Thriving Children, Successful Parents: A Two-Generation Approach to Policy

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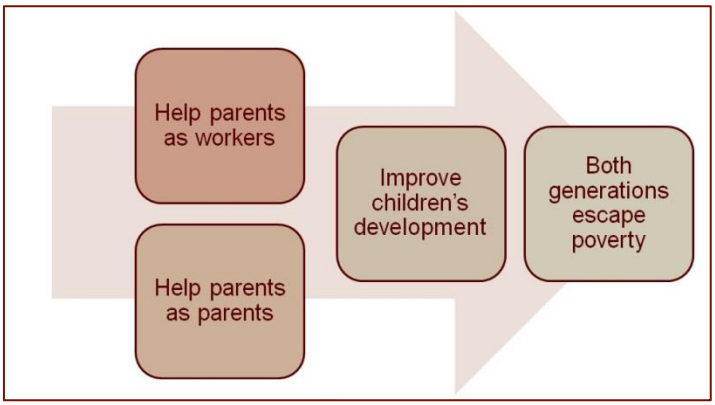
A two-generation approach to public policies brings together worlds that are often separated (focusing only on children or only on parents) to modify or create new policies that focus on the needs of parents and children together. Two-generation policies reflect strong research findings that the well-being of parents is a crucial ingredient in children's social-emotional, physical, and economic well-being.[1] And at the same time, parents' ability to succeed in school and the workplace is substantially affected by how well their children are doing.

Two-generation programs and policies are not a new idea. One of the most commonly known two-generation programs, Head Start, was created nearly 50 years ago with the idea of supporting the developmental needs of children while also supporting their parents' ability to parent and to improve their livelihood. Recently, there has been considerable attention to encouraging, supporting, testing, and disseminating local two-generation programs that align services for parents and children.[2] However, there has been much less attention to the focus of this paper: an examination of major federal and state policy areas to identify opportunities for large-scale change that better support families as a whole and provide a more conducive environment for local programs to do their work with families. This paper has two goals: (1) To give policy experts in individual program areas a sense of what it could mean to think two-generationally and why it matters and (2) to look at the opportunities for large scale policy changes that go beyond innovative local programs.

Figure 1: A Two Generation Pathway



Despite the strong evidence that both generations benefit when their needs are considered together, neither the economic circumstances of poor families nor the characteristics of low-wage work support this connection between child and adult well-being. More often, the conditions that low-income families live under may in fact do just the opposite. The nature of employment among the working poor can make it difficult to raise children, creating great hurdles for parents who are trying to better their lives and their children's.[3]

Current federal and state policies also do not adequately support two-generation approaches. Exclusively "child-focused" programs and policies may focus on improving child outcomes, such as child health or nutrition or boosting school readiness, without regard to supporting parent's economic success or capacity as parents. For example, many state pre-kindergarten programs operate for as little as three hours a day. This makes it difficult for parents working in low-wage jobs with little flexibility to make use of them.[4] Likewise, "adult-focused" programs and policies, such as workforce development programs and post-secondary education, may aim to increase economic success but may not take into account adults' role as parents, and their children's competing

needs that may run contrary to participation in a particular program or course of study, due to its hours. Even programs that are explicitly targeted to parents, such as cash assistance under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), often fail to accommodate parental responsibilities beyond wage earning, and the needs of children.

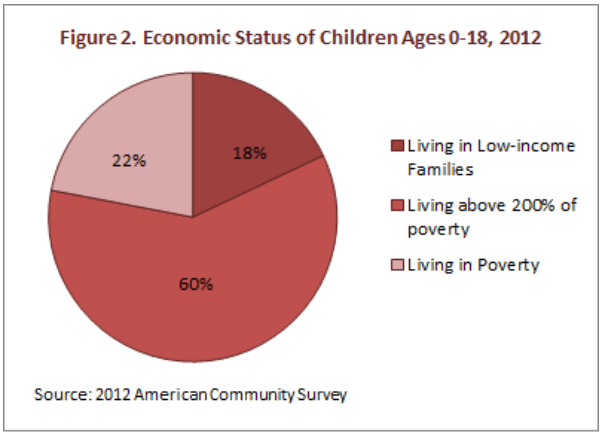
Even when policies are intended to meet the needs of both generations, there is often room for improvement. Child care assistance – inherently a two-generation program that supports low-income parents' access to work and low-income children's access to child care and early education— is often implemented with overly complex and burdensome policies that simultaneously make it difficult for parents to get help and less possible for children to have continuous access to stable child care that supports their development.

Local innovation is taking place across the country identifying and encouraging effective two-generational programs. Most often, these programs combine workforce development and early childhood education, along with other family services.[5] For example, Career*Advance* in Tulsa, Oklahoma is a two-generation program providing training and support for parents leading to a degree in the health field. While focusing on skills that will lead to family-supporting jobs, the program also offers support in balancing child care and transportation.[6] The Career*Advance* program links Head Start with intensive parental support. This includes education and training to help parents build careers in nursing or other related health care fields, with the added support of life coaches and financial bonuses.

Many at-risk, low-income children and families could tremendously benefit from two-generation policies that would better meet their needs. Fortunately, opportunities exist to amplify and move forward with a two-generation approach to policy.

The Current Status of Children and Families

Children are the poorest Americans.[7] Almost 22 percent of children are poor. In 2012, over 16 million children in the U.S. were living in poverty according to the official measure, defined as living in families with income under $19,090 for a family of three (See figure 2). Over 40 percent live in low-income families (living under twice the poverty line). Racial and ethnic minority children are disproportionately poor. In 2012, the poverty rate for Black children (37.5 percent) and Hispanic children (33 percent) was higher than that of non-Hispanic White Children (12 percent). Among those in poverty, the largest group of children is Hispanic (5.8 million), followed by non-Hispanic White children (4.5 million) and Black children (4.1 million).



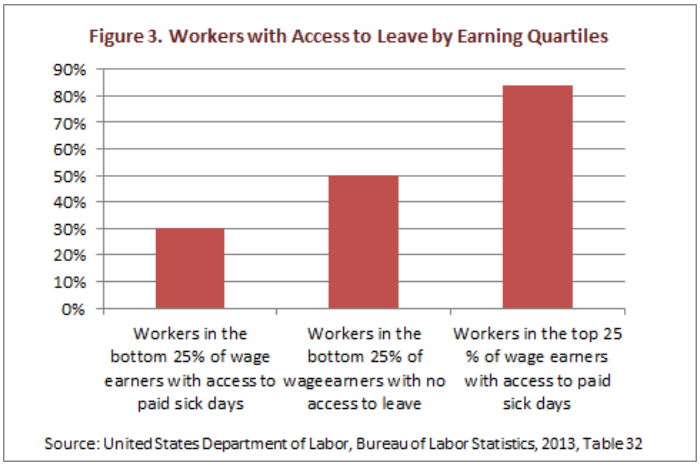
Among all children, the youngest are most likely to be poor. The prevalence of poverty is highest during the earliest, most formative years of children's lives--with potentially lasting

consequences for education, health, and other key outcomes.[8] Research shows poverty is a strong predictor of children's success in school and adult employment and earnings. Children growing up in poverty experience poorer health, higher incidence of developmental delays and learning disabilities, and more hunger compared to their peers. And the longer children live in poverty, the worse their adult outcomes.[9]

Many poor children live with working parents. More than two-thirds of poor children live in families with at least one worker. Over 30 percent of poor children—and more than half of low-income children—live in families with at least one worker employed full-time year round. Among Hispanic children, the largest single group of poor children, only about one-quarter live in families with no worker and more than one-third are in families with at least one full-time, full-year worker. Many poor and low-income children have parents who work hard but for very little pay.[10]

Children in single-mother households are at greatest risk of poverty, even when their mothers work.[11] Even among children with single mothers who work full-time year round, nearly 20 percent are poor. And the official poverty rate does not account for the cost of child care. Poor families paying for child care spend an estimated 30 percent of their income on child care, compared to 8 percent for families above poverty.[12] More than half of mothers who have very young children and work in low-wage jobs are raising children on their own; half are working full-time; and over one-third are poor.[13]

The conditions of low-wage work contribute to families' difficulty making ends meet and interfere with parenting. Low-wage work is harmful to both generations--parents and children. It is not only low wages that pose challenges for parenting and children's development, but also the characteristics of low-quality jobs, such as volatile scheduling and lack of paid leave,[14] that are frequently found in low-wage work. Moreover, job growth since the recession has been concentrated in sectors characterized by low-quality jobs, creating major burdens for working families.[15]



Volatile and non-standard schedules, increasingly the new normal for low-wage workers, are particularly problematic for parents. Workers experience scheduling challenges that include unpredictable hours, lack of advance notification of schedules, and fluctuations in quantity and scheduling of hours. Workers with non-standard schedules have hours that fall outside typical daytime and weekday shifts.[16] These job schedules make it difficult for working parents to secure stable child care, hold second jobs (often needed to make ends meet in low-wage jobs), and take classes or training necessary to find better paying work.[17] In addition to the effects of volatile schedules on families' economic security, stress associated with these practices may have a negative impact on children's development.[18]

Lack of access to paid leave, including sick days and family and medical leave, poses particular challenges for children's health and early development and for parents' capacity to balance parenting with stable work and

economic security. Since no federal law provides private sector workers with paid leave, employers determine whether or not employees will have access to such leave. About 40 percent of low-income parents have no access to any paid time off (no sick days or medical leave, no parental leave, no vacation), making it difficult to care for their own health issues, new babies, or sick children.[19] Without leave, parents risk losing wages or jobs. In fact, one in seven low-wage workers (and one in five low-wage working mothers) report losing a job in the past four years because they were sick or needed to care for a family member.[20]

When considering just paid sick days, 61 percent of private sector workers have access to paid sick days. But only 30 percent of low-wage workers (those in the bottom 25 percent of average wages) have access to paid sick days, compared to 84 percent of the top quartile of wage earners (See Figure 3).[21] As a result, parents are often forced to miss appointments that are critical to their own and their children's preventive health care, such as well doctor visits and immunizations.[22]

And finally, when looking just at paid family leave, only 12 percent of all private sector workers and a mere 5 percent of low-wage workers have access to this important type of leave used when caring for a newborn or a sick relative.[23] All forms of paid leave have a range of implications for child health and well-being. When parents have access to leave, their children have lower mortality rates and higher birth weights. Parents with leave are better able to care for children with special health care needs and breastfeed for longer. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence shows that children's cognitive and social development may be enhanced when parents have paid leave.[24]

Why A Two-Generation Approach?

Parent and child well-being are inextricably linked. Parents are crucial to children's healthy development and to families' ability to move out of poverty. The first few years of a child's life are critically important to ensure their healthy development[25] and to ensure this, children need stability, coupled with responsive, nurturing relationships.[26] As such, parenting deeply affects children's development. Parental stress, health and mental health, as well as, parental education affect parenting. Growing up in poverty can lead to negative consequences throughout a child's entire life. One reason for the lifetime consequences is straightforward: poor and low-income children may miss out on basics like nutritious food and stable housing. Researchers have also long known that parents' stress—compounded by untreated health and mental health challenges—can hinder children's early learning and development.[27] In addition to the stresses caused by not being able to cover their bills and meet their families' basic needs, the nature of low-wage jobs can compound family stress because of irregular work schedules and the lack of basic benefits like health insurance and paid leave when a parent or child is ill.[28] Moreover, because poor and low-income families often lack meaningful savings, any minor setback—from a traffic ticket to illness—can quickly spiral into a crisis.

Because parents' outcomes and children's outcomes, positive and negative, are so tightly linked, developing two-generational policies is imperative, not optional.

Children can also affect parents' ability to succeed. When children are ill,

having difficulties at school that require parent meetings, or are experiencing other problems, parents who lack paid leave may be forced to compromise their attendance, stability, and success at work. Without paid family leave, low-wage workers who are new parents are often forced to return to work right away in order to make ends meet. Many times this means cobbling together unstable child care arrangements, putting infants' health and development at risk. Without paid medical leave, children with serious illness are too often in hospitals without their parents at their bedside: this increases the time it takes for children to heal and increases the stress on parents who might be fired if they take off work to care for their children. Without sick days, a parent can lose wages or a job when child care calls for the child to be taken home.

Policies to address the needs of low-income children and low-wage workers typically operate independently and fail to consider the importance of addressing both economic and child well-being. Because parents' outcomes and children's outcomes, positive and negative, are so tightly linked, developing two-generational policies is imperative, not optional.

Policies and programs that are designed to meet the needs of adults or children often reside within different departments or agencies in government and employ service workers with differing sets of skills, unique to the populations they serve. The result is that neither the "adult" program nor the "child" program may understand the complexities and needs of the whole family in which the individual resides. Even when individual caseworkers or program managers have the two-generational perspective, they may be constrained in what they can do by funding restrictions, narrow measures of program performance, or excessive caseloads.

Opportunities and Next Steps in a Two Generation Policy Agenda

Federal and state policymakers, program leaders and advocates have many opportunities to take steps toward a two-generation policy agenda. Below are just a few examples:

Pair education and training pathways with child care and early education. Many of the innovative two-generation programs across the country have focused their efforts on this pairing. But high-quality individual programs often run into barriers driven by funding and policy challenges at the federal or state level. For example, the inability to use federal post-secondary financial aid for shorter-term credential programs thwarts the development of innovative programs that could combine short-term training for parents of young children with early childhood education. While federal Workforce Investment Act funds can pay for this type of training, the funding is so limited that few people in need of training are ever served. So, identifying opportunities for better policy choices that would make it easier to pair education and training pathways with early education would help both parents and children. This would require rethinking program design throughout many policy areas, including TANF, workforce development, higher education, child care, and Head Start. Changing federal student financial aid programs to better take into account the financial needs of students who are parents is one example.

Expand early childhood home visiting programs through state and federal investments, and seize other opportunities to help parents and young children in their very vulnerable early years. Home visiting programs offer a variety of voluntary, family-focused services to expectant parents and families with new babies and young children in the families' home. They help parents develop strong parenting skills that focus on

improving children's health and development, which can lead to fewer children in the social welfare, mental health, and juvenile corrections systems. Many home visiting programs have a two-generation approach, focusing on the parenting skills and needs of parents while providing child development activities, although this varies tremendously depending upon the model used. Take advantage of the opportunities to use TANF to provide two-generational services and to exempt parents of infants from narrow participation requirements.

Improve child care policies for both children and parents. Continuity and stability of child care can improve children's early education as well as adults' work stability. The design of child care subsidy policies can either support this continuity and stability of care – thus supporting parents' ability to work while providing children continuous access to child care settings – or get in the way. When states choose less burdensome eligibility and redetermination policies and processes, including annual redetermination with limited interim reporting, they can support both parents' employment and children's care. For example, while not a requirement of federal law, policies in some states require parents to show documentation of work schedules to determine eligibility for child care assistance or require them to report any small changes in income or work in order to retain eligibility. If parents' schedule or income is in constant flux due to erratic work schedules beyond their control, they risk losing child care – so removing work schedule verification requirements and allowing for broader authorizations can make child care assistance more usable for parents.[29] Linking child care enrollment policies with those of other public benefits can also reduce the burden on parents to get and keep subsidies.

Improving these policies and processes goes beyond just helping parents retain a benefit. Creating a smoother system for parents in turn supports employment and access to care. But it's also possible to make low-income parents' lives less stressful, increasing their capacity for parenting. For example, allowing families to apply online for assistance versus requiring families to apply in-person, often with young children in tow, may improve the quality of life for both adult and child.

In addition to improving access to child care assistance, changes in policy can improve child care quality in ways that benefit both children and their parents. Policies that promote the integration of comprehensive services like family support, linkages to basic needs, preventive health strategies, and developmental screening into child care and early education settings can help engage parents more effectively in their children's development while connecting adults to needed resources and opportunities and improving outcomes for children. At the state level, these policies can take the form of licensing and quality standards, funding partnerships, or requirements linked to subsidy policies.[30]

Improve labor policies for low-income workers. Improving labor policies enhances parents' stability at work and children's wellbeing. For many low-wage workers, volatile and nonstandard schedules make parenting and juggling child care very challenging. When children are ill and parents are unable to attend to their needs for fear of losing wages or even their job, children's health and parents' work performance suffers. Improving job scheduling and paid leave policies to better meet the needs of children and families are imperative to families' future success.

A comprehensive package of improvements in labor policies, including an increase in the minimum wage, advance notice of job schedules, the right to request and receive flexible and predictable job schedules, minimum hours, paid family and medical leave, and paid sick days would support low-income workers in their

role as parents. Enforcement of existing labor protections, such as overtime, wage-theft, family and medical leave act, and minimum wage laws, is also crucial to ensuring working parents success in their jobs and at home.

Expand access to health care and mental health treatment. Physical and mental health are critical components of parents' ability to participate in the labor force and effectively raise their children and of children's ability to appropriately grow and develop. Despite big improvements in children's health coverage, the health coverage of parents is equally as important, but hasn't been focused on as much. The key to children's healthy development is having parents who are physically and mentally capable of providing a stable, nurturing environment. Mental illness affects many Americans and disproportionately affects low-income vulnerable families, who typically have less access to treatment even for serious problems. Depression, which is highly treatable, is a prime example of a parental mental illness that affects large numbers of families and poses risks to children's safety and cognitive development when untreated. Depression is widespread among poor and low-income mothers, including mothers of very young children.[31] While depression is highly treatable,[32] many low-income mothers do not receive treatment—even for very severe levels of depression. Strong and consistent evidence indicates that a mother's untreated depression undercuts young children's development, including risks to learning and success in school, and may have lifelong effects.[33]

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) offers a game-changing opportunity to address mental health. The ACA tears down major barriers to depression treatment and provides many mothers with health insurance for the first time. The benefit package includes mental health (and substance abuse) treatment, access to primary and preventive care, as well as, prevention screening and quality measures to target depression. There are also important provisions in the ACA that promote integrated care. The provisions that benefit low-income working families will have the largest effect in states that take the Medicaid expansion providing for more mothers and fathers to access care.

Recent changes in the ACA offer the opportunity to design and implement reforms that would increase the number of mothers who receive effective treatment for depression, in turn bolstering children's emotional and social development and learning—helping families across the country rise out of poverty.

Conclusion

Developing two generational policies is not an easy task—it will require working across systems and infusing adult- and child-oriented services and approaches across policy areas. However, great opportunities exist--in child care and early education, in workforce development and community colleges, in the ACA, and in home visiting. Given these important and appealing opportunities, we must get started.

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