



CHILDREN AND WELFARE REFORM—Issue Brief 6

Beyond Work: Strategies to Promote the Well-Being of Young Children and Families in the Context of Welfare Reform (NOVEMBER 1999)

OVERVIEW

In the three years since the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) restructured the nation's welfare system, most state and local policy efforts have focused on helping the adult recipients of cash assistance transition to employment. Although young children may benefit from policy efforts to promote work, additional steps are needed to ensure that welfare reform helps and does not hurt them. To promote positive outcomes for young children in the context of welfare reform, policymakers need to craft deliberate program, policy, fiscal, and collaborative strategies to:

- *Strengthen basic supports for families* (e.g., access to health care and child care);
- *Promote young children's health and development* (e.g., high-quality child care; comprehensive early childhood programs, and family support activities); and
- *Address specialized child and family needs* (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence interventions for children and their parents).

Many of the resources that state and local policymakers need to address the well-being of young children in the context of welfare reform already exist. These include increased federal funding and expanded options to provide health insurance and child care subsidies to low-income families; growing state, federal, and foundation investments in comprehensive early childhood programs and initiatives; and increased funding opportunities through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the block grant to the states created by PRWORA to replace AFDC.

NCCP has identified four general ways in which states and localities are beginning to build on these and other resources to promote better outcomes for low-income young children and families.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Strategy 1: Expand and Improve Health Care, Child Care, and Other Basic Supports for Low-Income Families

For parents to make a successful transition from welfare to work—and to remain employed—their families need access to affordable health care and child care services. Having access to these and other basic supports can increase job stability for all low-income families, whether or not they have ever received cash assistance. Basic supports are important not only for helping families maintain their connections to the labor force; access to high-quality health care and child care also have critical implications for young children's health and development.

Strategy 2: Adapt Comprehensive Early Childhood Programs to Address Welfare-Related Needs

Comprehensive child development and family support programs are in a unique position to help parents and their young children address the challenges associated with welfare changes. Many families affected by welfare reform are already enrolled in such programs, which typically focus on helping parents meet the health and developmental needs of their children, strengthening parent-child relationships, and assisting families with individual challenges.

Strategy 3: Invest TANF Funds in Programs and Services for Families with Young Children

TANF provides states with significant financial flexibility in how they spend their welfare dollars. This flexibility allows states to use TANF funds to provide a variety of supports and services to low-income families with children. For example, TANF dollars can be used to improve the quality of child care, to provide child development and family support services, and to offer specialized supports, such as mental health or substance abuse services.

Strategy 4: Develop Formal Partnerships Linking Early Childhood, Welfare, and Other Supports for Low-Income Families

Families with young children who receive cash assistance are sometimes involved with multiple social service systems (such as TANF, child support enforcement, and child welfare services) as well as with one or more comprehensive early childhood programs (such as Head Start, prekindergarten, and home visiting). Efforts to coordinate or integrate the delivery of these services can help reduce strain on already stressed families. From a policy perspective, formal partnerships can streamline service delivery, prevent duplication of effort, and use resources more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The general strategies and specific examples presented in this issue brief make clear that some states, communities, programs, and foundations have begun in earnest the difficult work of strengthening families and promoting healthy child development in the context of welfare reform. This issue brief sounds a challenge to others to use welfare reform as a catalyst to promote better outcomes for this generation of children and families as well as the next.

For more information about programs pursuing these strategies and contact information, as well as research citations, please refer to *Children and Welfare Reform Issue Brief 6: Beyond Work: Strategies to Promote the Well-Being of Young Children and Families in the Context of Welfare Reform*. Copies of the full publication are available through the NCCP Web site at: www.nccp.org.

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