



POLICY BRIEF

Strong Families:
A Key to School Readiness & Success



FIRST THINGS FIRST
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Strong Families: A Key to School Readiness & Success

Strong families are the cornerstone of thriving communities. Turns out, they hold one of the keys to their child's academic success, as well. The majority of a child's brain develops by the time she is 5 years old, and the strength of a child's relationships with her family and early caregivers determines whether her brain will develop in healthy ways that promote learning.

Definitions of strong families are as varied as the families themselves. However, when exploring the connection between strong families and school readiness, two crucial characteristics stand out.

First, a strong family has the resources to meet a child's basic needs, including safety, food, shelter and medical care.

Second, a strong family is one that has the information and support to feel confident and competent in their role as their child's first teacher. This includes awareness of the importance of warm, nurturing interactions to a child's healthy brain development, as well as the ability to make informed decisions about other adults who may serve as caregivers for their children.

The next two sections describe how each of these factors impact a child's developing brain and whether her or she arrives at school prepared to succeed.

Later in this brief, we list some of the ways that First Things First partners with parents to promote school readiness, and outline ways in which parents, communities and policymakers can help give kids the tools they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Basic Needs & School Readiness

There is no question that when children experience abuse or neglect, family violence, poor nutrition, housing instability and infrequent health care, their ability to learn and succeed is severely compromised.

Families dealing with these issues often experience high levels of stress, and high-stress environments can substantially impact early development. According to Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, research on the biology of stress shows that major adversity can weaken developing brain architecture and permanently set the body's stress response system on high alert. Science also shows that providing stable, responsive environments for children in the earliest years of life can prevent or reverse these conditions, with lifelong consequences for learning, behavior and health.





The ongoing economic crisis means that many Arizona families continue to struggle with situations that can cause stress for parents and compromise children's healthy development. These include:

- 1 in 4 kids 5 and younger live in poverty;
- The state unemployment rate stands at 8 percent;
- Arizona ranks fifth in the nation when it comes to home foreclosures;
- Between September 2011 and September 2012, there was a 22 percent increase in the number of children entering foster care due to abuse or neglect;
- 1 in 10 kids 5 and younger lack health insurance.

Protecting vulnerable children and helping vulnerable families is supported through the public safety net and programs operated by faith-based or non-profit groups. But state budget cuts in recent years have resulted in fewer supports available for the families of young kids, and the economy has also taken a toll on donations to many community-based services that help fill those gaps. Given the critical link between family stress and early childhood development, the restoration of the state's safety net – particularly for the families of young children – is both an economic *and* educational necessity.

Families as Teachers

Research has confirmed that the early relationships children establish with adults are the primary influence on brain development. How, exactly, do nurturing relationships affect brain growth?

90%
of a child's critical
brain development
happens by age 5.

According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, the key process that helps

build strong brain architecture is known as Serve and Return.¹ A growing infant's new neural connections form in the brain as children "serve up" opportunities for interaction through babbling, facial expressions and gestures. Adults "return" the serve by responding in a directed, meaningful way. This interaction forms the foundation of brain architecture upon which all future development will be built.²

Here is an example of how this works in literacy development:

"When a baby sees an object, the adult says (the object's) name. This makes connections in the child's brain between particular sounds and their corresponding objects. Later (through daily reading), adults show young children that those objects and sounds can also be represented by marks on a page (letters and words). With continued support from adults, children learn to decipher writing, and eventually, to write themselves.



Each stage builds on what came before. Ensuring that children have adult caregivers who consistently engage in serve and return interactions beginning in infancy builds a foundation in the brain for all of the learning, behavior and health that follow.”³

Often, parents and caregivers are not aware of the importance and long-term impact of daily interactions on children’s early learning, brain development and future academic success. A recent statewide survey of parents and caregivers conducted by First Things First revealed that:

- **Only 50% of respondents reported reading to children seven days a week.**

Why is this important?

Reading to children daily is one way that children build vocabulary and a foundation for literacy. In fact, research shows that the number of words a child knows at ages 3 and 4 corresponds strongly to reading comprehension levels at ages 9 and 10.

- **50% believe children do not respond to their environment until two months of age or later.**

Why is this important?

From birth, children perceive the environment that surrounds them. Those perceptions are influencing the development of their young brain.

- **29% believe that children sense and react to parents’ emotions only after they reach seven months of age or older.**

Why is this important?

Just as infants from a very early age can detect and react to their environment, they also can sense and react to parents and their emotions. From touches to expressions and tone, infants are sensing and responding to their parents.

- **50% of respondents believe their child learns just as much from watching television as from being with their parents.**

Why is this important?

In fact, although TV can be entertaining, it does not stimulate brain development. Research shows that face-to-face interaction and experimenting with their environment are the primary ways in which children learn. Because of this, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time (TV, movies, computers, etc.) for kids under 2; and limited screen time after that.

In addition to information gaps, there are also service gaps that exist in the current early childhood system. For example, despite the growing investment in home visitation, not all potentially eligible families who wish to participate in home visiting services have access.

Further, as a geographically diverse state, the number of service providers varies substantially between the state’s urban areas and its numerous rural communities. There are also challenges in transportation and basic access, as many smaller communities are geographically isolated.

FTF's Role in Strengthening Families

It is important to recognize that many parents are able to meet their need for parenting information and support through formal or informal networks, including extended family members, faith communities, friends and neighbors. However, there are other families who may need or want more formal or targeted interventions, and accessing these is essential for their child's success.

In SFY2012, First Things First invested **\$30.8 million dollars** – **approximately 27% of its funding** – in programs that strengthen families.

First Things First is charged with expanding programs that help families support their young child's learning and health. Through a governance structure that respects Tribal sovereignty and local decision-making, FTF provides increased access for families to programs that are:

- Completely voluntary;
- Culturally responsive;
- Offered in a variety of settings; and,
- Provided at the intensity that meets the individual family's needs and desires.

Programs funded by First Things First that partner with parents to help promote their child's optimal development and learning include:

Arizona Parent Kits are provided to every family of a newborn upon discharge from an Arizona hospital or birthing center. The kits include six DVDs that address a variety of areas of healthy parenting including child nutrition, safety, quality early care and education and early literacy. Also provided is an 80-page *Arizona Parents Guide* with statewide resources listed and a book for parents to begin reading immediately with their child. *More than 61,000 parent kits were distributed to families of newborns in fiscal year 2012.*

Birth to 5 Helpline is available toll-free statewide for all Arizona parents and caregivers of children 5 and younger. Staffed by early childhood development specialists, registered nurses, disabilities specialists, early literacy specialists and mental health counselors, this free service allows all Arizona parents to call in with questions about their infants, toddlers and preschoolers. *More than 3,100 calls from caregivers of infants, toddlers and preschoolers were responded to in fiscal year 2012.*

Family Resource Centers operate in a variety of capacities and are designed to meet the specific needs of diverse families in unique communities. These centers are required to meet evidence-based standards of practice and provide families with children birth to 5 years old access to information and education on a variety of child development and health topics. The centers are established in areas of the community where families naturally congregate. Family Resource Centers can also contribute to the community building process, serving as a central location for engaging local community organizations and local government. *More than 138,000 parents and caregivers were supported by family resource centers in fiscal year 2012.*

“The brain classes are the best; we learned how most of our kids’ brains develop by the time they are three and how talking to them and playing with them can help them learn. But, a big part of that was learning how not to underestimate our kids.”

Sara, mom to 6-year-old Annie and 3-year-old Sammie; Family Resource Center participant

Emergent Literacy and Early Language Development Programs are specific community-based efforts, such as Reach Out and Read as well as a number of library-based programs that focus on early literacy development. Additionally, several of the FTF regional partnership councils have funded Native Language Preservation strategies to promote use of the Tribe’s language. *More than 141,000 books were distributed to young children whose parents also received information about the importance of early literacy through these programs in fiscal year 2012. In addition, tribal children working with 18 early learning providers benefitted from language preservation efforts.*

While the programs previously described meet the needs of many Arizona parents, there are families who desire and need more intensive interventions, such as families with multiple babies, children with developmental delays, or who do not have the informal networks that many parents lean on for support.

Home Visitation is an intensive program that is provided through a number of different evidence-based models in many regions statewide. Programs such as Healthy Families, Nurse Family Partnership and Parents As Teachers each have unique eligibility criteria, but all target recruitment and enrollment of families who are either expecting a child or are the parents of a newborn or infant.

Comprehensive home visitation programs provide participating families of infants and toddlers with information and education on parenting, child development and health topics while assisting with connections to other resources or programs as needed. Home visitors deliver one-one-one coaching and interaction tailored to the needs of individual families. *More than 8,700 Arizona families enjoyed stronger, more supportive parent-child relationships through home visitation in fiscal year 2012.*

Strong Families AZ

Funded by a federal grant, Strong Families AZ is a statewide awareness campaign that seeks to increase families’ and communities’ understanding about home visiting and its benefits. Resource information allows families to identify potential home visiting programs within their own community. Visit strongfamiliesaz.com

Moving Forward

Getting kids ready for school starts the day they are born. As a community, we have a shared responsibility to ensure that all children arrive at kindergarten prepared to succeed; that includes strengthening families in their critical role as their child's first teacher. There are things parents, communities and policymakers can do to strengthen families and give more Arizona children the tools they need to succeed in school and in life.

Parents can:

- Read to their child every day. School success is built on language and literacy development; 15-30 minutes per day can make a big difference later on.



- Sing, talk and play with their child. Brain development is healthiest when children interact with the caregivers in their lives. Introducing children to sounds, objects, concepts and words from an early age builds the requisite foundation for healthy brain growth.
- Not wait until their child is sick to see a health care provider. Preventative health care, including well-child visits, dental visits and developmental

screenings, keeps children on track and identifies potential delays early for the most successful intervention.

- Ensure their child is receiving the right foods in the right amounts. Healthy eating is a building block for physical and cognitive development. Making sure meals are balanced and snacks are nutritious helps combat both obesity as well as malnourishment, both contributors to developmental delays.
- Limit screen time – television and computers – for young children. Instead, encourage physical activity and play for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Physical activity builds gross motor skills in children and helps them maintain a healthy weight. Play builds creativity and develops their language, social, and problem-solving skills.

Communities can:

- Ensure there are opportunities for parents to access accurate information about their children's needs and development as well as appropriate supports. This could happen in Family Resource Centers, local schools or child care centers.
- Provide safe, centrally located areas for children to play. These could be local clubs, churches or playgrounds, but all children need a safe place to grow, play and develop.
- Support and encourage the establishment of quality early care and education providers as well as opportunities for professional development for child care professionals in the community.
- Support the creation of transportation and infrastructure that allows families to access needed services and opportunities.

Policymakers can:

- Restore and expand the safety net to keep children and families safe and secure and to reduce child abuse and neglect.
- Expand health insurance coverage for children from low-income families.
- Restore and expand access for early care and education programs for low-income families.
- Expand incentives for early learning providers to provide quality programs.
- Expand home visiting programs for vulnerable families.
- Establish/expand family friendly leave policies, including maternal and paternal leave for newborns.

Just as we all pay the price when children fail in school, our entire state reaps the rewards when kids become successful students and – later on – contributing adults. By ensuring that the most critical needs are met, and relationships in a child’s early life and strong and supportive, we send kids to school prepared to meet our expectations.



Endnotes

- 1 “Serve & Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry.” Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.
Accessed at http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/multimedia/videos/three_core_concepts/serve_and_return/
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.

