

## **A Child's Health Begins at Pregnancy, Requires Solid Early Investments, and Follows a Child into Adulthood**

Priscilla Mpasi, MD, FAAP

Assistant Medical Director, Clinically Integrated Network, ChristianaCare Health System; Chair, Delaware Maternal & Infant Health Consortium

Imagine being a parent who is faced with the difficult decision of staying home and not working, or sending your child to child care. This is a common discussion in my pediatric practice, where parents ask me about child care resources or affordable child care centers. In particular, I recall one family's story, a family relatively new to Delaware.

Mom brought all three children, ages 6, 3 and 10 months, for their annual well child visit. As I completed the school paperwork for the 6-year-old boy, I asked mom about any additional paperwork or resources we could provide. After a brief pause, she asked if we had a list of child care centers in the area. When I asked about a specific location or child resources, she replied that she already explored some centers in the area, though the cost for both the 3-year-old and 10-month-old was not affordable with the current household budget. She thought that her husband had a "good income;" however when they learned the daycare rates, they realized they could not afford daycare for two children.

When I mentioned Head Start for the 3-year-old, mom stated that, with the recent move, they missed the application timeline and there was now a long waitlist. Even so, the child care rates for only the 10-month-old were still expensive. Mom also said she desired to return to work within the next one to two years, and that, even with their projected combined income, finances would still be challenging with the child care expense. She expressed both her frustration and sadness that her 3-year-old might not get the learning and social experiences from being in child care, and that she might start behind her peers in preschool next year. She was even more concerned that, even with her second income, they would struggle to pay for child care for her youngest son. At the end of the visit, we had more questions than solutions, and there was no clear path for the family on child care or parent reentry in the workforce.

Many parents do not have to imagine this situation: they are facing similar challenges with accessible and affordable childcare. This story is the reality for many of my families and for even more families across Delaware. With an early start and early investments, together we can write a new story for our families and children.

As a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics and its Council on Early Childhood, as well as the Chair of the Delaware Maternal & Infant Health Consortium—I know that early childhood development starts during pregnancy.

Ensuring that birthing persons are healthy is a great predictor for healthy children. In the field, we think of a child's first 1,000 days of life: starting in utero and continuing through age two.

I've also seen firsthand how the building blocks of prenatal care, early learning experiences, and K-12 education fit together. And all too often, when the first or second piece is missing or insufficient, the rest of the child's journey is impacted.

The wide achievement gaps we see in Delaware between racial groups can begin startlingly early. And once a child falls behind on developmental milestones, it can be hard to catch up.

In addition to prenatal health, quality early learning experiences are crucial for children's growth and set the table for kindergarten and beyond. In a child care setting, surrounded by their peers and qualified professionals, a young child's mind will blossom. They mimic their classmates and providers, learning to speak, to share, to regulate emotions.

On the flipside, when children don't have the opportunity to develop in a child care setting, they often begin kindergarten at a different academic level than their peers.

Imagine the frustration in a child's mind realizing they can't write their letters or pronounce words as their classmates do. How does this frustration manifest in a child? A five-year old can only manifest through their emotions. They may get angry. They may have tantrums. They may want to avoid their work because they know that they're not at pace with their peers.

And by that stage, things can begin to snowball. A child without child care or intervention for developmental delays often becomes a young student facing school discipline, ADHD diagnoses, or a "problem child" label that will follow them from grade to grade. What should have been an early intervention and need for special resources later on becomes "behavior modification" and punitive measures.

That cycle affects parents, too, who now might be even more hesitant for their next children to seek services. It is a downstream effect, and one of the social determinants of health, and one that can literally start from the day the child is born.

In Delaware, too many families are struggling to access and afford quality child care. That is creating a developmental logjam that ripples into our K-12 education system. As a society, we must evolve our thinking around child care. Child care providers are not simply babysitters; they're trained professionals who guide our young ones through critical developmental milestones in safe and nurturing environments. They're trained to spot cognitive or social delays, which can necessitate special resources for families.

The full scope of early childhood development should also include affordable housing, livable wages, transportation, and food security. These are all aspects that parents have to consider when they have a child or children that influences the overall development of that child and their outcomes later in life.

As a state, we need to continue to push for these foundational pillars of family life. We need to invest in early childhood education so providers can earn a livable wage and families can have a safe place for their children. We need to ensure pre- and neonatal care, home visiting services, and maternal health are priorities, alongside community prevention programs, and before- and afterschool programs. All of these aspects have to come together to ensure the best chance for a child to live out the life of their dreams.

I always say that education is the great equalizer. Many children are starting in different places, and I truly believe that early education is when you empower a child to learn. If we can make early childhood opportunities equitable, then we can ensure that all of our children are set up for success.

Dr. Mpasi may be contacted at [priscillampasi@gmail.com](mailto:priscillampasi@gmail.com).

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