Center on the Developing Child | HARVARD UNIVERSITY

A Strategy to Achieve Breakthrough Outcomes for Children Facing Adversity

A Case Statement for the Center on the Developing Child

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The Case for Innovation

EARLY CHILDHOOD IS A TIME OF BOTH GREAT PROMISE AND CONSIDERABLE RISK. Assuring the availability of responsive relationships, growth-promoting experiences, and healthy environments for all young children helps build sturdy brain architecture and the foundations of resilience. Significant disadvantages can disrupt the developmental process and lead to limited economic and social mobility that threatens the vitality, productivity, and sustainability of society. The frontiers of 21st-century science offer an untapped source of fresh thinking that could be used to address serious threats to child well-being by catalyzing more effective policies and services in the early years of life. To that end, the mission of the Center on the Developing Child is to drive science-based innovation that achieves breakthrough outcomes for children facing adversity.

We view current best practices as a vital starting point, not a final destination. We believe that unprecedented improvements in school performance and economic security, as well as reductions in criminal behavior and chronic disease, can be achieved. We see the pathways to solutions in a new way of thinking fueled by advances in science, a new way of working that embraces the culture of innovation, and a new type of distributed leadership across multiple fields and sectors that is driven by constructive dissatisfaction with modest, incremental change.

The Current Context and Challenge

Disparities in educational achievement and lifelong health resulting from adversity impose enormous burdens on individuals, communities, and nations. Multiple interventions have been developed to address the early roots of these disparities and almost half a century of program evaluation research has documented positive impacts for many service recipients and strong economic returns for society. Without minimizing the importance of these benefits, the quality of implementation when programs are taken to scale is variable, the magnitude of effects typically falls within the small to moderate range, and long-term sustainability of short-term gains has been difficult to achieve. Unlocking the answers to these challenges requires that we apply new insights from both cutting edge science and practical, on-the-ground experience.

Extensive studies have shown that genes provide the basic blueprint for brain architecture and experiences shape how the circuitry is wired. Abundant evidence also indicates that significant adversity can disrupt the developing brain and other maturing biological systems in ways that undermine later learning, behavior, and health. Science suggests that the longer we wait to intervene on behalf of children at high risk, the more difficult it will be to achieve positive outcomes later. This is particularly true for children who experience toxic stress during the earliest years.

Independent of the challenges of scaling and sustaining program effects, the marker of intervention success in the 20th century, completing secondary school, no longer ensures employability and economic security. Moreover, while the incomes of affluent families have risen sharply in the last 40 years, the purchasing power of wages earned by families near the bottom has hardly changed. This has led to increasing disparities in the life experiences of young children that are widening the opportunity gap well before school entry. In short, although the dream of upward mobility is still alive, people must now reach higher to attain economic self-sufficiency and the rungs on the ladder are now farther apart.

Investing in New Ways of Thinking, Working, and Leading

The most striking missing piece in the fields of early childhood intervention and poverty reduction is the absence of a dynamic R&D (research and development) dimension to support the design and testing of more effective strategies. Current efforts to improve quality, enhance access, and build stronger systems of services are important, but they alone are unlikely to fully close the gaps in learning and health that are caused by significant adversity. While most leaders in the field focus on the delivery of best practices today, others need to invest in the development and scaling of more effective solutions for tomorrow. Many seek improvements. We seek breakthroughs.

The worlds of business and medicine, among many examples, have long known that a field that fails to innovate cannot achieve ambitious goals. In channeling that core insight, the vision that drives our Center demands that we embrace new ways of thinking, working, and leading.

- **Science as a different way of thinking.** Instead of basing decisions solely on evaluations of programs developed in the past, we view advances in science as a remarkable resource for generating and testing new ideas.
- **Innovation as a different way of working.** To counter the slow-changing nature of policy and service delivery, we need to embrace risk-taking, catalyze creative thinking, promote short-cycle sharing, learn quickly from failure, support continuous adaptation, and reject uncritical loyalty to existing programs or strategies.
- **Distributed leadership as a way of creating change.** Leadership for a successful movement can be best achieved through the collective action of people, organizations, and communities that are aligned around a common vision and able to work creatively across disciplines and sectors. We define these change agents—practitioners, policymakers, managers of systems and organizations, civic leaders, researchers, and investors—by their constructive dissatisfaction with the magnitude of the impacts of current best practices, their positioning within their field, and their determination to overcome the inertia of the status quo. It's about mindset and drive, not titles.

Turning this vision into reality requires an integrated set of strategies that addresses multiple barriers to innovation and unlocks the creative entrepreneurship of change agents who believe we can and must do better for young children. It requires a "systems convener" that will drive activity itself as well as provide a critical

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support and catalytic function for others. The early childhood and poverty reduction fields are not achieving cumulative change at a sufficiently rapid pace. Our value proposition is to create a platform that makes significant change happen and a landscape that demands it. Over the last five years, we have engaged an eager community of thinkers and doers across sectors and disciplines who are ready to build an R&D platform for the field. Our Center is well-positioned and prepared to convene and lead this collective effort.

The Center's Five-Year Strategies

Our goal is meaningful policy and practice change that produces substantially larger impacts than the current state-of-the-art on the learning capacity, health, and economic and social mobility of young children facing adversity. We aim to catalyze a new era in early childhood investment that mobilizes science to stimulate fresh thinking. We are particularly concerned about the needs of children who face the cumulative burdens of poverty, maltreatment, violence, family mental illness, and discrimination. We know that true breakthroughs take time—time for research to produce new insights, time for entrepreneurial efforts and partnerships to coalesce into new initiatives, and time for innovations to result in game-changing effects. Given the stakes, however, we also know there is no time to waste.

Since its founding in 2006, the Center has drawn on the contributions of distinguished leaders from a broad range of academic disciplines and practical experience. Our work bridges the creation and application of scientific knowledge.

Building on the strong foundation that has been laid to date, we pursue our mission through a variety of activities. We bring practitioners, parents, and researchers together to co-create new intervention strategies. We shape the policy, practice, and investment climate by translating science and fostering innovation. We galvanize scientists through seed grants and forums. And, we build the capacity of change agents "on the ground" to take risks, think creatively, test new ideas, scale what's working, and lead initiatives in their own communities. Over the next 3-5 years, we will drive productive innovation at the intersection of practice, policy, community, and research through six linked strategies designed to address two core objectives:

Objective #1: Build an R&D platform to drive breakthrough outcomes by:

- Conducting and aligning new, interdisciplinary research;
- Creating and testing new ideas designed to achieve breakthrough outcomes; and
- Mobilizing a multidimensional learning community to scale greater impacts.

Objective #2: Transform the policy, practice, and research landscape to support change by:

- Demonstrating the value and impact of science-based innovation;
- Advancing and sustaining leadership prepared to drive that innovation agenda; and
- Cultivating institutional partners for collective ownership.

A detailed description of each strategy—including what we are currently doing, planning, and hope to achieve in the next 3-5 years, as well as our priorities and what is needed to get there—is provided in the full Case Statement.

	Barriers	**What Is Needed**	**What We Do**
Practice	• Regulations that inhibit innovation • Funding tied to demonstrating only positive outcomes • Poor differentiation of who benefits, who doesn't, and why	• Broad understanding of the science of development and culture of innovation • Shared drive to try new strategies informed by scientific thinking, practical experience, family preferences, and community leadership • Partnerships across sectors to co-design and test new policies and practices • Active forums to discuss, translate, and apply new knowledge and lessons learned from failure • Long-term investment in exploratory R&D and fast-cycle sharing • Ability to scale targeted interventions based on subgroup impacts found in innovation clusters	• Conduct and align new, interdisciplinary research • Create and test new ideas designed to achieve breakthrough impacts • Mobilize a multidimensional learning community • Demonstrate the value and impact of science-based innovation • Advance and sustain distributed leadership • Cultivate institutional partners for collective ownership
Policy	• Exclusive interest in services with evidence of effectiveness • Emphasis on immediate returns, not longer-term investments • Focus on compliance creates minimal incentives for innovation		
Research	• Predetermined protocols that preclude exploratory studies and mid-course corrections • Peer-review process that delays release of findings and limits learning from programs that don't produce significant effects		
Funding	• Heavy focus on programs with previously demonstrated success • Limited support for R&D-like efforts that involve risk		