



# CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE EARLY YEARS

The way we talk changes the way we work. *The Raising of America* can help you change the conversation about why some children thrive while others flounder.

This is important because the predominant ‘story,’ or way of talking about early child development in the U.S., places a disproportionate focus on parents making right or wrong choices. If parents only “knew better,” or had the grit and determination to make the “right” choices in the face of adversity, the conventional narrative goes, their children would do better. The Frameworks Institute and a growing number of researchers suggest that this emphasis on parenting actually stands in the way of change. When parenting behaviors are seen as the driver of childhood outcomes then solutions are limited to changing parenting behaviors.

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But families don’t live inside a bubble. Our lives and opportunities are enhanced or constrained by the larger social ecology we inhabit: housing and neighborhoods, availability of services, wages and income, workplace and public policies, social norms, and economic and racial arrangements. For example, how can even the best teaching about breastfeeding make significant changes if we don’t also enact policies that ensure working mothers have the time, privacy and access to a refrigerator so they can pump at work?

As a nation, we are well-versed on promoting positive parenting behaviors. But if we really want to improve early child outcomes, we need to expand the conversation beyond parenting to include how the social conditions, public policies and racial and economic inequities which impede parental efforts to nurture, care for, and guide their youngest children.

Middle class parents are in a constant struggle against the seemingly implacable constraints of time and money—facing long workweeks, stagnant wages, debt, and short vacations. Most lack paid parental leave, have little or no paid sick leave, and face rising childcare costs. The working poor and the unemployed face even greater adversities.

Advancing a compelling new narrative capable of changing the way parents, practitioners, policy makers and the public think about society's responsibilities and interests in these first crucial years will help open a space to entertain new initiatives and debate the transformative changes needed to give all our infants the opportunity for a strong start.

*The Raising of America* tells this new story. We hope it will help you widen the locus of attention from the individual child and family to how our larger society structures opportunities for healthy child development.

Here are six elements of that story.

## Six Elements of a New Conversation

ELEMENT 1

### What surrounds us shapes us

We are born with most of our 86 billion brain cells (neurons), but those cells are only weakly connected.

It's our experiences during the very first years of life which literally wire together and shape the architecture of our developing brains, building a strong or weak foundation for future learning, earning, and mental and physical health, and affecting whether our stress management system responds appropriately or not to real or perceived threats.

This is why safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments are among the most powerful and protective forces in a young child's life.

ELEMENT 2

### Blaming parents is the easy way out

Too many parents in the U.S. are cut adrift without paid family leave, high-quality affordable child care, affordable housing, living wage jobs or social supports.

Without these kinds of family friendly policies, parents with young children are increasingly squeezed for time, for money and for resources. These societal stressors create anxiety and worry in parents which in turn impedes their efforts to provide focused and responsive attention to their baby's emotional states and needs.

Because of attunement between baby and parents, when parents are stressed by social circumstances (often beyond their control) that stress can quite literally "drip down" on their babies, altering the wiring of their developing brain.

ELEMENT 3

**The best parenting programs may have nothing to do with parenting at all**

Many are quick to advocate for programs that teach parenting skills—but managing adversity, chronic stress and the pressures on our lives is not the same as reducing the sources of that adversity and stress.

Improving conditions for parents, caregivers and communities—living wages; quality, affordable housing; paid parental leave; high-quality childcare; flex time; social inclusion and desegregation; better transit—can improve young children’s chances for growing into healthy, compassionate and responsible adults.

ELEMENT 4

**Young children are one of the most prudent investments our nation can make**

To predict how our nation will fare tomorrow, we only need look at how our youngest children are doing today—and the numbers show we are falling behind.

Many studies suggest that investments which improve a child’s, her family’s and her neighborhood’s circumstances in the earliest years of a child’s life have the best chance of putting that child on a strong developmental path—emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Today’s children are tomorrow’s parents, friends, neighbors, workers, citizens and leaders.

ELEMENT 5

## We all stand to gain

Parents, rich and poor alike, report being plagued by chronic anxiety: Will my children have enough? Can I keep them safe? Can I provide what they need to succeed? Will they feel my love and learn to love in return?

As we have increasingly become a fend-for-yourself society, even affluent families fear not having enough—while middle and low-income families, stressed for time, money and resources, struggle every day to be the parents they want to be for their young children. If we as a community, a state, a nation better assure the conditions that improve all children's chances to realize their capabilities, we and our children will all benefit from a healthier, safer, better educated, more prosperous and more equitable future. And when we make the needs of young children and their families a national priority, anxiety and fears for our own children can give way to a sense of hope and possibility.

ELEMENT 6

## Change is possible

The conditions and policies that make parenting so stressful in the U.S. aren't natural or etched in stone. They are the result of decisions we as a body politic have made—and can make differently.

The U.S. has a long history of social movements which have tackled social inequities and driven social change. There are many things we can do—large and small—to improve social conditions for families with young children.