

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S EARLY STEPS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS & HEAD START PROGRAMS

The Need

Early education – starting with moms during pregnancy and following children from their first days to their first day of school – is a critical window to academic achievement, but that window closes fast. Children are born ready to learn, but for the nearly 15 million children living in poverty in America, the risks of entering kindergarten ill-prepared to succeed are high.

In rural America, where Save the Children's U.S. Programs specializes, economic barriers are intensified by absent resources, geographic isolation and an ever-growing disparity gap.

Consider the following:

- The foundations of brain architecture are shaped during the first three years after birth and establishes either a sturdy or weak foundation for all health, learning and behavior to follow.
- Four-year-olds from low-income families are often 18 months developmentally behind their peers.
- More than 60 percent of families impacted by poverty have no books in their homes for children.
- Disadvantaged children who don't participate in high-quality early education programs are 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education, 25 percent more likely to drop out of school, 60 percent more likely to never attend college, 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime and 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent.

As these children reach elementary school, they risk being so far behind their peers that they can never catch up. Their futures are determined before they've even begun. In order to give the 15 million children in America living in poverty a chance to succeed, we have to give them a fair chance to learn...and learn early.

Innovative Solutions

The best way to improve the chances for lifelong success of children who live in poverty is to reach them early. If we want to ensure children impacted by adversity have the same opportunities to succeed as other children, they need support. Save the Children reaches the youngest U.S. children in need with early childhood development activities through two paths: the management of Head Start programs and our own signature Early Steps to School Success program.



Giving Children a Head Start

Save the Children operates six Head Start programs in 18 counties across Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and North Dakota, serving 2,563 children. Head Start is a federal early childhood development program aimed at promoting school readiness and social and emotional development for children in low-income families. Save the Children brings our expertise in improving educational outcomes for children in underserved communities to our Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Our services include a mix of high-quality classroom programs and home visiting for children from birth to age 5, as well as comprehensive family services.

Early Steps to School Success

Save the Children introduced its Early Steps to School Success program in 2006. Built on private-public partnerships with local schools and states, Early Steps delivers high-quality early childhood development services to children ages 0 to 5 and their families in 14 states.

Key Components include:

- **Home Visits Conducted by Early Childhood Coordinators.** For ages 0-3, coordinators provide parents with age-appropriate activities for their children, help monitor developmental progress and offer suggestions on how to interact with young children to promote early literacy.
- **Helping Parents Support Child Development.** Coordinators help parents build skills and strategies to support their child's growth. They advise parents on topics such as establishing healthy sleeping routines, interpreting and responding to babies' efforts to communicate and helping toddlers develop self-control and problem-solving skills.
- **Book Bag Exchange.** Coordinators continue to foster a love of learning in children ages 0-5 with a Book Bag Exchange, supplying families with children's books that encourage reading frequency, comprehension, and parent-child interaction.
- **Fostering Positive Connections Between Families and Schools.** To support a positive parent-school relationship for children prior to entering school, parent education groups meet at local schools to discuss early development topics. Toddler storybook hours and play groups are also available at Early Steps school sites.
- **"Transition to School" Activities.** Coordinators help children and families connect with teachers and faculty before the first day of preschool or kindergarten.
- **Community Connections.** Coordinators build relationships with local resource partners so they can connect families to the services they need, as well as advocate for themselves in a sustainable way – with services that will continue to be there for them and their community.

Early Steps to School Success is a low-cost, targeted approach to enhancing school readiness for children in some of America's most under-resourced communities. At age 3, participants' language development is assessed using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT). This evaluation indicates the program is as effective, and often more so, than other early learning programs.



Photo: Susan Warner

Save the Children's Early Childhood Results

Save the Children's early childhood education programs have produced stellar results for children. Our student evaluations for the 2015-16 school year show:

- Save the Children's Early Steps to School Success program served 7,400 children.
- 87 percent of 3-year-olds in our program scored at or above the normal range for vocabulary acquisition.
- Children ages 0-3 were read to an average of 38 times per month.