



How Texas policymakers understand and support early childhood brain development: Learnings from a recent survey

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The most rapid period of brain development occurs from the prenatal stage through age 3.¹ Experiences during these years have a lasting impact on children’s learning abilities, behavior, and overall health.² Positive influences, including a loving and nurturing caregiver or access to high-quality child care, can strengthen early childhood brain development (ECBD) and foster advantageous life outcomes.³ By funding and regulating public services and programs to help children learn and strengthen families, policy plays a unique role in ECBD.

The Episcopal Health Foundation partnered with TexProtects and Child Trends to conduct a survey to learn what state and local policymakers in Texas know about ECBD, and how they use that information in their decision making. This fact sheet provides a brief overview of key findings from the 60 policymakers who responded to the survey.⁴

Areas of understanding and areas for further education

Most surveyed policymakers understand the importance of ECBD for children’s development.

Concepts policymakers are most likely to understand	Programs policymakers believe have the highest return on investment	Policies policymakers believe have the greatest benefit for young children
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Good health care and having a positive relationship with a parent or caregiver are important for healthy ECBD. 2. Children’s experiences from the prenatal stage to age 3 have long-term impacts on their health and well-being. 3. Investing in services for families and children results in long-term social benefits. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Health care through Medicaid for mothers during and after pregnancy 2. Children’s health care 3. Early childhood education programs, including Head Start and Early Head Start 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Access to comprehensive pediatric and primary care 2. Health care for mothers during and after pregnancy 3. Nutrition and food security

The policymakers surveyed have gaps in knowledge on some ECBD concepts and identified areas in which they lack the research and data needed to make informed decisions to support ECBD.

Concepts policymakers are least likely to understand	Programs policymakers believe have the lowest return on investment	Policies policymakers believe have the least benefit for young children
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The physical brain development of young children who experience chronic neglect differs from that of those who do not experience neglect. 2. Investing in services for families and children results in long-term fiscal benefits. 3. Parents’ level of chronic stress affects young children’s brain development. 4. Young children’s brains can recover from adverse experiences and trauma. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Child care subsidies 2. Workforce supports for parents such as paid family leave policies, cash assistance, or a living wage 3. Family support home visiting programs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Early and consistent developmental screenings 2. High-quality child care workforce 3. Family support home visiting programs

Not all surveyed policymakers agree on the role of government in ECBD

Policymakers in this survey disagree about whether promoting ECBD is the role of the government or the family. More than one third (37%) agree that promoting ECBD is solely the responsibility of the family; roughly two-thirds (63%) disagree and believe that the government has a role in supporting ECBD.

Most surveyed policymakers would like more information about ECBD

Surveyed policymakers would value the following information and data to support decisions that promote ECBD: (1) data on outcomes for young children and families in public programs; (2) data on current gaps in and availability for existing programs; (3) research on the return on investment (ROI) with such programs; and (4) clear information on program funding (i.e., how a program is funded and how funding will be used).

When making decisions, policymakers in this survey weigh most heavily a program or service's (1) evidence of effectiveness; (2) cost; (3) ROI or net-gain; and (4) impact on long-term child outcomes.

Implications

The study provides useful information for early childhood stakeholders who work with policymakers to support ECBD in Texas.

There is a good deal of consensus among these policymakers. Policymakers in this survey understand that young children need positive experiences and relationships with parents or caregivers to thrive later in life. They acknowledge the critical role that health care plays in the health of young children and their mothers, and see health care from Medicaid and CHIP as having a high ROI. Framing new recommendations and advocacy efforts around these common beliefs may be a powerful way to engage policymakers.

Policymakers need to learn more about some topics. Policymakers in this survey did not understand some concepts as well as others, including how trauma, chronic neglect, and chronic stress can hinder ECBD. Helping policymakers understand these concepts is even more critical as families cope with the economic uncertainty and stress from COVID-19. Also, information on the potential ROI from child care subsidies and a strong early childhood workforce may build policymakers' capacity to support ECBD.

Policymakers understand their role in ECBD differently. Policymakers have differing ideas about the role of policy in family life, as well as the roles policymakers should play in supporting ECBD. For policymakers who believe that promoting ECBD is the responsibility of the family and not the government, messages around supporting the family itself may resonate more strongly than messages about supporting children.

A disconnect exists between health care attitudes and policy. Stakeholders who work to increase access to high-quality health care in Texas can point to common beliefs around the critical role of health in ECBD. However, it is important to explore what barriers exist in connecting children and families to health insurance. Texas currently has the highest rate of uninsured children (11%) and women (23%) in the nation.^{5,6} A disconnect exists between surveyed policymakers' attitudes toward health care and their support for policies that could increase access to care.

If you have questions about the findings from this study or would like to receive the tables of results for all survey items, please email Dr. April Wilson (AWilson@ChildTrends.org).

1. Kolb, B. (2009). Brain and Behavioral Plasticity in the Developing Brain: Neuroscience and Public Policy. *Pediatrics & child health*, 14(10), 651-652. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2807801/>
2. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/from-best-practices-to-breakthrough-impacts/>
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2012). The Science of Neglect: The Persistent Absence of Responsive Care Disrupts the Developing Brain: Working Paper No. 12. Retrieved from <https://46y5eh1lfhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/The-Science-of-Neglect-The-Persistent-Absence-of-Responsive-Care-Disrupts-the-Developing-Brain.pdf>
4. The study team held four focus groups in different regions of the state with 79 early childhood stakeholders, conducted one-on-one phone interviews with four Texas policymakers, and surveyed Texas state legislators, county representatives, mayors, and city council members across political parties.
5. Texas Medical Association. (2020). Quick Statistics on the Uninsured in Texas and the U.S. Retrieved from <https://www.texmed.org/template.aspx?id=5519>
6. America's Health Rankings. (2019). Annual Report: National Uninsured. Retrieved from <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/HealthInsurance/state/TX>