs to serve all eligible children and families.** To scale programs that work, nonprofits, agencies, and policymakers are expanding applicable funding streams (e.g., Medicaid and private health insurance) and eligibility for evidence-based programs, as well as passing laws that ease implementation.
- 3. Capital to grow effective programs and reach more families.** Expanding the reach of a family-facing program means establishing operations in new locations or expanding existing ones. For new operations, pilots can make the case to stakeholders by demonstrating viability and impact. Expansion also requires growth capital for recruitment and initial operations until sustaining funding sources can be established.

In the Field

Consider [HealthySteps](#), a program of the national nonprofit ZERO TO THREE. HealthySteps provides pediatric care by embedding dedicated child development and behavioral-health specialists within primary care teams. The specialists help families navigate a range of challenges—from developmental concerns to maternal depression. HealthySteps has grown dramatically, now supporting over 360 pediatric practices across 25 states, in Washington, DC, and at military bases. Moreover, it has demonstrated how to achieve wide coverage within a state: in Arkansas, it reaches approximately half of children under age 3.

HealthySteps's measurement, evaluation, and learning processes helped it better meet the needs of diverse communities and families—for example, by providing evidence of the most effective intensive supports for families with more significant risk factors and/or concerns. Its policy efforts helped secure reimbursement to cover the operating costs of adding a specialist to the care team. At every stage, national and regional donors have been vital to helping HealthySteps strengthen its program and reach more children and families. (See "[Case Study: Healthy Steps in Arkansas](#)" on Bridgespan.org.)

The growing movement for direct financial investment represents another approach to closing gaps in family supports. Programs such as the [Bridge Project](#), [Magnolia Mother's Trust](#), and [RxKids](#) are providing direct cash payments to expectant and new mothers and their babies. This subsequently reduces stress, improves maternal mental health, and creates more stable environments for children's development. Some programs target families experiencing homelessness, mothers in rural settings, or military veterans. Philanthropic support has gone directly to families and has helped organizations refine their programs. Some organizations work to influence policies such as the new birth allowance program in New York state or broader support for child tax credits that support families nationwide.

In addition, family-focused organizations are closing gaps in family supports in other ways. Some take two-generation approaches, simultaneously supporting both young children and their parents and caregivers (such as the [Jeremiah Program](#) for single mothers or [Generation Hope](#) for student parents). Others focus on specific cultural or demographic groups, such as [Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services](#) in Washington state, which offers customized birthing and parent supports to Indigenous communities. Many of these organizations provide both direct services to families and research and technical assistance to other service providers.



Nurturing community-led solutions for families with young children

In many communities, local leaders are working to integrate services in ways that support families' needs. Philanthropists are funding their work to engage families and early childhood professionals in cocreating solutions; connecting people, services, and agencies; and using data to track progress and inform approaches.

- 1. Family and early childhood professional involvement to develop solutions.** Grassroots organizing brings parents' and professionals' experiences to community gatherings, local policy discussions, and program design sessions, ensuring that their experiences, concerns, and hopes shape solutions for their communities.
- 2. Community-driven efforts to support collaboration between families, services, and agencies.** Community-driven efforts nurture their own capabilities and change initiatives through tracking tools and resources, accessible meeting and convening spaces, compensation for families and providers for their time and expertise, and staff to build relationships among nonprofit organizations and government agencies.
- 3. Data to track progress and inform approaches.** New data systems are used to track and share data across agencies, coordinate resources and care, track outcomes and identify gaps, and provide useful information to families.

In the Field

An example of this kind of coordinated approach is [Ready for School, Ready for Life](#) (known as Ready Ready) in Guilford County, North Carolina, an initiative dedicated to ensuring that every child in the county enters kindergarten prepared for success. Ready Ready coordinates the work of more than 300 community partners, including educators, health care providers, social service agencies, and families, to create a comprehensive support network that makes it easier for children and families to access programs and services. The initiative uses data, including the county's early childhood development indicators, to design strategies, inform resource allocation, measure progress, and improve services. Between 2018 and 2024, the proportion of families in Guilford County with very young children served by pre- and postnatal care programs grew from 12 percent to 27 percent. Almost three dozen national, state, and local funders joined together to support the work in Guilford County and helped bring the approach to other communities. (See "[Case Study: Ready Ready in Guilford](#)" on Bridgespan.org.)

Another example of an initiative that nurtures community-led efforts is the [CT 359 Network](#), which grew out of a local effort by community actors in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The CT 359 Network connects nonprofits, philanthropy, and consulting organizations, using data to improve healthy development outcomes for young children across Connecticut and to inform state policy.

Community-led solutions often receive support from national networks. [Help Me Grow affiliates](#) in 31 states coordinate and streamline access to child development pediatricians, screenings, referrals to specialists, and other supports. They also track progress and identify improvements in service coordination to better meet the needs of families and providers. These affiliates are supported by the [Help Me Grow National Center](#), which provides technical assistance and knowledge sharing to affiliates. Similarly, [Nurture Connection](#) shares knowledge and lessons learned across its network of parents, caregivers, clinicians, funders, advocates, and policymakers who work locally to integrate family supports and nurture relationships. It also promotes local and national policies, such as Medicaid and paid family leave.



Building the chorus of supporters, cultivating broad-based support and a bench of influential champions for young children and their families

Advocates and leaders have shown that it is possible to generate broader public awareness and influence private and public sector leaders to consider investments in young children and their families. Philanthropists are funding efforts to build a sense of urgency around early childhood solutions, amplify the voices of those with experience, and broaden the support base for early childhood.

- 1. Stories that build awareness and a sense of urgency.** Elevating stories that emphasize fairness, shared responsibility, and the common good, as well as the realities faced by children and families in need, can change narratives and drive progress.

In the Field

National organizations are also building awareness through storytelling. For example, [Too Small to Fail](#) has collaborated with writers, influencers, and entertainment studios to weave messages about the neuroscience-backed importance of talking, reading, and singing with young children into popular culture, including television shows, text messages, and music streaming platforms, to strengthen public understanding of early learning as a shared societal priority. The initiative has advanced these efforts along with direct-to-parent messaging to shift mindsets and encourage support for families nationwide. Similarly, [ZERO TO THREE's Think Babies](#) campaign elevates stories from families across the country to illustrate the realities of raising babies and toddlers today and to highlight the supports young children and their caregivers need to thrive. As a third example, Neighborhood Villages produces the "[No One is Coming to Save Us](#)" podcast, which puts the stories of families, providers, and early childhood educators front and center, providing a unique and raw look at the early education and care system in the United States.

- 2. Experienced voices shaping the issues and actions.** Efforts engage and equip parents, caregivers, providers, and community leaders to share their stories and advocate for their families with policymakers through campaigns or grassroots organizing.

In the Field

One example of an organization supporting this work nationwide is the [Raising Child Care Fund](#) (RCCF), which funds grassroots organizations that directly engage and elevate the voices of families and educators. In 2024, RCCF grantees in 16 states and Washington, DC, mobilized more than 16,000 individuals to become advocates, leading to a number of state wins.⁴² Many of these grantees are also galvanizing broader interest in the issues of early childhood with stories that illustrate the relevance of child care to other issues and policies with momentum, such as gender equity, economic security, and civic participation.

At a state level, the [OLÉ Education Fund](#) and its partners in New Mexico have engaged families, early educators, and community leaders to make early learning a public priority. Their Vote YES for Kids campaign, supported by philanthropic funders, mobilized thousands of voters and helped secure passage of a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing the right to early childhood education, unlocking \$150 million annually in funding for early learning.

- 3. Committed champions for children and families.** Sustaining attention over time will require cultivating and engaging more government, community, and business leaders who can elevate issues facing young children and families.

In the Field

Many organizations seek to broaden the base of champions for early childhood. For example, [Moms First](#) mobilizes employers to champion child care in their workplaces and in public policy—expanding benefits for workers and making the case that affordable child care and paid leave are economic imperatives.

[ReadyNation](#), an initiative that engages more than 2,000 business leaders nationwide, makes the economic case for investing in children and youth—from prenatal care and child care to workforce development. It helps translate early childhood research into clear, business-focused messages and mobilizes leaders to advocate for evidence-based, bipartisan policies that strengthen the workforce. Other efforts focus on cultivated public sector leaders—for example, [ZERO TO THREE's Strolling Thunder](#) annually brings babies and families to Washington, DC, to meet with federal policymakers, share their experiences, and highlight the supports young children and their caregivers need. Together, these efforts help grow a bench of champions who see investments in early childhood not only as a social good, but as essential to a strong and competitive economy.



Strengthening public investment and advancing smart policies so public systems can reliably support young children and families

Organizations and leaders across the country are making important progress in protecting and expanding public investment to meet the needs of children and families. Philanthropy is supporting efforts to develop effective bipartisan policies, mobilize stakeholders, educate and influence elected officials and policymakers, sustain campaigns to protect and expand public investment, and strengthen the government's implementation capacity.

- 1. Effective bipartisan policies.** Effective policies for young children and families often emerge from the engagement of think tanks, policy coalitions, and others. And developing and building support across the political spectrum requires investment.
- 2. Cross-sector coalitions.** Strengthening collaboration across the community, business, faith leadership, and leaders of other issue areas (e.g., affordable housing) can build common ground in elevating the needs of children and families in state and federal decision making, laying the groundwork for policy change.
- 3. Education, lobbying, and official accountability.** Policymakers make policy decisions based on empirical data, compelling personal stories, and programmatic examples. They are also influenced by constituents and voters, which means that running ballot initiatives, supporting candidates who prioritize early childhood, and campaigning for public support all play a role.

In the Field

The [YES for NOLA Kids Campaign](#) in New Orleans is a broad-based policy campaign with these critical ingredients. In 2022, the campaign led to the passage of the Early Education Property Tax Measure, which will generate \$21 million annually for 20 years to fund high-quality early education for children from low-income families.⁴³ This win was a decade in the making. The nonpartisan campaign used data to support its public messaging—for example, showing that because the great majority of young children in the city have parents in the workforce, reliable child care is critical to the city's economy.

Local and national funders invested \$10 million to build a coalition that included the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Council of New Orleans, and organizations championing issues like criminal justice—all committed to a clear, evidence-based plan for child care. Philanthropic dollars underwrote staffing, partnership-building, and research to support public messaging, using [all of the tools in the philanthropic advocacy toolkit](#)—including support for both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) nonprofits. (See “[Case Study: Child Care Campaigns in New Orleans](#)” on Bridgespan.org.)

National organizations can also play a role in sustaining public investment. For example, the [Impact Fellows Action Fund](#) supports state organizations leading advocacy for pro-child and pro-family legislation (addressing child care, preschool, paid leave, health and well-being, and family supports), and advances their work by developing locally relevant messaging and voter education. Impact Fellows recently funded the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce to elevate child care as a central issue among voters and promote leaders across the political spectrum who support related policies.⁴⁴ All the candidates endorsed by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce won their elections in 2024, meaning those investments helped elect champions for early childhood.

[The First Five Years Fund](#) has helped secure bipartisan congressional support for early childhood programs by supporting constructive dialogue among policymakers and advocates. Its data, polling, and state-by-state analyses have informed major funding decisions for child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, Preschool Development Grants, and the child care tax credits—helping to expand and now defend billions of dollars in annual federal investment in young children and working parents.

- 4. Guidance on implementation for government agencies.** Providing assistance, data, and implementation expertise can help government agencies use newly enacted policies and new funding streams to create effective programs that reach more families.
- 5. Dedicated capacity within government agencies.** Privately funded temporary staffing can help government agencies direct new funding, improve service delivery, and build institutional capacity to support families. In addition, agencies could benefit from support to coordinate early childhood strategies, interagency partnerships, and community engagement.

In the Field

Groups such as the [Children's Funding Project](#) are helping states and communities understand funding policies and take action to improve them. The organization provides technical assistance to states, cities, and Native communities to identify current funding sources to support children and families, determine the true costs of achieving their goals for young children, and develop long-term financing strategies for early childhood services. Through its Children and Families program and dedicated legislative tracking systems, the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) supports legislators and senior agency staff with data, best practices, peer learning, and state-by-state implementation resources. This support spans early childhood and child care programs, home visiting services, maternal and child health care, paid leave, and economic security policies like child tax credits. These organizations help public systems not only spend funds effectively, but also build the internal capacity to sustain investments in young children over time.

Donors and philanthropic partnerships can build enduring public capacity by funding dedicated positions and infrastructure within government, as well as supporting initiatives that help agencies deliver effective services to families. For example, philanthropic support helped [Nurture NJ](#) coordinate a maternal and child health strategy across agencies and pilot community-based programs that informed new public investment. (See “[Case Study: Nurture NJ](#)” on Bridgespan.org.) In Los Angeles County, philanthropy subsidized new roles within government to coordinate the [Affordable Housing Initiative](#), including training case managers and expanding the data system required to provide housing. As of December 2025, 12,121 total new units had been constructed.⁴⁵ (See “[Case Study: Permanent Supportive Housing in Los Angeles](#)” on Bridgespan.org.)

Approaches to Philanthropy in Early Childhood

The good news for donors is that nonprofit and social change leaders are advancing a wide range of vital work on child and family supports at the national, state, and local levels. There are many entry points and opportunities for funders. What follows are thoughts on questions we often hear from both new and experienced donors as they weigh grantmaking decisions across a wide variety of options.

Where to focus? Supporting the youngest children and their families requires attention to the whole child and whole family. This means supporting every part of a child's healthy development—physical, emotional, social, and cognitive—as well as the family's well-being and stability. As such, donors with a wide range of interests will find opportunities that align with—and likely augment—their current investments. For example, donors with an interest in health could support the incorporation of developmental screenings into well-child visits or the expansion of supports for parents before, during, and after childbirth. Or those focused on gender equity or economic justice can invest in accessible and affordable child care, which benefits child development, family economic stability, and women's economic participation.

Where to give? Early childhood leaders and organizations are advancing on multiple fronts—national, state, and local—each with corresponding opportunities for donors. Local organizations need funding to tailor support models, grow, and mobilize parents. State organizations need funding for policy advocacy and implementation. National investments, meanwhile, support more effective learning and the exchange of information and ideas across geographies. In addition, some national organizations offer options for supporting communities with significant need and opportunity, which is particularly valuable where donors do not have their own relationships or connections.

How to give? Regardless of focus area or geography, there are several approaches to giving that are especially important in early childhood:

- **Pursuing both shorter-term milestones and long-term change.** Building strong and durable supports for children and families takes patience, flexible funding, and the willingness to sustain efforts over many years, especially when working to change policy or integrate services. At the same time, successful efforts identify and focus their work on shorter-term milestones to evaluate and demonstrate progress along the way.
- **Giving in a way that demonstrates trust and includes the voices of those closest to the issue** is essential to meeting the real needs of young children and families. This means listening to local organizations that know their communities best and funding in ways that give them flexibility to do what works. In places like Guilford and Los Angeles counties, funders who work in genuine partnership with communities are helping to create lasting change for families.
- **Supporting organizational capacity** is invaluable for paying what it takes to get results. Covering growth and operating costs outside of program delivery—such as fundraising and resource development; communications; data collection; measurement, evaluation, and learning; and staff capacity—enables organizations to build awareness of early childhood, attract new donors, and sustain programmatic work.

- **Coordinating with and mobilizing peers** expands and focuses the pool of resources required to tackle the complex challenges facing young children and their families. Donors can build and participate in donor networks, collaborative funds, or collaborative tables to inform and inspire peers. Coordination and collaboration expand the base of private champions who play a critical role in maintaining the momentum of public sector engagement. Like the YES for NOLA Kids Campaign in New Orleans, many examples in this guide benefited from donor collaboration.

What To Do Next

For those who are eager to get started today, either as a novice or an experienced collaborator, there are clear and practical ways to engage:

Learn more through companion materials. Resources that summarize the early childhood [research base](#), why it's [critical to support children and their parents](#), and case studies provide illustrative examples of philanthropy in action.

Join in. Find a peer—or a group of them—to learn alongside and get involved. A great starting point can be exploring national or local collaboratives, such as the [Early Childhood Funders Collaborative](#). And if you feel stuck, reach out to philanthropic advisors who can help you prioritize your learning and explore options for giving.

Bring a friend. The pace of continued progress in early childhood depends entirely on increasing the number of philanthropic supporters and available funding. It requires new donors to step in and existing donors to step up. For those already deeply involved in this work, we invite you to expand the impact of your giving by seeking opportunities to bring others in. Donors can help build donor networks, especially by inviting peers, joining and funding operations of collaboratives, or proactively sharing their experience with peers to inform and inspire new action.

With such progress to build from, funders can play a critical role in helping more families access what they need, build the public will to sustain it, and strengthen the systems young children rely on. Working together with leaders, organizations, and communities, philanthropy can help build a future where all young children have the strong start they deserve.

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