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New Science Provides Compelling Framework for Early Childhood Investment

*Scientists Chart Path to Improving Outcomes in Learning, Behavior,
and Health for Vulnerable Children*

AUGUST 6, 2007—A remarkable convergence of new knowledge about the developing brain, the human genome, and the extent to which early childhood experiences influence later learning, behavior, and health now offers policymakers an exceptional opportunity to change the life prospects of vulnerable young children, says a new report from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. The report, *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy*, integrates new research findings in neuroscience with extensive evaluations of early childhood programs, and provides a highly credible, comprehensive guide for evidence-based policymaking.

“The early childhood years lay the foundation for later economic productivity, responsible citizenship, and a lifetime of sound physical and mental health,” says Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Director of the Center and one of the report’s principal authors. “This document is designed to help both public and private sector leaders make wise investments in our nation’s future by supporting the healthy development of young children and the needs of their families in the most effective ways.”

Prepared in response to requests from state policymakers around the country, and released with bipartisan participation at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures in Boston on August 6th, the report was co-authored by the National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, two initiatives located at the Harvard Center. Based on a rigorous peer-review process, it provides a concise overview of the scientific principles of early childhood and early brain development, along with an inventory of specific effectiveness factors associated with a variety of programs that enhance outcomes for vulnerable children.

“As policymakers, we receive a lot of different messages about what is best for our children, but when science can be brought to bear on critical issues involving child development, it can give us the unbiased information that we need to develop the best policies for our states,” said Kansas Speaker Melvin Neufeld. “All of our citizens will benefit when we can base our policies on a solid understanding of the effects of early childhood experiences and the best investments we can make to improve the chances for all kids to have a successful future.”

Because brain architecture is shaped by both genetics and early experience, the report says, policies that support the ability of parents and providers of early care and education to interact positively with children in stable and stimulating environments help create a sturdy foundation for effective learning, socially adaptive behavior, and lifelong physical and mental health. Four decades of program evaluation research provide a wealth of knowledge about both successful and ineffective interventions, and illustrate that even the best programs can be improved by the continuous development and evaluation of new strategies, particularly for the most vulnerable target groups. The report also concludes that ensuring positive experiences for children in the earliest years is likely to produce better outcomes than providing remediation programs at a later age. A review of cost-benefit studies documents strong return on investment from high-quality programs for vulnerable children beginning as early as prenatally and as late as age 4.

“In Washington, science helped us find common ground,” said State Representative Ruth Kagi. “We learned from science that children’s birth-to-five experiences are closely linked to their school success. Now we are one of the leading states in the nation as far as bipartisan, comprehensive early childhood policies that make sense for children.”

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The Center on the Developing Child, a cross-disciplinary academic center at Harvard University, was founded in 2006 to generate, translate, and apply knowledge in the service of closing the gap between what we know and what we do to support positive life outcomes for children.

The National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation, a multi-university collaboration, was launched in 2006 to learn more about what early childhood interventions work best and for whom through the analysis, synthesis, translation, and dissemination of findings from program evaluation studies.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, with 13 members from academic institutions across the country, was established in 2003 to translate and communicate the science of early childhood and early brain development into informed public policy.

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For further information about the Center on the Developing Child or the science of early childhood development, please see the full paper, downloadable at www.developingchild.harvard.edu.