

A Winning Beginning for All Children

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Sonia and Tom's Story: The Experience Today

Sonia and Tom had always wanted to start a family and now they were expecting! It should have been a moment of joy; but instead there was hesitation. Although both had full-time jobs, neither job offered health insurance. Sonia knew that their income would entitle her to low cost prenatal care, but what about health care for the baby once it was born? Besides, they were barely making it on two incomes. They knew from friends' and co-workers' experiences that babies bring many challenges. What if there were complications with the delivery or health of the baby? Who would care for and nurture the child while they worked? Would it be safe? Could they afford it? With extended family members far away, what support systems would they need to help raise a child?

Sonia and Tom are not alone. These are questions many parents ask regarding the well-being of their young children.

Introduction

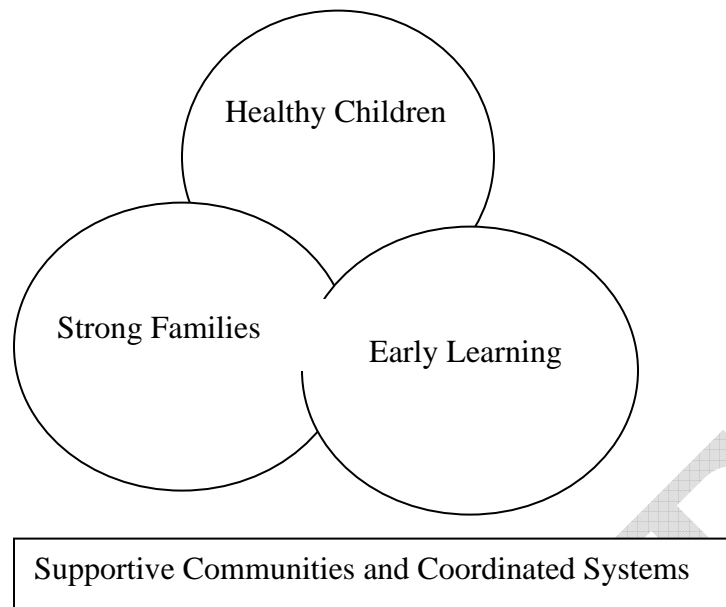
With all of the scientific evidence amassed in the last 20 years that documents the importance of ages zero to three, why has New York failed to provide our children with the opportunities they deserve? How can we close the gap between what we know and what we do as New Yorkers to give every child a winning beginning?

This document represents the collective vision of numerous position papers, reports and policy recommendations collected from across the nation and within New York. Now is the time to knit these policy recommendations together and create a vision that supports the whole child within the context of the family and the community.

Vision

The roadmap for a winning beginning has many interlocking paths. The scientific research indicates that it is not enough to build one or two sections of the road if we fail to connect them into a comprehensive system. While New York currently has many strong programs to support families, we need a more strategic approach to align existing funding, make wise new investments and create a comprehensive system to address the critical needs of children from the prenatal period to age three, within an even broader 0-5 context. More than 85% of early brain development occurs in the first three years. This foundation affects the preschool outcomes and success in school and life. We can't afford to leave the early years to chance. Families face too many barriers. Three core principles drive our vision. Every policy must promote:

- **Healthy children. Children are physically, mentally, and emotionally healthy.**
- **Strong families. Families are understood to be the foundation of healthy development and are supported as such.**
- **Early learning. Learning begins at home and continues in other settings.**



Furthermore, this vision can be met if we utilize supportive communities and coordinated systems that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity, and that are consistent with families' values and expectations.

Background

The prenatal experience and the first 1000 days of a child's life create the foundation for later learning and healthy development. Breakthroughs in neuroscience, psychology and health sciences have opened our eyes to many mysteries of human development. We have learned from the research that early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain becomes a strong or weak foundation for future learning, behavior and health. We can now identify the ingredients for a healthy pregnancy and positive birth outcomes. We know that 80% of the brain develops during the first three years and that this establishes lifelong behavior patterns. We know that healthy relationships maximize healthy brain growth, resulting in positive social, emotional and cognitive development. We have the benefit of more than 40 years of rigorous program evaluation and know what works to help get babies and families off to a good start. We can identify red flags early in the developmental sequence and have evidence-based interventions to counter negative effects. We know that babies are born learning and that school readiness begins in the womb.

Unfortunately, even with all this knowledge, New York State's early care and education system remains poorly coordinated with many programs underfunded. A child's chance at success vary widely by neighborhood. Some families receive support but others don't. However, the state does have a solid foundation on which a comprehensive system may be built. New York State has:

- created a Children Cabinet with representation from a wide range of state agencies whose mission is to discuss cross-systems issues and recommend strategies to successfully implement children's policy
- created an Advisory Board to the Children's Cabinet with representation from a broad group of stakeholders who help frame and support the work of the Cabinet
- written a Regents Policy Statement on early learning that addresses the preparation of the future workforce in a global economy

- moved towards universal health care coverage for children with Child Health Plus
- implemented mental health parity in private insurance plans
- made a public commitment to universal pre-kindergarten for four-year olds and has taken significant steps toward that goal
- funds several home-visiting programs and is working toward a program of universal access to home visiting supports
- will release its Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan in 2008
- will unveil a Children’s Mental Health Plan in October 2008

Statement of Need

New York State must shift its focus to prevention and early intervention so that the state reduces the high costs associated with remediation—such as poor health outcomes, an embarrassing high school dropout rate, and involvement with the juvenile justice and adult mental health systems. Investing funding in services and supports up-front will result not only in lower costs later on, but in children who are healthier, better educated, and who grow up to be more productive citizens.

In this fiscally strained environment, it is prudent to take a look at what services and supports exist, what’s working, what’s not, what resources can be streamlined or shared, and what programs require increased funding to be truly effective.

The Vision: Healthy Children

Children are healthy and functioning at full potential. Focusing on healthy pregnancies, healthy births and early surveillance of development in all domains ensures the best possible start for all children.

Desired Outcomes for Children and Families

- “Health” is broadly defined to encompass physical, mental, and social/emotional well-being, as well as nutrition and safety.
- Health care begins prenatally, with services for the family that improve birth outcomes.
- All children have access to affordable health insurance that covers health promotion, preventive services, and screening as well as treatment for physical ailments, mental illnesses, and substance use.
- Early intervention (including identification of and referral for problems) takes place wherever children are, and professionals who come into regular contact with children are all knowledgeable about how and where to refer children with health issues beyond their realm of expertise.
- A broad understanding of all health issues is incorporated into all normative settings (such as schools, child care centers, and pediatric offices).
- Children have a medical home within a system of care and all those involved in their care communicate regularly and decide on next steps together.
- Treatment is multi-generational, addressing the needs of both the children and the adults in the family.

The Vision: Strong Families

Children are born into families that have the financial, emotional and cognitive ability to protect and nurture them. Early relationships are the active ingredients for healthy development.

Helping families get off to a good start and become good parents creates lifelong advocates who will support their children.

Desired Outcomes for Children and Families:

- Children’s development occurs in the context of family dynamics. Families are the most powerful force in their young lives. Stable families who live in permanent homes, who use effective parenting techniques are most likely to promote the healthy development of young children.
- As part of an overall plan for assisting the child, the community supports family members when they have health or emotional issues, are experiencing economic hardship, have housing difficulties, or are having difficulty balancing work and family life.
- Home visiting and other parenting support prepares parents and caregivers prenatally for childbirth and what comes afterwards, continuing through age three as needed for high-risk families who require additional family support and parent coaching.
- Paid parental leave is a critical support that allows parents and caregivers to tend to their responsibilities at home without fear of losing their employment or facing financial disaster.
- Services are universal and available wherever families are.
- A preventive model of support, offered before problems develop to children or families at risk, is readily available, built into programs where they are every day.
- Families are further supported by receiving help to navigate the various systems with which they may have to come in contact .
- Families, and the needs of their children, drive the decision-making around their own treatment and education.

The Vision: Early Learning

Babies are born learning. Every early experience, both positive and negative, makes its mark upon the developing brain and overall development. All developmental domains mutually influence a child’s ability to learn. The younger or more vulnerable a child, the more that this is true. Social and emotional competence creates a foundation upon which to build language and cognitive skills. Developing physical abilities support social and emotional growth. Parents and primary caregivers are critical partners in the developmental dance. Positive relationships during the early years are the key to promoting lifelong healthy development.

Desired Outcomes for Children and Families

- It is understood that children are constantly learning in the context of relationships, and that early experiences matter.
- It is equally understood that the consistency of these relationships and the quality of their early experiences are critical.
- An ideal early care and education system is inclusive of all program delivery settings— Pre-K, child care, Head Start and home visiting —with the understanding that developing positive social and emotional skills is the foundation for success in school and in life.
- Learning is understood to begin at home and continue in all types of early care and education settings as well as in community services such as libraries, play groups and other family support services.

- All children (including those with special needs) have access to safe, affordable, high-quality early care and education programs that meet their developmental and family needs.
- Early literacy programs are available to at-risk children and family literacy programs are available to all families both through center based and home visiting service delivery.
- Full-day extended family model pre-kindergarten is available to all children beginning at age three.
- The early care and education workforce is appropriately educated, credentialed and compensated and is financially supported in their ongoing professional development efforts.

Sonia and Tom's Story: The Experience Tomorrow (If We Take Action)

Sonia and Tom enrolled in Family Health Plus and accessed prenatal care. Sonia's doctor referred her to a home visiting program that helped both Sonia and Tom prepare for the birth. They had a baby boy three weeks early. Sonia's employer gave her three months paid leave to bond with her baby. Her hospital provided a Welcome Baby visit that answered a number of Sonia and Tom's initial questions and encouraged Sonia to breastfeed. Shortly after she left the hospital the family received a visit by a trained nurse who helped them assess what additional supports they would need to settle in. The home visiting program monitored the premature baby's development and feeding difficulties, and provided general support to the new family. When the home visitor noticed that Sonia was experiencing postpartum depression she promptly referred Sonia to a mental health provider in the community. The home visiting nurse stuck with Sonia and Tom as they adjusted to parenting and faced additional decisions.

When she needed to return to work, she called the local Child Care Resource and Referral service to help answer her questions about child care. They informed her that based upon the family income, her baby would be eligible for Early Head Start or for a child care subsidy to help pay for a high-quality, regulated infant care program. They provided information about family child care and center based care and what to look for as she learned more about the different options. Sonia and Tom called Head Start but learned that there were no openings until later in the year. Since Sonia needed to return to work she enrolled the baby at a local center because of the comprehensive family supports they provided. Sonia gained confidence in parenting through the weekly meetings and was able to ask questions and learn more about her babies development with the experienced staff.

Sonia and Tom enrolled their baby in Child Health Plus and found a medical office for the baby's primary care. After a standard developmental screening at nine months, the pediatrician referred them for early intervention services to address the baby's gross motor delay and to improve his muscle tone for crawling and walking. The pediatrician's office followed progress as the boy received services, and speech therapy was added at age two.

At age three, the toddler transitioned into a preschool program with his early developmental challenges resolved. By the time he reached age five, he was socially and emotionally ready for school, thanks to the early and timely supports his family had received. The work of University of Chicago professor James Heckman, who won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2000, demonstrates that public investment made early in a child like Sonia's and Tom's is less expensive for society in the long run (**needs a citation**).

Conclusion

All children deserve a “winning beginning”, an equal start at a successful life. New York State must assist families in providing the best care and education for their young children from the start by offering a comprehensive system of services that will strengthen and support them. With the foundation it already has in place, New York State is ready to build a system that meets the comprehensive needs of its youngest citizens and their families. Such an approach is a winning strategy for children, families, communities and tax payers!

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