



Supporting Student Parents: Local Needs for Early Care and Education

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Eight of nine student-parents interviewed at a local community college indicated that they planned to transfer to a four-year college after earning their associate's degree. All expressed interest in CSU Channel Islands, but most said it was not a possibility for them because of a lack of childcare services. Only one of the eight said she planned to attend CSU Channel Islands. When asked what she planned to do about childcare, she said she had no idea. (Karp, Lugo, Magaña, Nieves, Rodriguez & Veloz, 2012)

For the past several years, we (three educator-scholars with over 100 years of teaching, research, and administrative experience spanning infancy through higher education) have been studying the impact of high quality, affordable early care and education with the goal of bringing an early childhood center to our campus. While our focus has been on the lack of affordable childcare services at CSU Channel Islands (CSUCI), the roots of the problem are much deeper, severely impacted by local, state, and federal policies and funding. The argument we will make in this paper is that the consequences emanating from this problem are so severe and so costly to individuals and to local, regional, and national economies, that its existence not only defies logic but flouts it.

After examining resources allocated to affordable early care and education in Ventura County and at our university, we have identified three major needs, described below. We offer this detailed perspective on early care and education in our region with the assumption that this snapshot will resonate in other communities across the nation.

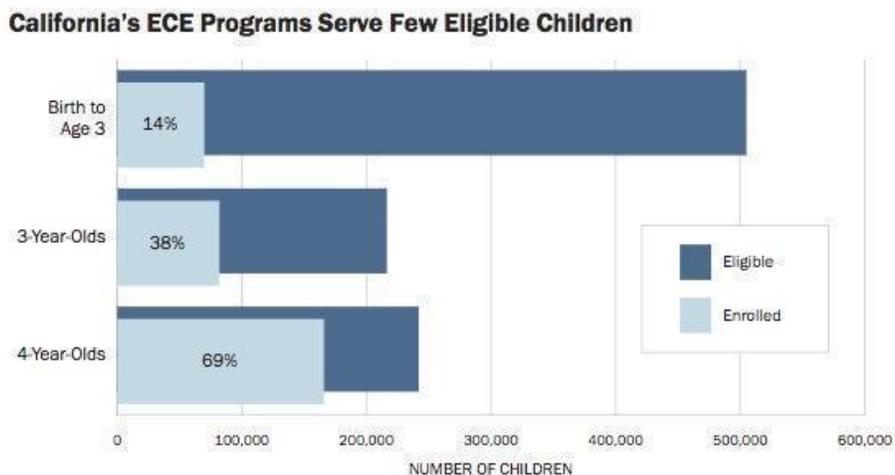
Need 1: Early Care and Education Spaces for Young Children

According to the 2015 report of the Local Planning Council of Ventura County, 49,464 children from birth to five years of age live in our county (2015). Over 23% of Ventura County's children live in poverty, but this overall percentage obscures the fact that child poverty rates in California are much higher for children of color and for children of single-mother families than for white, Asian, and dual-parent families (Bohn, Danielson & Thorman, 2017).

Over half of Ventura County's young children from moderate and high-income families are in child care and education programs for part or all of each day, but far fewer children from the lowest income and ethnic minority families attend preschool programs. In 2014, 37,074 of our county's children from birth to five years of age were eligible for government subsidized child care, but of these, a mere 14% actually received services (Local Planning Council of Ventura County, 2015). In that same year, there were 8,904 children from birth to five living in poverty in Ventura County, but only 1,246 of them (again, only 14%) were served by government subsidized programs (2015).

A sizeable number of eligible children in California are missing out on the opportunity for early education. Figure 1 shows how many eligible children in California are not being served in early childhood programs. It is striking to note that there are twice as many infants and toddlers compared to preschool children who are eligible and not served.

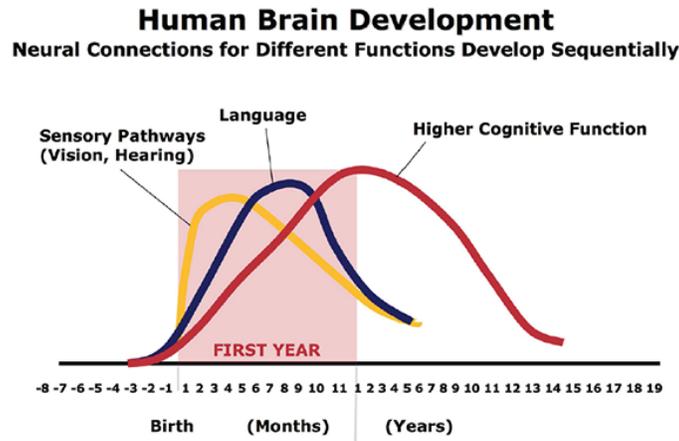
Figure 1



(Melnick, Meloy, Gardner, Wechsler, & Maier, 2018, p. 26)

This educational under-serving of Ventura County's poorest and youngest children is extraordinarily significant. So much is at stake for the rest of their lives, to them and to our society, consequent to what they learn and experience in their first five years. Most of what they will learn throughout their lives is rooted in the earliest years (see Figure 2), given that 85% of the core structures in children's brains are already developed by the time most of them enter kindergarten at age five (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Figure 2

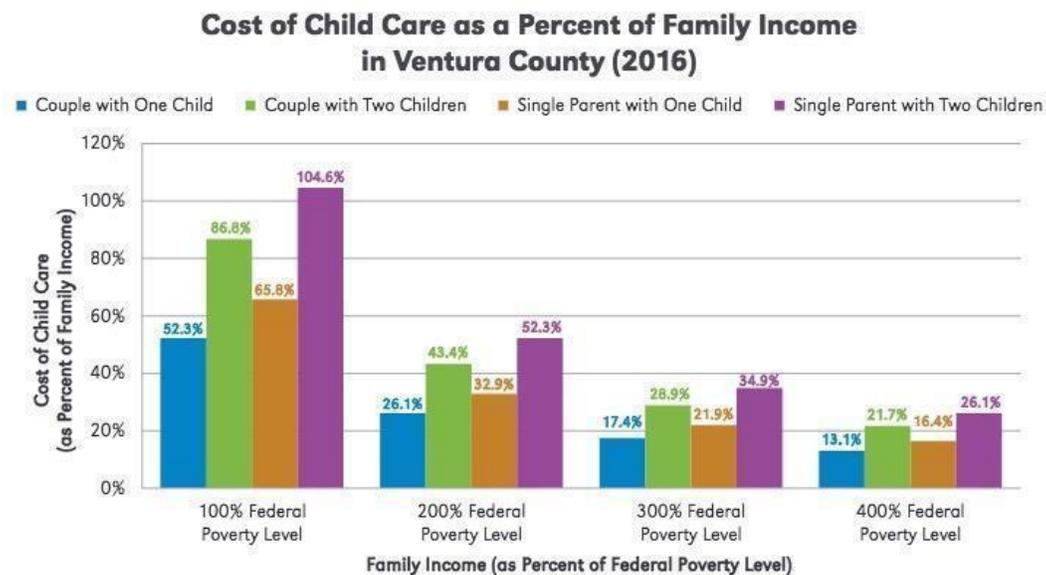


(Nelson, cited in Center on the Developing Child, 2007, #1)

Lack of early access to high quality care and education for our poorest children is one of the fundamental cracks in their lives that will widen, year by year, to become the achievement gap. By age three, children from middle and upper income families have vocabularies that are 66% larger than those from poor families (Hart & Risley, 1995). Gross disparities in early literacies foreshadow the gaps we see in academic achievement and degree attainment patterns of later years

The cost of child care as a percentage of family income is enormous for low income families, as can be seen in Figure 3. For example, for a couple with one child and an income at 100% of the poverty level in Ventura County, child care costs consume 52.3% of their income. A same-sized family having twice the income spends 26.1% on child care

Figure 3



(2017 State of the Region Download, 2017, p. 37)

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Since 2010, California has cut early learning programs' budgets by \$1,000,000,000, despite what is known about the importance of early care and education. These cuts have resulted in 110,000 lost spaces in early care and education programs for children in the state, 4,000 of which were lost in Ventura County. 2014-2015 saw the first budget increase to early learning programs in California in 10 years, with an increase of \$260,000,000 representing only one-fourth of the funding lost since 2010 (Local Planning Council of Ventura County, 2018). First 5 Ventura County (2013) identifies lack of facilities first on a list of barriers to Pre-K expansion in the region.

Need 2: Access to Postsecondary Education for Student Parents

Early care and education for college-going student-parents is difficult to find and expensive. Additional challenges for student-parents are finding options for care that match college schedules and gaining access to programs where state subsidies are available (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds & Froehner, 2014). Most centers operate on a typical 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. schedule, which fails to serve the needs of working parents whose college courses are often taken during late afternoon and evening hours.

An early care and education center on our campus would allow our university, the only public four-year university in Ventura County, to better serve a population that is now substantially underserved. In 2015, our best efforts to ascertain the number of student-parents attending CSUCI (in the absence of an established mechanism for identifying them) resulted in an estimate of 300, or five percent of the campus's student population at that time. This is one-third of the national average of student parents attending a four-year university (Gault et al., 2014). Hundreds of missing student parents at CSU Channel Islands is a significant reality to consider, particularly given the likelihood that they are parents with very low incomes for whom access to education would make a significant difference in their own lives, and in the lives of their children. Indeed, 48% of students participating in a family services needs assessment conducted at our university indicated that their income was at or below the federal poverty level (Karp et al., 2012).

Nationwide, women of color in postsecondary education are more likely than other college students to have dependent children. Of these females in college, 47% of African Americans, 39.4% of Native Americans, and 31.6% of Latinas are mothers. Further, student parents of color have lower incomes than white student parents. Nearly 71% of black student parents and 68% of Hispanic student parents live at or below 200 percent of the poverty level, compared with 49% of white student parents (Gault, Reichlin & Roman, 2014).

As stated earlier, for those in the lowest income levels, access to education can change not only their life circumstances but also those of the future generations of their families. However, we must remember that a university's responsibilities to its student parents extend beyond the question of entry-level access. Of those individuals who do make it to college, completion is less likely than for non-parents. As Nelson, Froehner & Gault (2013) found, "Being a parent substantially increases the likelihood of leaving college with no degree, with 53% of parents vs. 31% of non-parents having left with no degree after six years" (p. 1). University leaders must recognize that student parents are a unique population whose challenges are significant and in addition to those commonly experienced by students without children. Support services for this population makes a difference. Findings from a study at Monroe Community College (MCC) in New York State point to the positive impact of campus-provided child care for student parents (cited in Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017):

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MCC students with children under the age of six who used the campus child care center were more likely to return to school the following year than their counterparts who did not use the child care center (68 percent, compared with 51 percent). Parents who used child care were also nearly three times more likely to graduate or go on to pursue a B.A. within 3 years of enrollment (41 percent, compared with only 15 percent). (p. 13)

Need 3: Strengthen Academic Programs and Professional Development for the ECE Workforce

Laboratory learning opportunities in early childhood education are as essential to students in education as science labs are to students in STEM disciplines. However, despite having an Early Childhood Studies major with over 400 students enrolled, CSU Channel Islands does not have an early care and education center. Student observers and student teachers are placed throughout the county in a variety of centers. Finding a sufficient number of field sites for these students is a continuing challenge for us, as it typically is for early childhood programs across the nation (NAEYC, 2012).

In addition to providing more student teaching placements for Early Childhood Studies, an on-campus children's center would provide meaningful instructional opportunities for students in many disciplines (e.g., education, nursing, psychology, sociology, visual and performing arts) that are not possible in a university classroom. A learning lab of this kind creates opportunities for students in these many fields to:

- integrate theory, research, and practice while learning and practicing the latest developments in the field;
- develop skills in observation, assessment, teaching and research, which is a particularly relevant problem given that students who have had the opportunity to have clinically-based preparation are more successful teachers (NAEYC, 2012); and
- learn and practice collaboration skills with the center's administrators, teachers, and parents.

Early care and education centers on college campuses serve significant needs at multiple levels—serving young children, student parents, college faculty and students in many disciplines, and practitioners in the early childhood workforce.

Conclusion

These three major needs are interconnected—lack of spaces for early education and care, lack of funding, and lack of facilities to prepare early childhood educators. Together, they demonstrate a failure of our collective responsibility to the youngest, most vulnerable members of our society, despite heroic efforts by professionals in the field to do their essential work with inadequate public support and resources. This failure must be corrected and can be, through purposeful coalition building, creative thinking about needs, resources, and systems, and intentional, collaborative actions across institutions and organizations in our region.

CSU Channel Islands is doing incredibly important work in our region and is recognized as being the 18th most effective university in the nation for improving social mobility of low income students (CSU Channel Islands News Center, 2017). Extending this work to incorporate the needs of student parents is a logical and necessary next step.

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About the Authors

Adria Taha-Resnick is faculty at California State University, Channel Islands. She has 25 years of experience in early care and education working as a teacher, administrator, and trainer and currently teaches future teachers. In addition to teaching, Adria is the Vice President for the California Association for the Education of Young Children, and Chair of the Ventura County Local Planning Council. Her interests include quality initiatives and building leadership in early care and education.

Kaia Tollefson, Ph.D., is a Professor of Education at California State University, Channel Islands. Dr. Tollefson has 35 years of experience as an educator and administrator at P-12, undergraduate, and graduate levels of schooling. She has authored a number of articles and two books, *Cultivating the Learner-Centered Classroom* and *Volatile Knowing: Parents, Teachers, and the Censored Story of Accountability in America's Public Schools*, all of which seek to promote educational equity and excellence of opportunity for all students. Current research interests include social justice in education, leadership, and Critical Friends Groups as a professional development approach for faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education.

Joan M. Karp, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita at California State University, Channel Islands. After completing over 40 years as a teacher and professor of special education, Dr. Karp concluded her work at California State University, Channel Islands as Director of the School of Education. Prior to her work at CSUCI, she was a teacher, researcher, and grant director at University of Minnesota Duluth, University of Washington, University of California Santa Barbara and Rhode Island College. Her research examined ways to prepare interdisciplinary educators and educators with disabilities for a variety of leadership roles in education. In addition, she studied organizational change and the integration of young children with disabilities into general education.

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