

## **Early Childhood Nutrition and Education**

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Thank you for inviting me to join you in your dialog about reducing generational poverty through effective early childhood nutrition and education programs. Your desire to focus on early childhood nutrition is important because we now know that nutrition affects the brain development of young children enabling their long term academic success and our ability at a national level to strengthen our economy.

In my business, providing quality early childhood education and care, we have a favorite expression that I am sure is familiar to all of you as well, and that is: **ALL BOATS RISE WITH THE TIDE.** I thought this would an appropriate metaphor for today especially since I live in Connecticut by the Long Island Sound and I have a passion for sailing.

Sailing has taught me a number of things....one of which is that to be a successful sailor, you have to be able to read the signs:

the direction the wind is blowing,  
whether or not there are variable winds,  
how to sail against the wind by tacking,  
how to maneuver the ship in choppy water, and  
how the combination of wind, water, weather and destination can make the difference between a pleasant and successful voyage versus a disastrous one. (And, I have had my share of disasters so I have learned a lot!)

I learned that good sailing requires the ability to read and interpret the data so that the journey is not only safe, but one that gets you to the intended place.

If you look at ALL the data on the effectiveness of early childhood programs, you'll find conflicting information. However, there IS a preponderance of research that shows that the outcomes of high quality preschool programs, especially for low income children, can lead to a stronger economy for all in the long term. That data shows that high quality preschool programs (whether they are Head Start programs or state subsidized "universal PreK" programs or private programs) lead to:

- Increases in the long-term educational attainment and the life long earnings of children (Ludwig & Miller, 2007; Deming 2009; Chetty, et. al, 2011)
- Increases in the number of women and minorities in the current and future workforce (Labor statistics; IRS statistics; Perry High Scope Study, 2005)
- A reduction in the number of incarcerations, the crime rate, high school drop out rates (Perry High Scope Study, 2005), and even childhood obesity (Frisvold, 2007)

These outcomes help narrow our nation's ECONOMIC gap and that creates a stronger economy for all --- because ALL BOATS RISE WITH THE TIDE.

Let me share with you some specific cost benefit statistics related to the long term outcomes of early childhood programs:

Every \$1 invested in early childhood education returns \$7 to taxpayers in savings for remediation, incarceration, risky teenage behavior, homelessness, joblessness, welfare and health care costs.

A 7 to 1 return on investment is impressive even in corporate environments. (Perry Study, 2005)

The State of Connecticut actually forecasts our future prison populations based on 3rd grade test scores of students in our public schools which are largely attended by the children of low income

families. And, while it costs \$40,000 per year to house an inmate, it only costs \$15,000 per year to provide full day, full year education and care to a preschooler. That's a savings of \$25,000 per year per inmate in a nation that has the highest incarceration rate in the entire world. Childcare Learning Centers serves nearly 1000 children. If providing them with a preschool experience ensures they avoid jail, then that is a savings to the taxpayers each year of 25 million dollars. If Childcare Learning Centers helps only 50% of those children in a given year, that is still a savings of 12.5 million dollars.

Other studies tell us that every \$1 invested in high quality early childhood education returns \$7-10 to taxpayers by simply lifting the lifelong earnings of preschoolers. Higher wages produce higher tax revenues while at the same time increasing consumerism and reducing the cost of welfare. (Chetty, et.al)

So what are the components of high quality care:

Scientists who have studied brain research know that children who are tired, sick, or hungry cannot learn (Greg Duncan, et.al.)

Consequently, they find that high quality programs first and foremost ensure children have good nutrition and health care.

Health care meaning that children have access to affordable dental care as well as medical care and proper nutrition and exercise.

Children who are rested, properly nourished, and are generally healthy, both physically and emotionally, are able to attend to, learn, and retain new concepts and skills. So good health and good nutrition go hand in hand with higher levels of academic success.

The data around the growing need for higher levels of education to build a stronger economy is also very clear. More and more “good” paying jobs in our country today require higher levels of education attainment. The high school diploma will no longer

suffice. At a minimum, college degrees are required and the Early Childhood field is a perfect example of this.

Early childhood is no longer about “babysitting.” I personally believe that it was never about “babysitting;” however, that has been the perception for many years. The research shows that quality EC programs begin with educated teachers who understand the critical nature of brain development in the early years of life and who know how to nurture that growth physically, mentally, and emotionally to ensure healthy brain pathways are formed for optimal learning as well as optimal physical and mental health. A high school diploma or even an Associate’s degree no longer provides aspiring early childhood teachers sufficient knowledge and skills to ensure classroom environments are the catalyst in building the healthy brain plasticity of these very young, very susceptible minds. Quality early childhood programs are now requiring Bachelor and advanced degrees if one wants to find work

in this field. And, these higher level skills are necessary in so many other fields that are fueling our economy today.

So, higher level degrees lead to more and better paying jobs for teachers. Higher level degrees lead to more and better paying jobs for the masses.

Better paying jobs for the masses increase our Nation's tax revenues. Better paying jobs reduce crime and lower prison populations.

Better paying jobs decrease welfare costs. Better paying jobs put better nutrition on the tables in the homes of families.

Better nutrition lowers the cost of health care and increases education opportunity for ALL. More and better paying jobs give us a stronger economy because ALL BOATS RISE WITH THE TIDE.

I'd like to share with you Childcare Learning Centers Vision Statement. It is this: Imagine a World Where Every Child Succeeds in Life!

If every child succeeded in school and in life, how do you think our nation's economy and society would look? Where would we be in relation to global competition?

I believe – and the recent research on brain development supports this - that physical health that comes from good nutrition not only makes it possible for every child to succeed, it is an absolute necessity. At birth, a child's "genes" are the spark plug that gets our body's brain or engine running. However, environmental factors such as nutrition, medical care, and language exposure modify the gene structure as the brain grows and develops by creating an architecture of new brain pathways and synapses. In

fact, studies show that poor nutrition can actually negate brain growth and development by suppressing gene expression in the brain. So, there is an imperative to promote the development of a healthy brain architecture through proper nutrition. A single deficiency such as insufficient iron in the diet affects the development of pathways in that portion of the brain related to the length of time an individual is able to attend to a task. That's a critical capacity for all children to acquire if they are going to succeed in school and in the workplace.

This is why CLC has the mission it has and that is to provide every parent access to affordable, high quality education and care for their children that includes a comprehensive program in nutrition, exercise, and health care.

We know that poverty or socio-economic status and the lack of parental education are often the reasons that children don't get the proper nutrition they need at home. Consequently, at CLC the care

provided includes 3 nutritious meals a day or 80% of a child's daily nutritional requirements. CLC actually has a nutritionist on staff who works with the food service provider to make sure this happens. CLC also provides parent workshops on nutrition that show them where to purchase affordable, nutritious foods, and even offers them cooking lessons on how to prepare nutritious meals on a budget. Learning to taste new foods and making decisions about good food choices is an integral part of the overall curriculum for the children and these concepts are reinforced when teachers share meal times with the children while they encourage conversations about favorite and nutritious foods.

I'll never forget the day CLC was visited by U.S. Congressman Jim Himes who was partnering with us and a local philanthropist to see if he could help us obtain some funding that would allow CLC to expand our nutrition and exercise program more broadly in the entire community. The media had joined us on this visit which was scheduled for the noon day meal. It just so happened that day

that “broccoli” was the lunchtime vegetable being served.

Representative Himes asked one of the children what his favorite vegetable was and without prompting or hesitation, the child immediately and enthusiastically answered, “Broccoli!” And, of course, you know what happens when one child starts shouting out his response. All the other children began chiming in with answers like “beets” and “carrots.” Our visitors were so impressed that we did indeed obtain the funding. When was the last time you heard a 4 year old declare that his favorite vegetable was broccoli?

CLC’s total, comprehensive approach to ensure preschoolers are exposed to an environment that promotes healthy brain development and growth includes:

- Not only 80% of their nutritional requirements daily, but also
- 80 minutes of outdoor play daily, (this is one way children get the necessary Vitamin D they need to develop a brain architecture for strong motor coordination).

- Support services for the entire family, including parenting workshops on a variety of parenting topics (not just nutrition but topics such as discipline, how to effectively read to children, educational field trips for the whole family, and child safety).
- Family nights that are free to everyone in the family and which get everyone in the family exercising through fun activities like Zumba lessons, yoga classes, and diversity nights with music and dancing from the various cultures of families. These events are actually planned and performed by the parents themselves.
- A curriculum for children in literacy, math, science, and a social-emotional skills for both children and parents

This total approach to educating the whole child and the entire family is preparing our “workforce of the future” while at the same time strengthening today’s workforce. It is doing this by first ensuring young children, birth to age 5, have the physical health

and academic foundation to succeed in school, leading to the long term benefits of higher school attainment and better paying jobs.

At the same time, CLC's affordable childcare enables today's young parents to join and stay in the workforce, employing those who would otherwise be unemployable.

It used to be that young mothers stayed home with their young children while Dad went off to work. But in today's society, both parents often need to work just to stay above the poverty line – many of these parents work more than one job. Fifty percent (50%) of CLC's parents are single parents. They too are working more than one job. In all of these cases, parents come home exhausted at the end of the day from all this work and then have to take time to attend to their duties as parents. Often – with the best intentions and a desire to hold down family expenses - they resort to inexpensive, fully prepared and processed foods as meal time

favorites. CLC's nutrition program counterbalances this lack of higher quality nutrition that is commonly offered at home.

This is just another reason why CLC ensures that children not only receive a strong academic program, but that they also are provided with good nutrition and exercise so that they have the physical health to be able to learn well and retain what they have learned long term and throughout life.

Other components that compliment the nutrition and exercise program at CLC include:

- A health clinic staffed with a health practitioner who ensures all children are administered their immunizations and prescriptions
- Regular medical & dental screenings that measure and track children's BMI's, height, weight, vision, hearing, and early detection of learning disabilities

- Family services support that links families to 50+ other non-profit partners in the community who can help them
  - Find affordable housing
  - Deal with domestic violence
  - Give them access extra services for special needs children
  - Give them access to English As A Second Language (ESL) classes, workforce development and job training services, and financial counseling.
  - And, provide access to workshops and counseling for pregnant, teenage, and single mothers, including prenatal care, and connections to religious institutions and their services.

What I have learned from working at CLC is that a preschool provider can be the hub of the wheel that links families to all other support services in a community. A preschool provider can be the force that drives the collective impact of a systemic approach to lifting families out of poverty and to ultimately strengthening our economy.

It is because parents seek out preschool care that they are led to these other support services, including those that enable good nutrition and health. So my message is that if you are community that wants to effectively and efficiently reduce generational poverty by providing good nutrition programs for all children and families, then partnering with a preschool provider is a highly effective means of doing so. Preschool providers don't have to advertise their services. They are sought out by parents who want to work and or want their children to have an educational advantage.

In my six years at CLC, we consistently had a waiting list of over 100 families. So, a community's preschool provider becomes a portal to all the surrounding community services, organizations, and churches, especially those interested in nutrition programs to reduce generational poverty. This kind of systemic approach with community partners reduces competition for dollars and ensures

that the funds that are allocated for all these different programs are efficient and effective investments.

I'd like to say a final word about Childcare Learning Centers in Stamford. CLC is an organization that has been around for 114 years. In 1902 its founder, Mrs. Stewart Smith, the wife of a local philanthropist, opened the school with 13 children of immigrant families. From the beginning, Mrs. Smith had a doctor, nurse, and nutritionist on staff. She provided her children with 3 nutritious meals per day, medical assistance, and even provided them with much needed clothing. Today, CLC serves nearly 1000 children with a staff of 200 employees, 6 facilities, and a budget of \$15M. The programming is subsidized through both Head Start and a state-funded, universal PreK program. However, there are small number of children (12) who come from homes with earnings above the state median income whose parents have chosen to enroll them at CLC because they want their children to be exposed to the diversity and high quality programming at CLC. These

parents pay full tuition (non-subsidized). About 300 of CLC's children are enrolled in the Head Start Program at no cost to their families. The remaining two-thirds are enrolled in the state funded program, which charges families tuition on a sliding scale based on family income. All CLC children – those in the Head Start program as well as those in the state-funded program and “private pay” program – receive the same curriculum and support services.

I am sure you have many questions you would like to ask about CLC and how we are helping to reduce generational poverty through our nutrition programs. I would like to pause now to answer them for you.\*

\*Note: A recent review of all the research on the “fade out” problem in Head Start programs has confirmed that “fade out” is a problem that is experienced by ALL preschool providers, including Head Start, state-funded universal programs, and even private programs. However, in spite of the gains lost in the early

elementary years, the long-term effects of higher education attainment and life long earnings are still happening for children who have had these preschool experiences. Researchers are postulating that we may be measuring the wrong things in the elementary years and that the development of social-emotional skills may actually be the catalyst for the long term effects. Yale University has come to this same conclusion through their research that demonstrates a high correlation between strong social-emotional skills (e.g., resiliency and the ability to maintain relationships long term) and life long success. Examining children's IQ or standardized test scores does not appear to be an indicator of eventual education attainment or increases in life-long earnings, or even the likelihood of staying married or maintaining mental health.