Creating the Future of Childhood: A State Perspective.

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“Creating the future of childhood.”

You know, that isn’t something we normally do. Normally, history is something that just happens to us while we aren’t watching. We look backward in time and create stories that make our history seem almost well-planned or even pre-ordained, like the only possible present we could have arrived at. Of course, that isn’t true. And then when we look forward in time to the future, we typically continue to operate as if history is pre-ordained. With rare exceptions, history is to us as water is to a fish. We are so continuously caught in its stream that we forget it is even there. But a centennial celebration gives us leave to stop and consider both our past progress and our future trajectory.

* A hundred years ago, the big issue in child development was simply keeping children alive. Deaths during childbirth, or in epidemics of infectious diseases, were common. Approximately 20% of children in the U.S. and Western Europe died before their first birthday in 1900, while today we have less than a 1% infant mortality rate. A study of orphanages in several countries found a 100% death rate for babies prior to their first birthday. [Infant mortality: Britain 16%, Germany 22% in 1900; Britain, Germany, France and U.S. @ 10% by 1915]

* A hundred years ago we had large families, in part because children had economic value. Today children have become economically worthless, but emotionally priceless. The fewer children we have, the more we invest our hopes for the future in each.

* A hundred years ago, the idea of optimizing the potential of each child would have sounded crazy. Today, parents worry that they didn’t play Mozart for their baby during that formative first year of life.

Today we have the luxury of investing in our children’s lives. But today we also know a lot more than in the past about how important those early childhood years are. Thanks to university research, much of it funded by Dr. Barratt’s National Science Foundation and similar federal agencies, we know today that experiences in early childhood establish trajectories into the future. These life trajectories are not deterministic, but they are reliably probabilistic.
Here is one example. From observing the aggressiveness of 4-year-olds, we can predict quite a bit about their juvenile arrest records, even their driving violations in adulthood. (By the way, I read a scientific paper last year that summarized the state of our knowledge on the life course of aggressive individuals, and this paper cited the path-breaking observational research conducted in our Preschool Lab, and published in 1934, by Professor Helen Dawe. Great research doesn’t go out of fashion. It is like a brick in a wall, with the newer bricks depending upon the integrity of the older bricks below them. We continue to build that wall today.)

Here is a 2nd example. When children walk through the door for their first day of public school, we can already predict with decent accuracy which ones will succeed in school and which will fail. The most important experiences for school success don’t take place in schools or even during the school years; they take place in families and child care programs, in the early childhood years leading up to school entry.

All this we can predict, with some degree of accuracy, from observing young children. Of course, there is nothing automatic about these predictions. At any age, conditions can change and put a child onto a different path. If we are smart in applying the knowledge of our science, we can create policies and programs that purposefully nudge children and families toward happier and more successful life courses.

Of course, that is something we have been trying to do for a long time. Our state is famous for instituting the first American kindergarten, in Whitewater way back in 1855. Compared to many other states, Wisconsin scores about in the middle in terms of investing in the early childhood years.

- We began regulating child care programs in 1949, while some other states did not begin doing so until as late as 1979 (Florida).

- Governor Lucey’s budget of 1973 provided a half million dollars per year to help new child care programs get started.

- By 1994, we had a network of state-funded Resource & Referral agencies covering the entire state, helping new child care businesses get started, and helping parents find available child care slots for their children.

- In the late 1990’s, with leadership from Governor Thompson, we led the nation in utilizing welfare reform to redirect federal funds to providing child care to low income, working parents. In all these ways, we were one of the states leading the way.

In other ways, we have lagged in recent decades. Other states have moved strongly toward using the preschool years for early childhood education. For example:
Georgia has had universal, full-day, public preschools since 1996, funded by their state lottery. We are just beginning to experiment with 4-year-old kindergarten here in Wisconsin, with no start-up funding from the state.

California instituted a 50 cents per pack tax on cigarettes, and the 650 million dollars it generates each year goes entirely to early childhood education, child health, and parenting education programs.

The New Jersey Supreme Court has forced that state into a leadership position in early education, by requiring them to spend 300 million dollars per year on high quality early childhood education in selected low income school districts, since it is a proven remedy for achievement gaps that have effectively taken away the equality of opportunity of low income children.

Other states have also moved ahead of us in helping parents do their best in raising competent children. Through our Children’s Trust Fund, this state has in the last 2 decades created a statewide network of parent support centers, and that’s a terrific first step. But we lag well behind the states that are leading the way through universal, voluntary programs of parent education, states like Missouri, Minnesota, and Hawaii.

I am reminded of a press conference we held here in the school some years ago, to release the findings of our statewide study of child care. When I suggested that we, as a state, would be wise to invest more in the quality of child care programs, one of the reporters asked me why people, especially those without young children, would want to tax themselves for such a purpose. I hadn’t anticipated this question, so I was surprised by my own immediate answer. I said the public would pay for high quality early childhood programs because the public is patriotic, and those programs represent the future of our nation. Prior generations have loved this country enough to sacrifice their lives for it. I looked around the room of reporters and asked, has our generation become so selfish that we are unwilling to sacrifice in this small way to insure that the next generation is intelligent, caring, competent? I don’t think so. I think we are every bit as patriotic as those who came before us. If people truly understood the importance of these early childhood years, then we would gladly step forward to contribute our share. We would do it because the future strength of our country depends upon it.

There are precedents for this. For nearly a century, Britain has had a program that sends nurse home visitors to the homes of every family giving birth, helping them learn how to care for their babies. We Americans are modeling similar programs after that one today, and we are finding that these programs save more money in future social services and crime prevented than they cost to provide. But did you know that the British program was created at the insistence of the Royal Army? Their defeat in the Bohr War alerted them to the need to improve the health of their nation’s young people, and so they created this universal program for parents. As Prime Minister Edmund Burke once said, “Caring for and educating young children are the cheap defense of nations.” We, in this department, are a strategic industry!
Researchers are getting increasingly good at showing that this not an empty claim. For example, economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Paul conducted a study two years ago from which they concluded that public investment in high quality early childhood programs produced greater returns on investment than any other public investment they could find. Better return on investment than more highways, or business tax breaks, or advertising export industries, or any other public program you can name. If we were simply rational, and had our own long-term best-interests in mind, then the early childhood years would receive a far larger share of our public attention and investment. In a short time, these investments would start saving us much more than they cost, and our collective tax burdens would be reduced.

This raises the question: what if we truly believed this and acted upon it? What future might we create for childhood in Wisconsin? Here I offer you my modest set of immodest suggestions about our future.

**Immodest proposal #1.** If we really believed the research, we wouldn’t invest $10,000 per child per year in education starting at age 5 or 6, while investing nearly zero in the education of toddlers and preschoolers. That’s what we currently do. Starting to invest in education at age 5 or 6 is not only arbitrary, but foolish, since it misses the years when public investments have their biggest payoffs. Researchers have done their work on this topic: several large field experiments have randomly assigned some children to high quality early childhood programs, while other children received their normal services, and have then followed these children into adulthood. The studies all find that the reductions in social services and crime save the public 5 to 7 dollars for each dollar invested in these programs, when the programs are delivered to low income families. Over a period of years, these programs save much more than they cost, while creating a more productive and crime-free society for the rest of us. Researchers have done their work on this topic; now we just need to put the knowledge to work in programs.

**Immodest proposal #2.** If we really believed the research, we would create a seamless system of early care and education that focused on both the child and the family, covering the first decade of life. It’s reassuring news that scientists, in the last quarter century, have shown that the most effective programs for young children are the ones that are family-centered rather than child-centered. Scholars from our own department have been mounting large-scale demonstration projects along just these lines. The most important such demonstration project in the nation is under the direction of Professor Arthur Reynolds, a joint faculty member of our department. He has followed children and families who participated in a program of the Chicago public schools, which provided parent-child programs for the preschool years. His recent reports in the Journal of the American Medical Association (and elsewhere) show that participation in the program leads to greater educational attainment, lower juvenile crime, and significantly reduced public expenditures for those families. This program is one of many showing that the most effective interventions for young children work through the family, not just directly on the child.

**Immodest proposal #3.** If we really believed the research, we would make it possible for working parents to succeed both as parents and as workers. You know, most parents of
young children are employed outside the home today, whether they live in a one-parent or a two-parent household. And these two roles compete so much for our limited time and energy that most people feel they are failing at one or both of these roles. As a nation, we can ill afford to have ineffective workers today, but neither can we afford to neglect our future by having ineffective parents today. So we need new or restructured societal institutions that make employed parenthood feasible. There are many possibilities here, and I will offer you just one: a system of publicly supported child care programs, each with a master teacher, but each operating as a parent co-op, with families required to contribute a half day per week as the assistant teacher. This insures that the program is an extension of the family, as it ought to be, and it also creates the most powerful form of parent education I can imagine. To give an example, if you volunteer one morning per week in your child care program, over the course of a year you will see 6 to 10 other adults use a variety of strategies to get your child to pick up her blocks before lunch. You can see which strategies work, and which don’t. How valuable is that! Some employers might not want to give you the half day per week off for this, but we could create a state law making it possible, modeled after the laws that hold National Guardsmen harmless for their required days of training each year. As the British Royal Army reminds us, it is no exaggeration to say that this program contributes to our national strength. With a program of this kind, we keep the family at the center of child care, while underwriting the cost of high quality early education, and providing opportunities for parents to learn from each other and from the master teacher about child rearing. A program like this would go a long way toward making employed parenthood work for both parents and children.

I call those 3 ideas “immodest” because each is a fairly radical departure from our existing approaches. But that doesn’t mean these ideas cannot come true. When you think how much our predecessors changed childhood in Wisconsin in the last 100 years, then I would suggest we would be unworthy inheritors of their heritage to NOT dream big.

It was Sir Isaac Newton who first commented that “If I have seen far, it is because I rested on the shoulders of giants.” Today, our public programs rest on the shoulders of those who invented such radical ideas as public schools and public health departments. Today, our research-based knowledge rests on the shoulders of giants like our own Professor Helen Dawe. Their legacy, the legacy of this department and this School of Human Ecology, is to continue to expand our knowledge, and the application of our knowledge to effective programs for children and families. If we are to produce as much progress in human development in the next century as our forebears did in the last, then I would suggest that dreaming big, and taking our dreams seriously, are our first orders of business.

Thank you.