



Early Childhood Learning and Development:

Key Themes and Findings

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Table of Contents

3	Introduction
4	Key Points and Takeaways
6	Background: The Importance of Early Childhood Development
8	Early Childhood Learning and Development: BPC Listening Tour
17	Effective Messaging About Early Childhood Issues Across the Political Spectrum
19	Early Childhood Issues in the 2016 Presidential Election
20	Strategic Near-Term Opportunities
22	Conclusion
23	Endnotes

Introduction

In April 2014, the Bipartisan Policy Center launched an effort to explore promising bipartisan approaches to strengthen early childhood policies at the federal and state levels. In the first phase of this effort, BPC conducted more than 75 interviews with policymakers, agency and business leaders, and early childhood advocates across the political spectrum. The aim of the interviews was to identify areas of potential bipartisan agreement and to better understand longstanding philosophical disagreements over the appropriate role for government in improving children's early years. Next, BPC organized a series of state-based roundtable discussions to uncover additional areas of bipartisan consensus; engage champions from the business, military, and communications sectors; and gather examples of effective local and state early childhood policies to inform federal policy development.

Roundtable discussions were held in five cities: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Dallas, Texas; Durham, North Carolina; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and Cheyenne, Wyoming. In addition, BPC convened several meetings in Washington, D.C., to gather feedback and share findings with leading experts in early childhood development and political communications.

These conversations took place as the 2016 campaign and election brought into sharp relief the struggles of working families. As the new administration and Congress seek opportunities to deliver on policies to support working families, policies focused on early childhood well-being, development, and learning provide a promising area for potential bipartisan cooperation.

This summary describes the findings of these outreach efforts. It begins by highlighting some key points and takeaways from the interviews and roundtables. Subsequent sections provide further context for the current policy debate and offer a more detailed account of the different issues and perspectives that are driving that debate, while also highlighting the opportunities and challenges for advancing early childhood policies.

Key Points and Takeaways

Several themes and concerns emerged repeatedly over the course of the project. BPC's intensive group and individual discussions with a wide, politically diverse, and multidisciplinary array of experts and stakeholders yielded several areas of widespread agreement:

- *Parents and families play a primary role in successful early childhood outcomes.* This universally shared view translates to broad bipartisan support for policy approaches that support parents' choices and preferences, that empower and engage parents in program design and implementation, and that emphasize voluntary rather than mandatory participation.
- *Given the critical importance of children's early years in learning and brain development, investments in early childhood provide lifelong individual benefits as well as societal and economic ones.* A robust body of evidence-based brain science highlights the significance of this early growth period for later achievement and career success. Businesses understand that they have a stake in early childhood development because of its long-term implications for the American workforce and U.S. firms' global competitiveness.
- *The federal government has a valuable role to play in supporting better early childhood outcomes.* Though BPC found substantial differences of opinion concerning the appropriate form and scope of government involvement, there is considerable bipartisan support for the proposition that government has a role in (1) ensuring that parents have an opportunity to make the best choices about their children's early years, and (2) providing certain programs and benefits to families with young children, including tax incentives. In addition, there is broad support for federal funding of further research in early childhood development, as well as federal efforts to promote innovation and disseminate information on best practices and programs.
- *Quality matters in early childhood programs.* Poorly designed programs, or programs that offer only isolated exposure to quality learning opportunities, will not provide lasting benefits. Thus, it is crucial—particularly in an era of scarce resources and competing budget priorities—that public investments be directed to those programs and approaches that have proved to really work.
- *Success in this arena requires functional government partnerships and open and honest dialogue.* Effective early childhood programs require collaboration among federal, state, and local governments as well as the private sector and parents. Stakeholders across the political spectrum also need to be able to have frank conversations, uninhibited by ideological assumptions and sacred cows that limit policy solutions.

Based on these broad points of agreement, BPC identified several issues with substantial potential for garnering bipartisan support:

1. **Reauthorize and/or expand voluntary home-visit programs** that provide in-home support to pregnant women and families of children from birth to age 5.
2. **Expand family-friendly tax policies**—that is, provisions in the tax code that are specifically designed to support families with young children, such as deductions or credits for early childhood and childcare expenses.
3. **Give parents a greater voice** in the development of key federal and state early childhood policies and programs, and facilitating parental choice in the selection of early childcare providers.

4. **Continue to prioritize health and safety** by incentivizing higher-quality care and expanding criminal- and civil-background checks for early childcare providers and staff.
5. **Allow participation by faith-based providers** in programs that provide federal funding for early childhood development.
6. **Improve coordination among federal and state early childhood programs** as a way to maximize efficiency and cost-effectiveness and to minimize duplication of programs and efforts.
7. **Support a “mixed-delivery” system for early childhood services**, in which a range of providers play a role in meeting children’s needs beyond what is provided by the public schools.
8. **Ensure low-income families have access to quality early childhood programs**—for example, by assessing fees on a sliding scale to account for families’ needs and resources.
9. **Better identify children with special needs**, including putting mechanisms in place to identify special needs and provide appropriate services earlier in childhood.
10. **Give states an expanded role in Head Start**, including increased involvement in program implementation.

Background: The Importance of Early Childhood Development

The exploration of effective early childhood policy solutions to support young children and working families continues to play a central role in America's policy discourse across the political spectrum. A number of recent congressional proposals from both sides of the aisle, the pending reauthorization of major federal programs such as home-visiting and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and the Trump administration's childcare proposals all highlight policy initiatives grounded in a common belief that quality early childhood learning and childcare are key drivers in a strong economy, a necessary resource for working families, and a critical investment in young children who will comprise tomorrow's workforce.

Each month, more than 1.45 million children and 874,000 families in the United States receive childcare assistance in the form of a federal voucher under the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act. Of these families, 52 percent live below the federal poverty level, and 93 percent cite either employment or job training as the reason they need childcare. In addition, a growing body of scientific research shows that children's early years are crucial for brain development and learning, and have lifelong impacts on intellectual ability, social functioning, and emotional well-being.

Historically, most public investment in early childhood programs, interventions, and support has come from the federal government. According to a February 2014 report issued by the General Accounting Office (GAO):

The federal investment in early learning and childcare is administered through 45 programs that provide or may support related services to children from birth through age 5, as well as five tax provisions that subsidize private expenditures in this area. Among the 45 programs, 12 have an explicit program purpose of providing early learning or childcare services.

These programs differ in size, target population, and structure. For example, most of them obligated less than \$500 million each in fiscal year 2012, while the largest program, Head Start, obligated approximately \$8 billion in that year. The remaining 33 programs identified in GAO's 2012 report permit the use of funds for delivering or supporting early learning or childcare services, but this is not their explicit purpose. These programs include multipurpose block grants, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), for which early learning or childcare is not a primary purpose but which may nevertheless provide significant funding for childcare. They also include programs that may allow funds to be used for early learning or childcare, but these are not among their primary goals and do not typically account for a significant portion of available program funds. Finally, five federal tax provisions support early learning and childcare by forgoing tax revenue to subsidize the private purchase of childcare services. These five tax expenditures accounted for at least \$3.1 billion of forgone tax revenue for the U.S. Treasury in fiscal year 2012.¹

Government policies targeting early childhood have generally been motivated by several objectives, including preparing young children for school and enabling low-income parents with young children to work or participate in work-related activities (i.e., education or training). In recent years, states, which likewise share an interest in school readiness and workforce participation, have increased their investments in early childhood programs, although the federal government remains the largest provider of childcare and early learning assistance. Parent contributions in early childhood and childcare programs have also increased substantially, to the point where expenditures for childcare, in some cases, rival the costs of college tuition. This complex network of federal, state, and community

programs, in addition to advances in brain-development research, make it more urgent than ever to take stock of early childhood policies and assess how the nation might better integrate successful efforts to build an early childhood system that supports parents and kids.

Early Childhood Learning and Development: BPC Listening Tour

In 2014, BPC launched an effort to identify bipartisan opportunities for advancing early childhood policy objectives, such as maximizing the effectiveness of federal investments in early childhood; better integrating federal, state, and local funding sources; and improving measurable early childhood outcomes. To explore existing political divides on these issues, BPC sought the views of early childhood researchers and advocates, policymakers, funders, and business leaders across the political spectrum through confidential, one-on-one interviews and in meetings. Five roundtables were held in locations around the country to get a sense of different regional perspectives; an additional three meetings were held in Washington, D.C. Each meeting provided an opportunity to gather feedback and share initial findings with the nation's leading early childhood experts and to consult national political communications experts and pollsters about the most effective ways to convey critical policy ideas to politically diverse audiences.

While the perspectives reflected in these conversations were as diverse as the participants themselves, the interviews and meetings revealed that, despite entrenched public battles over the direction of policy in this area, influencers and advocates privately share the view that there is substantial common ground for bipartisan action on early childhood issues. With few exceptions, there was agreement that federal, state, and local governments all have a unique role to play in this area. Perhaps most surprisingly, there was considerable conservative support for the proposition that additional federal investment might be appropriate if it supported cost-effective, evidence-based initiatives. Further, interview and roundtable participants strongly supported the view that building support for solid policy solutions around these potential areas of consensus required a commitment to fair and open discussion as well as a willingness to ask controversial questions and revisit ideological sacred cows without the fear of public political fallout.

Findings from the 2014 Interviews

In the summer of 2014, when BPC began conducting interviews, the Child Care Development Block Grant Act had not yet been reauthorized, and there was significant partisan disagreement on how to move forward on the early childhood front. Common differences between liberal and conservative approaches seemed to reflect several key underlying polarities: accountability versus flexibility, quality versus access, new spending versus realigning existing spending, and state versus federal control. In addition, views differed on whether federal interventions should focus on infants and toddlers versus pre-K and kindergarten populations.

In the face of these diverse and often conflicting approaches, BPC's goal in the interviews was to explore the potential for common ground on questions such as: *What is the appropriate role for different levels of government (federal, state, and local)? What messaging resonates in terms of building support for early childhood initiatives? What policies are less likely to offer opportunities for progress in the current political landscape?*

Based on the interviews, BPC identified a narrow but promising path for advancing meaningful bipartisan early childhood policy solutions at the federal and state levels. During the interviews, there was broad agreement across the political spectrum that action beyond reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant Act was highly unlikely in the 114th Congress. The issues identified as having the most potential for bipartisan support are summarized in the previous section: voluntary in-home visitation programs, tax incentives for families, greater safety requirements, better coordination of state and federal programs, participation by faith-based providers, a mixed-delivery approach to providing services, ensuring access to services for low-income families, better identification of children with special needs, and an expanded state role in Head Start.

Most of the experts BPC interviewed agreed that although pursuing broader policy changes at the federal level would be challenging, specific wins were possible. Several also highlighted the need to recruit and support “new influencers”—nontraditional players who could make a practical case for public investments in early childhood as a long-term strategy for improving the workforce and the overall economy. In addition, there was a strong contention that, with the right policies, the returns on early childhood investment at the federal level could be significant and further accelerate already robust state investments in this area.

These findings were reinforced when the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act passed with bipartisan support in November 2014. The act’s passage was not without controversy and took several years to accomplish, but the fact that members of Congress and most stakeholders were ultimately able to support this legislation represented a strong show of bipartisan support with respect to policies that target the nation’s youngest citizens. Indeed, the 2014 law included a number of provisions that were consistent with what BPC heard in its interviews, including provisions to:

- Provide better information to parents concerning quality childcare providers and options.
- Include faith-based service providers in the childcare certificate program.
- Apply a sliding fee scale for services to increase access, especially for low-income families.
- Require the secretary of Health and Human Services to improve the coordination of federal and state early childhood programs by disseminating information on effective and scientifically valid approaches and on demonstrated strategies for improving the quality of childcare programs. In addition, the law allows states to combine Child Care Development Block Grant funding with other funding for early childhood, so long as states describe their funding streams in their plans and explain how funds will be used.
- Promote quality childcare by increasing state-level investments in activities to improve the quality of care, enhance provider training, and develop safer and more effective childcare services.
- Strengthen health and safety requirements for childcare programs and providers.
- Improve access to childcare by expanding eligibility for participating families and by helping families connect with quality programs that meet their needs.
- Require states to conduct criminal-background checks for all childcare providers and staff (including prospective staff or anyone who receives compensation who is not related to at least one child in their care and is licensed, regulated, or registered under state law or receives Child Care Development Block Grant assistance).

Critical Roadblocks to Bipartisan Efforts in Early Childhood Policy

BPC's assessment also identified several philosophical barriers to reaching bipartisan consensus on early childhood policy at the federal level:

1. **Conflicting approaches to funding**, including disagreements about funding priorities (e.g., access versus quality), arguments over where to direct funds and how, disputes about whether to authorize new funding versus realign existing program dollars, and different views about the appropriate degree of state flexibility in program implementation.
2. **Pervasive partisan mistrust at the federal level**. Many interviewees on both sides of the aisle described current levels of partisanship, mistrust, and rancor as “unprecedented.”
3. **Different views of the appropriate role of government**. Debates over the federal and state role in early childhood are complicated by fundamental ideological differences.
4. **An influential, yet deeply entrenched advocacy community**, particularly around issues involving Head Start.
5. **A political tendency to focus on immediate wins**. Often, short-term political gains are favored over more valuable long-term early childhood investments.
6. **Lack of sustained public pressure**. While childcare is a fundamental “kitchen-table” issue for many families, interest hasn't yet morphed into a consistent and sustained political demand for action at the national level.

In addition to the common themes emanating from both the interviews and the roundtable discussions, there were other key takeaways:

1. **Parents play a primary role in successful early childhood outcomes.**
 - Parents know what is best for their children; they should have meaningful choices and involvement in where and how their children learn and develop.
 - Children need consistent and stable relationships with parents and other caring adults to learn and develop.
 - Participation in early childhood opportunities outside the home should be *voluntary and not mandatory*.
 - Parents are their children's first teachers; they should have access to the latest research and information to help their young children learn and develop.
2. **Children's early years are a critical period for learning and brain development.**
 - Emerging, evidence-based brain science has made a compelling case for the significance of this early growth period.
 - Access to learning opportunities in the early years will impact children's long-term success; achievement gaps begin in the early years.

- The quality of children’s health and nutrition directly influences their ability to learn and develop, as does exposure to toxic stress.
 - Social and emotional development is an important aspect of early learning.
- 3. The federal government has a critical role to play in supporting early childhood education.**
- Policymakers are willing to consider *new* federal investments in early childhood education if what they are funding really works.
 - Some basic level of accountability must be applied to the use of federal funds; standards imposed on the use of federal money should be directly related to desired outcomes.
 - The government plays a useful role in researching and reporting what works, measuring success, gathering data, and weighing outcomes.
- 4. The quality of early childhood programs matters.**
- Good-quality early childhood programs help children learn; bad programs cause harm.
 - Consistency and “dose” matter; isolated exposure to quality early opportunities has limited benefits.
 - One cornerstone of quality early childhood programs outside the home is the relationship between the child and provider; thus, a strong and stable childcare workforce is important.
 - Early childhood programs should not segregate by income and demographics and should take into account the unique needs of special, high-need populations (e.g., children with disabilities, children of migrant workers, etc.).
- 5. Building quality early childhood opportunities for children requires functional government partnerships.**
- Strong collaboration is required among federal, state, and local governments as well as with the private sector and parents.
 - Childcare and K-12 policy experts must be engaged more deeply in early childhood policy discussions and program development.
 - Meaningful and functional partnerships require more than just aligning funding streams.
- 6. Any policy for early childhood should employ a “dual-generation” approach that includes a focus on the needs of both parents and children.**
- Conservatives tended to characterize a “dual-generation” strategy as one that focuses on family engagement and external learning opportunities. Liberals tended to define it as a strategy that focuses on early learning as a key component of poverty alleviation.
 - Both political parties, however, strongly agreed on the essential role of parents in children’s success.
- 7. Effective federal early childhood policies must acknowledge, value, and build in a major partnership role for the states.**
- Many states have already demonstrated leadership in developing early childhood education programs that work.

- Any changes in federal policy must do more than pay lip service to a true federal-state partnership.
8. **Both parties have a significant interest in developing new opportunities to share evidence-based research about what works in early childhood and about how successful strategies can be replicated across states.**
- There is a rapidly growing body of research about what children need to thrive, which programs are getting the best outcomes and why, and how best to scale promising practices.
 - What is lacking is a reliable resource dedicated to getting this information to policymakers in a way they can understand and use effectively.

Findings from the 2015-2016 Early Childhood Roundtable Series

Building on the insights and perspectives gathered during the interview process, BPC organized a series of state roundtable discussions on early childhood. These meetings had several goals:

- Bring together innovative thought leaders across the political spectrum, including business and academic leaders, researchers, policy and communications experts, and other concerned stakeholders for off-the-record conversations about promising potential approaches.
- Explore policy ideas and messaging to garner bipartisan political traction.
- Engage potential new voices to take part in early childhood policy discussions and spur interest in these issues among a broader group of stakeholders.
- Identify local and state policies and programs that are already working to address the needs of young children.

A short description of each state roundtable meeting follows.

1. *Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (October 15, 2015)*: The kick-off meeting in the roundtable series was hosted by former Oklahoma Governors Frank Keating (Republican) and Brad Henry (Democrat). It included 40 leaders from the nonprofit, advocacy, philanthropic, and policy sectors as well as several elected officials. BPC heard several themes at this meeting that would be repeated across the country, including: the desire at the local level to better coordinate disparate streams of early childhood money and the consistent agreement across political lines that support in the early years is an important prerequisite for school readiness. Oklahoma has a long history of taking action on early childhood issues not only at the state and local level but also through large-scale partnerships with private philanthropy.
2. *Washington, D.C. (December 16, 2015)*: This meeting brought together key communications experts from across the political spectrum, including pollsters, political analysts, communications experts from think tanks, and messaging professionals. Democratic and Republican communications professionals and journalists shared what they have learned from their research, including which early childhood messages resonate across the political continuum and which messages and overall communications approaches are potential nonstarters for both liberals and conservatives.
3. *Dallas, Texas (February 10-11, 2015)*: BPC co-hosted a reception and policy roundtable in partnership with the American Enterprise Institute and the George W. Bush Library that brought together predominantly conservative state leaders in early childhood, state researchers, and national-level policy experts to discuss what Texas had

experienced in developing its early childhood policies and how those lessons might be applied in other states and at the federal level. The reception the night before the meeting included some of the most influential leaders in the early childhood field and was hosted by former First Lady Laura Bush, who shared her remarks with the group. The meeting highlighted the role of early childhood investments in strengthening the state's workforce and economy, and it underscored the importance of creating federal and state policies that allowed states and local counties to customize early childhood solutions that work in their local communities.

Momentous Institute

Understanding the Social-Emotional Health of Young Children

The Momentous Institute in Dallas, Texas, provides therapeutic services to 6,000 children and families annually and supplements those direct services with research and training designed to improve interventions at the local and national levels. In addition, the Momentous School provides private education for 245 low-income children ages three through grade five. "We are really trying to get a handle on what is helpful for families with all the direct work we do with kids," says Momentous Executive Director Michelle Kinder. "In particular, we are focusing on families who are underrepresented in research and use that to train close to 10,000 early childhood professionals every year." Based on its work, Momentous is learning that public policy must consider social and emotional learning to maximize later educational and employment success.

4. *Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (May 18, 2016)*: Co-hosted by former Pennsylvania Senator and presidential candidate Rick Santorum, this meeting brought together Republican state legislators, advocates, state think-tank leaders, and researchers to discuss potential areas of policy momentum in the early childhood space. Specific subjects included the success of privately funded voluntary home-visit programs, the potential for strengthening public-private partnerships to provide greater quality and selection in early childhood options, and suggestions on how to give parents more significant control over decisions regarding the care and education of young children.
5. *Durham, North Carolina (September 20, 2016)*: BPC partnered with the Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to bring together nationally recognized researchers in early childhood education, policy experts, conservative and liberal state advocates, and representatives from the state legislature and North Carolina governors' office. The meeting explored lessons learned from the implementation of the Durham County home-visiting program, a voluntary, cost-effective program that is available to all new parents in the county. Participants also focused on tensions between the federal and state roles in regulating funding for early childhood development programs and on the need for increased flexibility to implement solutions that address the unique needs of local communities.

Durham Family Connects

North Carolina's Nurse Home Visits for Young Families

Durham Family Connects is a universal nurse home-visiting program available to all Durham families with newborns. The program is designed to work directly with parents to improve maternal and child health and to provide the supports needed to decrease the rates of child abuse and neglect. In the first visit, a nurse consults with the parents and the child to determine if there are any unmet health issues or risk factors; to help with any challenges, such as feeding and sleep; and to connect the family to other community resources as needed. The typical cost of a year of home visits is \$700. Initial research has shown that the program has led to sharp declines in families' reliance on emergency care, including 59 percent less emergency care in the first six months of life. Explains Dr. Ken Dodge of Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy: "Everyone is concerned about health care costs. Nurse home-visiting programs represent a cost-effective way to help young families get off to a good start."

6. *Cheyenne, Wyoming (October 5, 2016)*: This roundtable, also co-hosted by Senator Santorum, focused on the challenges of addressing early childhood needs in rural areas. The Wyoming discussion focused primarily on the problems with a one-size-fits-all policy approach that ties the hands of local jurisdictions in meeting the unique needs of their local communities. Conservative and liberal participants alike underscored the importance of building widespread community buy-in in early childhood policy design and implementation. In addition, participants discussed the need to overcome a common mistrust of government-sponsored programs, especially in tribal communities. Because Wyoming is one of only four states that does not offer early childhood funding to supplement federal investments, participants also talked about the legislature's traditional ambivalence toward sustained state-funded efforts.

Wyoming's Little Purple Bus

Early Childhood Options for Rural Communities

In Wyoming's Fremont School District 6, a large rural area covering 1,300 square miles, the Little Purple Bus is a mobile classroom that brings early childhood opportunities directly to children ages 0 to 4. "One of our biggest challenges was truly about access," explains Fremont Superintendent Diana Clapp. "We started thinking about the old bookmobiles and wondered whether that same kind of concept would work as a preschool classroom." The bus makes weekly and biweekly visits to low-income families in remote areas across the district to provide preschool-learning and child-development information to ensure school readiness and improve long-term educational outcomes. A nurse also travels along to provide health care and advice. Since Wyoming is one of four states that does not invest state money directly into preschool education, the program is funded through a combination of federal, local, and private funding sources.

In general, the state roundtable discussions underscored the extreme diversity of perspectives, geographic differences, cultural contexts, and recent policy developments across different regions of the United States. Each roundtable highlighted the challenge for federal leaders in designing early childhood policies that adequately address the unique needs of local communities. At the same time, however, the meetings reinforced many of the interview themes that drew support from a broad range of meeting participants, regardless of party affiliation, occupation, and region, including:

1. Primary Role of Parents and Families: Despite a wide range of perspectives on the role of government in children’s early years, there was almost uniform support for the notion that parents are a child’s first and most important teacher. There was also widespread agreement that parental voices should be more strongly reflected in every aspect of early childhood policy development and implementation—from designing legislation to making choices about their children’s early experiences, including the ability to opt out of programs altogether.

In addition, there was support for the idea that government programs should build parental leadership and feedback into ongoing policy and funding decisions, as well as the idea that policies should also reflect the unique needs of communities. In all the state roundtables, participants mentioned that states and communities often struggle with what they perceive to be a one-size-fits-all approach to early childhood programs. Without a more elastic policy design at the federal level, there is concern about properly meeting the needs of diverse populations and building the requisite level of community buy-in to achieve long-term success.

2. Positive Economic Impact of an Early Childhood Focus: Even in the face of deep political differences over how to approach early childhood issues at the policy level, most stakeholders agreed that quality early childhood opportunities and attention to children’s intellectual and emotional development in the early years has a significant positive impact on the nation’s economic strength and global competitiveness in both the short- and long-term. Participants often emphasized that affordable, high-quality childcare options for working parents are particularly essential to a reliable and productive work force. While there was significant disagreement about whether a child is better off at home with a parent in the early years, almost all participants acknowledged that when economic necessity requires both parents to work, effective policies should support families’ access to safe and reliable childcare.

Given its clear interest in building the competitive workforce of the future, there was also substantial agreement that the business community has a valuable role to play in the early childhood policy debate. Business leaders who attended the state roundtables emphasized that, unless the private sector plays a broader part in developing effective early childhood supports for families and within communities, critical learning and future workforce opportunities will be lost. In addition, business leaders and other stakeholders commonly pointed to the need for better public-private partnerships to improve early childcare options and find a balance between publicly supported programs and free-market principles. While there was substantial disagreement over how to build and sustain a strong workforce of providers, all agreed that childcare providers and other support workers play a critical role in delivering a continuum of quality early childhood services.

3. Limits on the Government Role in Early Childhood: A contentious topic throughout the roundtable discussions was the role of federal and state governments in supporting positive early childhood development opportunities for children and families. Disagreements emerged around several points: the government’s overall involvement in the lives of families, the proper balance of financial “burdens” between federal and state governments, and the

appropriate balance of flexibility and accountability accorded to states in implementing federal programs or using federal funds. There was general agreement, however, that the government's primary purpose in this policy arena was to give families the opportunity to make the best choices for their young children's early years, especially in the case of low-income families who may struggle to find safe and quality childcare.

While there was no clear consensus about the extent of federal government's role in early childhood, there was widespread agreement that the federal government does have a limited function in funding certain programs and benefits, including tax incentives, improving and streamlining fragmented federal programs, and ensuring safety and accountability. In addition, there was almost uniform agreement that the federal government should fund and support unbiased research and share evidence-based programs and best practices among states to amplify innovation and ensure effective taxpayer investments. Similarly, meeting participants agreed that because local communities need community-driven solutions, states and local governments should generally be in the driver's seat when it comes to designing, implementing, and measuring the success of early childhood programs.

- 4. Need to Invest in What Works:** While views differ over which programs have a reliable evidence base, there is strong agreement that federal and state governments should invest only in programs that have proved to be effective. In each roundtable, participants shared examples of programs that either offered a poor return on public investment or were not structured flexibly enough to meet the unique needs of local communities. While common sense would suggest that taxpayer money should be used to support only those programs that consistently improve early childhood outcomes, there was widespread agreement that this goal was not always achieved and that there is a lack of reliable and accessible information about evidence-based programs that states and jurisdictions need to make good decisions about local investments and program interventions. In addition, stakeholders felt that much of the available research about early childhood is not necessarily as reliable and unbiased as it should be and therefore perpetuates programs that do not deliver for children.
- 5. A Realistic Fiscal Approach:** Early childhood programs must not only work (in the sense that they produce positive outcomes), they must be cost-effective. While examples of highly effective interventions can be found in every region, there was also concern about expensive, high-intensity programs that only serve a small number of children and families or that are custom-designed to meet the needs of a specific community. Given that government cannot adequately address all early childhood challenges, a broader, bipartisan conversation is needed about how investments should be prioritized. For example, should the debate focus on increasing program quality or on increasing accessibility? Should all families be included or primarily low-income families? Stakeholders also expressed concern about whether state and federal programs that may have overlapping goals could be duplicative.
- 6. The Importance of Open and Honest Dialogue:** Without exception, stakeholders in all the regional meetings expressed concern that ideological entrenchment in the early childhood field makes it increasingly difficult to identify areas of bipartisan compromise. Conservative participants particularly emphasized this concern, arguing that they had often shied away from early childhood policy discussions because their views about a limited government role were so often interpreted as a lack of commitment to early childhood policy solutions. Across the political spectrum, stakeholders underscored the need for conversations free of sacred cows—that is, conversations in which all topics could be analyzed and questioned in a fair and respectful manner.

Effective Messaging About Early Childhood Issues Across the Political Spectrum

Effective messaging requires understanding and considering the perspective and worldview of the target audience and is especially critical for politically sensitive audiences. While communication issues were a subject of discussion at each meeting, BPC devoted an entire roundtable meeting—held in Washington, D.C., prior to the 2016 election—to messaging challenges.

Understanding that many early childhood advocates tend to lean progressive, BPC asked both the Democratic and Republican participants to identify messages that they felt were especially likely to resonate with conservatives:

- Early childhood is a critical time for child development. This raises the importance of early, effective, and consistent quality time with adults, especially with the parent who is the child’s first and primary connection and teacher.
- A child’s brain develops quickly during the early years, and it is important to use this time to ensure that children are ready to embrace learning opportunities in kindergarten and beyond.
- Early investments in children and in children’s early experiences pay lifelong dividends that can produce high returns on investment for society.
- Parents should be respected and encouraged in their role as a child’s most important connection and first teacher and should be provided voluntary opportunities to understand and develop the skills necessary to reach their full parenting potential.
- Parental decisions to choose in-home or out-of-home childcare must be protected and treated with respect.
- Quality early childhood experiences matter more to conservatives than access because quality programs hold greater promise for positive returns on investment.
- Degrees are not a proxy for skills, especially for caregivers and educators dealing with children ages 0 to 3.
- The term “universal pre-K” should be understood to refer to universal access and opportunity, not universal enrollment. Participation in pre-K programs must be voluntary, and parents’ right to choose whether to enroll or not is paramount.
- Programs should be targeted to those most in need.
- Local control and flexibility is preferred over federal government control.

Of the concepts that animate the debate over early childhood policy, several appear to have special resonance with a wide array of audiences:

1. Research on early childhood brain development is critically important. So is the concern that kids who start life with certain disadvantages aren’t likely to overcome those disadvantages without quality engagement opportunities in their early years.
2. Anticipated returns on investment are high for improving the quality of early childhood experiences (both in-home and out-of-home).

3. Framing that casts the issue as targeting those in need, including the middle class and working families, to make sure opportunities are made available for children who would otherwise lack them is more compelling than framing the issue as one of simply spending more dollars to give everyone a leg up.
4. Early childhood issues should be seen as a workforce issue. Childcare is an important prerequisite to a reliable and productive workforce.

Even though there is broad agreement about the general importance of this issue, the debate around early childhood policy remains highly charged ideologically. Words really do matter in this space: For example, “universal pre-K” is one of the most loaded terms and concepts for conservatives. Similarly, it matters whether one says “early childhood education” versus “early childhood development”; “childcare staff” versus “teachers”; or “stay-at-home parents” versus “in-home childcare.”

The controversy around some of these terms and distinctions is briefly summarized below.

“Universal Pre-K”

Universal pre-K is a complicated issue. BPC heard clearly in the roundtables that many conservatives view this term and the ideology behind it as emblematic of major government overreach—an attempt to reach down to younger and younger children, remove them from the home environment at an earlier age, and place them in what many view as a failed institutional educational system. Some states like Georgia, however, have successfully embraced the concept of universal pre-K by creating a voluntary program that is open to all and that is not targeted exclusively to low-income individuals. The politics of this issue continue to evolve as a growing number of Republican governors have supported bipartisan efforts to provide universal pre-K at the state level, while resisting efforts in Washington to impose similar requirements nationwide.

“Early Childhood Education” Versus “Early Childhood Development”

Many have concerns about applying the term “education” to children under the age of 4. The term “development” was seen as more appropriate because it suggests a more holistic view of early childhood and lacks the semantic connection to a formal K-12 education system that is seen by some as failing or underperforming.

“Childcare Staff” Versus “Teacher”

Some conservatives reject the proposition that it takes a degree to raise a child—arguing that the concept reinforces the misperception that children of less “educated” parents would be better served by professionals outside of the home. Conservatives emphasize skill and safety over education levels and view caregiver degree requirements as a veiled attempt to raise workers’ salaries. Others argue that the science shows that caretakers of young children are the “first teacher” and that day-care providers need training to not only make a living wage but to provide the environment needed to ensure children get the developmental environment they need to succeed.

“Stay-at-home Parents” Versus “In-home Childcare”

To many conservatives, the term “stay-at-home parent” devalues the role of the parent and implies that parents who stay home aren’t working but are merely serving as the “custodian” of their child rather than being actively engaged in their child’s early development. They view the decision to stay at home as a desirable choice for taking care of children, one that should be respected and treated on par with out-of-home care, especially in the tax code.

Early Childhood Issues in the 2016 Presidential Election

In the past, Republicans often operated under the notion that most families comprised of a working father and a stay-at-home mother, and they were reluctant to embrace Democratic pleas for universal access and public funding for childcare and early childhood development. For example, in 1971, President Richard Nixon vetoed a universal-childcare law and explained his position this way: “For the federal government to plunge headlong financially into supporting child development would commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against [sic] the family-centered approach.”²

At the time, however, women accounted for 38 percent of the American workforce. Today, they account for 70 percent. Given this dramatic shift in workforce participation, childcare is no longer a luxury—on the contrary, it is an economic necessity for many working families and an issue of productivity for the business community.

In the 2016 election, the Republican platform did not specifically reference childcare but did include the following statement: “Parents are a child’s first and foremost educators, and have primary responsibility for the education of their children. Parents have a right to direct their children’s education, care, and upbringing.”

The Democrats’ platform embraced childcare, not only as part of a “cradle-to-college” commitment to education, but as a way of restoring economic security for the middle class. Specifically, the platform pledged to “invest in early childhood programs like Early Head Start and provide every family in America with access to high-quality childcare and high-quality preschool programs.” Democrats also expressed support for “efforts to raise wages for childcare workers, and to ensure that early childhood educators are experienced and high-quality.”

On the campaign trail, however, both presidential candidates included childcare as one of their keystone proposals. While the specifics of their plans differed, there was general agreement about the importance of improving childcare quality and affordability and, for the first time, bipartisan support for paid maternity leave.

Both presidential candidates’ campaigns took note of the fact that the United States is the only Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development nation (out of 35) that does not guarantee paid maternity leave. The average maternity leave is 12 weeks (Mexico), but some leaves are more than three years (Estonia, Finland, Hungary, and Slovakia). In most countries, women collect partial salaries during maternity leave, but the mandated payments can still exceed a year’s salary. Nearly every other country also guarantees paid job leave to care of a sick child or family member, unlike in the United States.

President Donald Trump, with the leadership of his daughter Ivanka, appears committed to reforming childcare and other parenting policies. The Trump campaign proposed a series of tax strategies to make childcare more affordable for parents. While actual language is not available, the Trump plan would allow working parents to deduct childcare expenses for up to four children and elderly dependents from their income taxes. The deduction would be capped at the average cost of care for the state of residence. Individuals making more than \$250,000 (\$500,000 if filing jointly) would not be eligible for the deduction.

The plan proposes childcare-spending rebates to lower-income taxpayers through the existing Earned Income Tax Credit. Stay-at-home parents would receive the same tax deduction as working parents. The Trump proposal would also create new Dependent Care Savings Accounts that would allow both pre-tax deductible contributions and tax-free appreciation year to year. To help lower-income families, the proposal offers a government match equal to half the first \$1,000 deposited per year.

Strategic Near-Term Opportunities

Though Congress passed a major childcare initiative in 2014, the 115th Congress may provide multiple opportunities to take further action on early childhood issues.

Tax Reform: The likelihood of Congress moving tax-reform legislation after the 2016 realignment in Washington is high. Republicans in the House, Senate, and now the White House have been gearing up for this opportunity for several years and are at work shaping a package. Trump has indicated that tax reform is the next item on his legislative agenda.

With respect to tax policy, the president appears to have embraced the views of American Enterprise Institute economist Alan Viard, who has stated: “Under basic tax-policy principles, workers should be allowed to deduct the expenses of earning the income on which they are taxed. Childcare meets the economic definition of a work-related expense—parents are less likely to work when childcare becomes more expensive. . . . Families should be free to make their own childcare choices, based on the options available to them, their understanding of their children’s needs, and their moral values, without interference from the tax system.”

Ryan Poverty Initiative: Possible legislation centered around House Speaker Paul Ryan’s poverty agenda, “A Better Way,” may also arise this Congress. Its stated goals include promoting work and family, restoring upward mobility, and collaborating with communities. The Ryan proposal specifically calls out the importance of strengthening early childhood development: “If a child does not have a home environment allowing them to develop the academic, social, and cognitive skills necessary to succeed in school, or have access to a program that can provide parents assistance in these areas, then he or she is less likely to succeed later in life.”³ Specific policy proposals include: (1) combining duplicative federal programs and investments to better support states and local communities in providing high-quality childcare and educational opportunities; (2) having the federal government provide information and research about best practices across the country; (3) supporting research to advance high-quality services that are based on results; and (4) supporting unbiased research partnerships that identify whether pre-K programs work and, if they do, what types of pre-K services best support children’s healthy development.

In addition, several existing programs are due for reauthorization, a process that could provide further opportunities for reform:

Head Start: Head Start was last reauthorized in the George W. Bush administration. The Improving Head Start Act of 2007 reauthorized Head Start and Early Head Start and, among other provisions, moved programs within Head Start to a five-year funding cycle. It received overwhelming bipartisan support, passing the House by a vote of 381 to 36 and the Senate by a vote of 95 to 0. According to the National Head Start Association, the next reauthorization “will take place amidst a much more turbulent and partisan climate.”

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): This block-grant program was scheduled for reauthorization in 2010. Congress, however, did not work on legislation to reauthorize the program and instead extended the TANF block grant multiple times. The most recent extension was part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016, which extended funding for the TANF block grant through September 30, 2016. In July 2015, the Subcommittee on Human Resources within the House Committee on Ways and Means released a discussion draft, but no further action was taken.

Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program: MIECHV is a federal-state partnership that has had broad bipartisan support. It provides voluntary, evidence-based family- and child-related home-visiting

programs in every state. The program was last extended in 2015 and expired in March 2017. MIECHV targets high-risk families who are most likely to benefit from intensive home-visiting services, which use trained professionals (often nurses, social workers, or parent educators) to help new parents acquire the skills to promote their children's development. The home-visiting programs also help families connect to necessary services, such as health care or community resources, and monitor children's progress on developmental milestones. MIECHV was initially authorized and funded for five years at \$1.5 billion and was reauthorized at \$400 million per year for fiscal years 2016 and 2017. In 2016, the Health Resources and Services Administration awarded \$344 million to 55 states, territories, and nonprofit organizations.

Conclusion

BPC's two-year process of examining early childhood development issues and exploring opportunities for further bipartisan progress in this area has yielded important insights into the policies, processes, and messages needed to move an early childhood agenda. It is clear that both sides of the political divide understand the challenges facing working families and that both are interested in policies that could make a significant difference in the educational and socioemotional development of America's youngest citizens. Childcare costs are rising nearly twice as fast as inflation, yet too many children are entering kindergarten in many cases already behind. And these gaps are seldom closed without significant investments later on.

Earlier this year, BPC announced a new Early Childhood Initiative led by former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and former California Representative George Miller. Though they hail from opposite ends of the political spectrum, they are united in the view that supporting early childhood development is an issue that can bring together their respective parties. They are also convinced that this is an area where Congress can begin working immediately with the Trump administration to support the needs and aspirations of working families.

With more than 13 million children under age 5 in some type of childcare throughout the United States, the new BPC initiative will focus on how to improve the quality and affordability of childcare, how to better support parents in their role as caregivers, and how to better ensure that programs are effectively meeting the needs of children and families.

According to Senator Santorum and Representative Miller: "Making sure *all* our nation's children start the journey of life equipped for what lies ahead is central to the American ethos of equality of opportunity—the notion that America is a place where everyone, regardless of background and circumstance, has a chance at achieving success. Through our work with BPC, we also hope to demonstrate the possibility of developing meaningful solutions that can bridge political and ideological divides. We owe our children nothing less."

Endnotes

- ^{1.} Government Accountability Office, *Early Learning and Child Care: Federal Funds Support Multiple Programs with Similar Goals*, GAO-14-325T, February 5, 2014. Available at: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-14-325T>.
- ^{2.} Richard Nixon, "Veto of the Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1971," The American Presidency Project, December 9, 1971. Available at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3251>
- ^{3.} Paul Ryan, *A Better Way: Our Vision for a Confident America*, Task Force on Poverty, Opportunity, and Upward Mobility, June 7, 2016. Available at: http://abetterway.speaker.gov/_assets/pdf/ABetterWay-Poverty-PolicyPaper.pdf.

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