

Success rooted in childhood
By Jamie Tobias Neely

Sunday, April 22, 2007
Edition: 1, Section: B, Page 8

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Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff is the director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Associate Editor Jamie Tobias Neely recently interviewed him in conjunction with The Spokesman-Review's "Our Kids: Our Business." project. This transcript is drawn from their conversation. Brackets indicate paraphrasing of longer comments, and ellipses indicate omitted material.

Q. What led to your interest in development during the first five years of life?

A. For starters, I'm a pediatrician by training. ... How could you not be interested in early childhood, once you understand the basic principles of brain development? You realize it all starts in those early years.

Q. What are the most common myths about early childhood development?

Traditionally, the most popular misunderstandings have been that not much is going on in the first couple of years of life, that children don't really understand what's happening and, even if they do, they won't remember it when they get older...

Q. How do those common misunderstandings about child development affect the public policy on childhood abuse?

A. [Current child welfare policies are based on outdated theories that failed to recognize the damage violence causes in a growing child's brain. Child protective service systems allow child custody cases to drag out for years, give foster parents very little training, and offer foster children very little mental health consultation.]

...The removal of a child from home is a mental health emergency, [yet] we treat it as if all that matters is that the child is physically safe.

... In many ways, the gap between what we know and what we do for young children is greatest in the child protective system. It is the largest disconnect between knowledge and practice.

... I don't want to be quoted as being critical personally of people who work in child protective services. It's just that the system, it's at least 50 years old and out of whack in terms of its knowledge base.

Q. What happens when children experience early deficits in development?

A. The architecture in the brain is literally being shaped by the quality of children's experiences in their daily relationships with the important people in their lives ...

The more disruptive the environment is, the more disrupted the brain circuits are. As time goes by, circuits get shaped in the brain and they stabilize, and you can't go back and redo those circuits. So, when we're talking about abuse and neglect, the earlier we can intervene, the better, and that's hugely important.

Q. If intervention doesn't happen, what are the outcomes?

A. If intervention doesn't happen, you get disrupted brain circuits on top of disrupted brain circuits on top of disrupted brain circuits.

... You have children who have an extraordinarily low likelihood of doing well in school, which means that they have a very low likelihood of being economically productive as adults.

And so, now, knowing what we know, there's a huge moral responsibility, more than we've ever had before, to intervene and to help protect these children early on.

Q. What are the best steps a community can take for protecting its children from child abuse?

A. Prevention is clearly the key. ...

All of those things [social isolation, poverty, unemployment, alcohol or substance abuse] that raise the stress levels of parents can lower their threshold for "losing it" with their kids.

So prevention involves providing support ahead of time [rather than] blaming parents who are isolated for abusing their kids. ...

Q. How would you characterize society's current level of support for the needs of young children?

A. Given the wealth of our society and given the knowledge that we have about what promotes healthy developments in young children, it's startling to think about how large the gap is between what we know, and what we could afford to do, and what we actually do for young children who are vulnerable and their families.

We provide far less support for families with young children [such as health care, family leave, child care and early childhood education] than just about any industrialized or post-industrialized country in the world.

The reason for that is we just have a different political culture. We put much more emphasis on rugged individualism than shared responsibility. But the problem is that babies don't do well with rugged individualism.

Q. In the last couple of decades, have you seen supports for families slip away?

A. ... As recently as five years ago there were lots of states in the country where you could visit, and if you wanted to talk about public programs for very young children, it was a conversation nonstarter. The answer was: "This is a private family matter. This is individual responsibility. This is not the government's business."

Today, you cannot go to a state in this country that isn't trying to figure out what to do with its childhood policies. Every single state is dealing with this right now.

Q. What particular programs around the country would you point to as strong models?

A. ... When it comes to early child care and education, do you know where the premier system in the country is? You'd never guess, it if you don't know.

It's in the military. All branches of the military have the highest child care in the country. Isn't that amazing?

Q. How did that come about?

A. In late 1980s, there was big public scandal because of rampant reports of child abuse in the military families and really poor-quality child-care arrangements. ...

Because of the scandal, Congress passed legislation and gave money to the Defense Department to improve the quality of its early care and education system. And the military took that very seriously. ...

They have built that up over the years. Now the money doesn't have to go to child care. It's part of the military budget. They could use it for other things. They could use it for weapon systems if they want.

But they choose to use it to maintain a very high quality child-care system because they understand the importance of high-quality care for two very important reasons: One is that in order for soldiers, men and women, to do their job every day, they have to be confident that their children are well cared for while they're at work. And also, and this is the one I love: A large percentage of soldiers come from military families. So, the military is investing in its future work force. They know that.

So here's the zinger for you. [The National Association for the Education of Young Children accredits centers on standards such as the quality of the staff, the learning environment and the programming. In most states, only 10 percent of facilities have this accreditation; the best states are in the 30 percent range.]

You know what the percentage of military child-care centers is that are accredited by NAEYC? It's about 98 percent.

Think about that. When people say, "Well, it can't be done. This is government intrusion." Or, "It's not the American way." Well, lo and behold, here it is: The U.S. military is the model for how to do it right. That's Air Force, Navy, Army across the board. [Many of the] best child-care facilities in the country are on military bases.

Q. If we make these changes for American children, how will life look for the next generation?

A. Let's be realistic about it. There are no magic bullets here. It's not waving a magic wand and we suddenly are living in a perfect society.

If we were to [make these changes] here's what it would look like in another generation: We'd have a much higher percentage of children graduating from high school, we'd have a much lower percentage of children repeating grades in school, we'd have a much lower percentage of children in special education.

...

We would have more adults making higher incomes; we would have fewer adults on public assistance; we would have more people owning their own homes; we would have fewer people in jail; we would have less unintended pregnancies in the teenage years.

Q. If we were to change one thing in Washington, where should we start?

[Shonkoff recommends starting home visitation programs for very high-risk children starting during pregnancy and infancy and enriched preschool programs for a broader population.]

[This] would actually save the taxpayers a lot of money, but they'd have to be patient. That's the problem with this. From a political point of view, the payoffs are very large, but they come after you're out of office.

This is the ultimate legacy issue for a policymaker. This is the opposite of the quick turnaround so you can show something for the next election cycle. But it's the ultimate legacy issue for society. So, that's why the real champions of this are the policymakers who provide leadership for investing in early childhood.

Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff served as co-editor of "From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development."

Photo Caption: Success rooted in childhood