



# Minding *Our* Future

INVESTING IN HEALTHY INFANTS AND TODDLERS

## ABOUT THE DAVID MATHEWS CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life (DMC) is a nonpartisan facilitator of dialogue and deliberation that assists communities, groups and citizens to make more effective and productive decisions. DMC connects Alabama's citizens with community leaders, teachers, organizations and institutions to share civic practices and discuss issues that affect communities nationwide. DMC's wide range of experiential, capacity-building programs and education-focused resources helps citizens and communities make decisions. Through its dynamic public forums and regularly-published issue books, DMC fosters productive learning, civic engagement and stronger communities. DMC is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization located in Montevallo, Alabama, with statewide impact.

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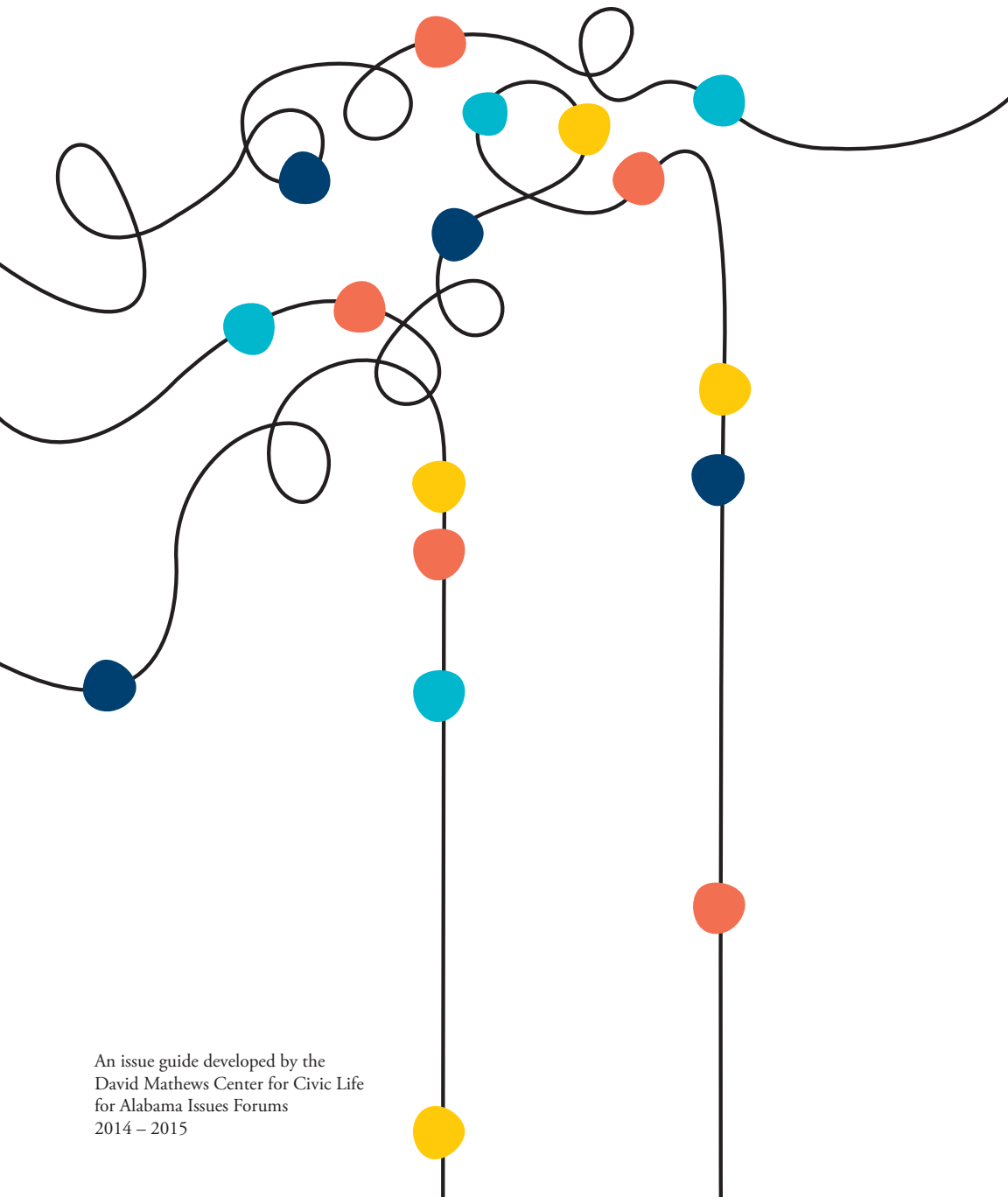
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*Making the Most of the First Three Years: How Can We Give Our  
Youngest Children a Good Start in Life?*

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for Alabama Issues Forums  
2014 – 2015

# Letter from *the* Executive Director

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On July 31 and August 1, 2014, approximately 40 Alabamians gathered at the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in Montevallo, Alabama for an inaugural Civic Institute. During the Institute, participants examined democratic practices, participated in a deliberative forum, and named and framed an issue in public terms.

During the naming and framing activity, participants shared their thoughts and ideas around guaranteeing a healthy future for young children. Prompted by an informative presentation from Dr. Ellen Abell (Auburn University), the group focused on the specific needs of infants and toddlers during their first three years of life.

The activity was lively and passionate, and many concerns and action ideas emerged. Specifically, the group identified three approaches to investing in healthy toddlers and infants:

- Approach One: Develop capable and caring parents, guardians, and caregivers
- Approach Two: Create healthy and thriving communities
- Approach Three: Provide access to high quality comprehensive services for all children

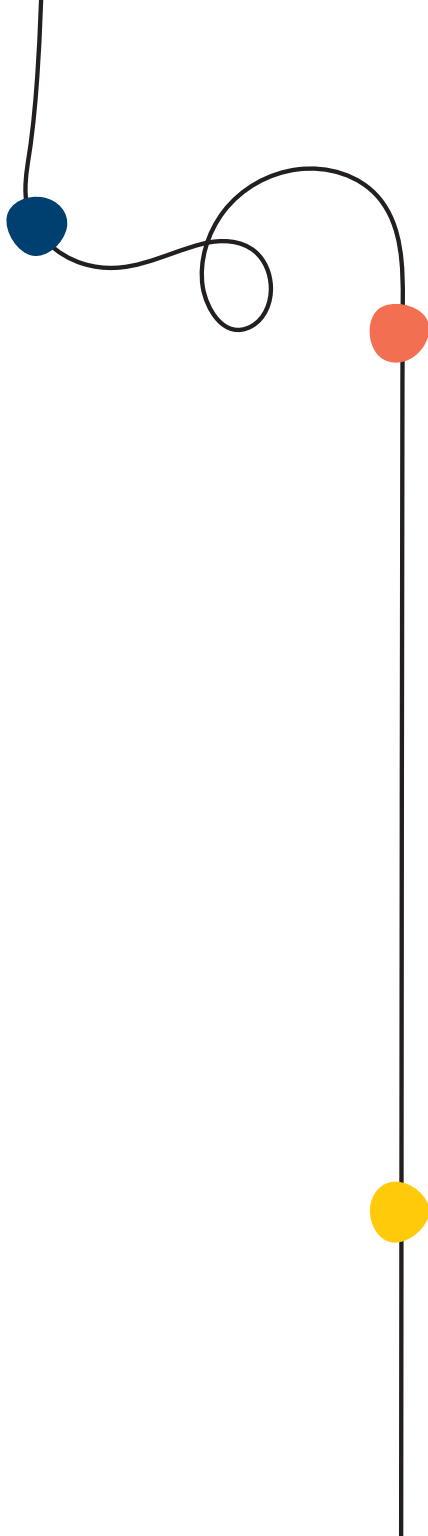
The following issue book further explores the three approaches that emerged during the Civic Institute. As you explore the book, we encourage you to examine the approaches, reflect on what you hold valuable, and work to identify common ground.

The David Mathews Center does not advocate for a particular approach. Instead, we are here to ask questions that will lead people in Alabama to talk through the issue, consider possible tradeoffs, and make difficult choices.

There is no doubt that many people want to help Alabama's children. The difficult question before us is this: Given our available options and limited resources, what are we willing and unwilling to do?

We look forward to working with you.


*Chris McCauley, Executive Director*



# Minding *Our* Future

INVESTING IN HEALTHY  
INFANTS AND TODDLERS

*by*  
Dr. Ellen Abell



**W**hat happens during the first three years of life affects children for a lifetime. The foundation for a person's growth, learning, and health is laid during infancy and toddlerhood. The strength and stability of this foundation depends on the relationships that babies have with the adults who care for them.

The best possible start in life happens for babies born into a community of caring adults who are tuned in and responsive to their needs. Appropriately responsive adults interpret babies' behaviors based on accurate information about what is reasonable to expect from babies. They recognize that infant behaviors, such as crying, are messages about their needs and internal states, and they try to match their responses accordingly.

Babies have many needs they can't meet for themselves, such as for physical care, emotional comfort, and stimulating interactions. How adults respond to these needs shapes babies' understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them. A stable pattern of positive adult-infant interactions sets the stage for a strong sense of self, healthy attachments to others, and the ability to learn. Thus, the greatest opportunities to influence the path of a child's entire life occur during the first three years.

## THE DEVELOPING BRAINS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

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Research tells us that the structure of babies' brains is built in the first three years. During this time, the brain creates 700 neural connections each second, a rate faster than at any other time of life. These simple, beginning connections develop into stronger, more complex connections if babies are exposed to a variety of experiences appropriate for their stages of development.

The sounds babies make, their body movements, and their facial expressions are some of the ways babies bid for the attention of their parents and caregivers. Adults who reliably respond to babies' bids for interaction in positive ways contribute to babies' healthy brain development. Such back-and-forth interactions create the pathways in the brain that support babies' developing social, emotional, cognitive, and language capacities.

In contrast, brain development and learning are blocked by adverse experiences. Infants and tod-

dlers who repeatedly witness violence, experience chronic neglect or abuse, or are deprived of basic needs suffer most. Early childhood trauma disrupts children's developing abilities to regulate their emotions, control their behaviors, and master mental processes such as attention and memory. As a result, early adverse experiences lead to poorer learning outcomes, reduced immune system function, and decreased ability to manage basic levels of stress.

## EARLY CHILD EXPERIENCE AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

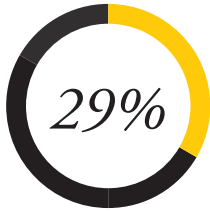
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Differences in early childhood experiences contribute greatly to the growing gaps in children's learning and achievement. A powerful example of this is seen in the development of language. An in-depth study of the use of language among families with infants showed that the number of words that children heard in the first 18 months of their lives affected their future learning (Hart & Risley, 1995). Infants and toddlers developed larger vocabularies by age 3 when parents talked to them well before they could talk back. These differences were related to family income. In general, children in lower-income families were exposed to less parental attention and talking than children in higher-income families. So, they heard and learned fewer words.

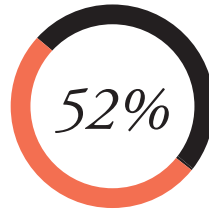
Furthermore, there were significant differences in later school success as a result of how parents talked with children before the age of 3. Children whose parents told them about things, described and labeled everyday objects and experiences, asked them questions, and generally communicated with them using a positive tone and guidance style had higher language scores in third grade than children whose parents did not. Such differences are important, because weak language skills in early childhood put children at risk for early reading failure, poor social emotional behaviors, and school dropout. Children with stronger early language skills tend to show better academic performance throughout their school careers.

# 182,171

INFANTS AND TODDLERS LIVE IN THE STATE OF ALABAMA.



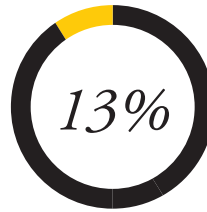
29% of children under the age of 3 live in families in poverty (i.e., families with incomes that are lower than 100% of the Federal Poverty Level).



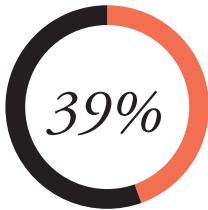
52% of children under the age of 3 live in low-income families (incomes lower than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level).



60% of Alabama mothers with infants are in the labor force.



13% of children under 3 live in families with parents who are unemployed.



39% of children under the age of 3 live with a single parent.

# 44<sup>th</sup>

ALABAMA RANKS  
44TH IN THE  
NATION ON CHILD  
WELL-BEING.



# Responding to the Unique Developmental Needs *of* Infants and Toddlers


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Many people treat babies according to out-of-date beliefs about what babies can or cannot do, why they behave as they do, and how they learn. Research findings from the last two decades have made it clear that we must revise these inaccurate ideas if we want our children to grow into healthy adults.

## PAST BELIEF


## CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

**Babies are not good at doing much besides eating, sleeping, and crying.**



Babies and toddlers are competent in their own ways. They are naturally curious and motivated to learn. They are wired to imitate and interpret, to explore and communicate. They try to make sense of and seek meaning in their experiences. But they must depend on others to help them express these natural abilities. Babies and toddlers need adults to meet their physical and emotional needs and to offer safety and security when they follow their drive to explore. When adults see young children as uniquely competent, they are more likely to engage with them and to notice and celebrate even small steps in their growth and learning.

**Babies and toddlers are too young to have feelings / babies and toddlers should be able to control their feelings.**




Babies definitely experience feelings like sadness, joy, anger, excitement, and fear. Their ability to learn how to handle feelings is critical to their healthy emotional and cognitive development. Babies do better at calming their strong emotions if they can depend on their caregivers to help them. They learn how to handle their feelings from interactions with adults who consistently tune in to their moods and feeling states and adapt their responses accordingly.

# PAST BELIEF


# CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

**Babies' and toddlers' behaviors need to be disciplined so they won't turn out spoiled.**




Babies do not learn good behavior from adult reactions such as slapping, yelling, or spanking. These behaviors are confusing and damaging to babies' trust in their caregivers. Babies need adults to model good social behavior and to share information about how the world works. For babies under 16-18 months of age, adults do this best when they demonstrate, explain, and help babies turn their attention to acceptable objects and behaviors. For older toddlers, adults can begin enforcing a few important rules and applying reasonable consequences when those rules are broken.

**Babies and toddlers need to learn obedience and respect - they need to know who's "the boss."**



Babies cannot understand yet what obedience and respect mean, or what a boss is. Their brains are not able to make sense of ideas like that. Babies learn respect from how they are treated by others. Young children learn respect for both themselves and others when adults dependably respond to babies and toddlers with patience and understanding--even when they make mistakes.

**Babies don't learn anything important in the first two years.**



Babies are wired to seek out the skills and relationships that will serve their development. They thrive when they are allowed to make safe choices to follow up on the things that interest them. Parents and caregivers foster babies' motivation to learn and explore when they are willing to reflect on babies' interests and respond and adapt to them.

Evidence from brain development research urges us to refocus our efforts to provide environments that meet the true developmental needs of infants and toddlers. Home and child care settings meet these needs best when they:

- Make time for affection and comfort;
- Anticipate, attune to, and respond to children's behaviors, cues, and needs;
- Communicate warmth and positive regard;
- Provide and engage in play opportunities;
- Respond kindly and firmly to misbehaviors.

Parents and caregivers are more likely to support positive early experiences for infants and toddlers when they are aware of the importance of giving and receiving messages with positive or neutral voice tones and body language; being aware of the intensity and duration of the positivity or negativity of their own emotions; showing understanding of and empathy for infants' and toddlers' dependence upon others; letting children set their own pace and following their lead; meeting children where they are, taking into account the child's current mood, temperament, and developmental stage.

Adults make it possible for infants and toddlers to thrive for a lifetime when they nurture close and responsive relationships with them, create safe and interesting surroundings that match their changing abilities, allow for time to explore, and offer emotional and intellectual support for their discovery and learning.

*Dr. Ellen Abell, Family and Child Development Specialist, Alabama Cooperative Extension System; Associate Professor, Auburn University Department of Human Development and Family Studies*

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014 Kids Count Data Book. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>

Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. (2005). Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooke.

J. Ronald Lally. (2009). The Science and Psychology of Infant-Toddler Care: How an Understanding of Early Learning Has Transformed Child Care. *Zero to Three*, 30 (2), pp. 54-58.

National Center for Children in Poverty, [www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org).

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, InBrief series, <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>.

Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families. State Baby Facts: Alabama. <http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/state-community-policy/infant-and-toddler-state-fact-sheets.html>



Develop Capable *and*  
Caring Parents, Guardians,  
*and* Caregivers

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**D**uring their first three years of life, children are completely dependent on parents, guardians, and caregivers. We must ensure that infants and toddlers receive the support that they need during these important years. Although programs and services aimed at helping children and improving the community are important, we need to focus additional time and energy on strengthening the capabilities of

the individuals who are responsible for raising and caring for young children. We must provide high quality pre-natal and post-natal education, organize support services that help parents develop the skills they need, and invest in education and training for early childhood development professionals. We also must prepare future parents and guardians for their upcoming responsibilities.

# POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Ensure access to high quality pre-natal education and in-hospital post-natal education for all parents.

Offer home visiting programs<sup>1</sup> to build the capabilities of parents and guardians.

Invest in high quality education, specialized training, and professional development for early childhood professionals.

Sponsor statewide public awareness campaigns that share information and resources about early childhood development.

Educate high school students on early childhood development and parenting responsibilities.

# CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

Ensuring access to pre-natal and post-natal education will require trained personnel, time, money, and space.

Information provided by home visiting programs may be perceived to conflict with the values and traditions of participating parents and guardians.

If specialized training and education are not mandatory, then early childhood professionals may not seek development opportunities beyond required minimum standards.

State funds are limited, and public awareness campaigns may be costly. It may be difficult to measure the impact of such campaigns.

Because schools must focus on academic standards, early childhood development and parenting may not be viewed as priorities.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Home Visiting Programs* offer a variety of family-focused services to expectant parents and families with new babies and young children. They address issues such as maternal and child health, positive parenting practices, safe home environments, and access to services.



## Create Healthy *and* Thriving Communities

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**C**ommunities directly impact infants and toddlers. If we want to “mind our future,” then we must work to foster safe and healthy communities that support young children and their families. Parents and guardians may want to provide children with everything they need, but unsupportive neighborhoods and workplaces that increase stress may reduce their abilities to do so. We must create additional fam-

ily resource centers, encourage workplace policies that embrace families, and organize community events that focus on young children and parents. Also, community agencies, organizations, volunteer groups, and businesses must work together to promote neighborhood safety efforts and healthy food options that will support children during their first three years of life.

# POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Create and support family resource centers<sup>2</sup> in all 67 Alabama counties.

Encourage employers to adopt workplace policies that support parents and guardians – especially during the first three years of their children’s lives.

Organize neighborhood efforts that ensure the physical and emotional safety of young children.

Coordinate community events focused on families and children. Distribute resources on early childhood development at the events.

Create community gardens and farmers markets, and provide healthy food options to families and children living in communities that lack access to high quality fresh foods.

# CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

Family resource centers require space, time, money, and personnel. Some parents and guardians may lack transportation options for accessing centers.

Employers are still operating in a recovering economy. Some policies for parents and guardians may require time and resources that are not available.

Neighborhood-based efforts will require volunteers and leadership. Volunteers may feel uncomfortable and unsafe in difficult situations.

Community events will require planning and resources. If the events focus on families and children, some community members may not feel welcome.

Community gardens and farmers markets need resources, volunteers, and space. Distributing food to all families will require outreach efforts.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> *Family Resource Centers* are private, non-profits that take an entrepreneurial approach to solving social problems. They attempt to create one-stop access to an array of social services by forming alliances with existing social and education providers in a community. Where the centers see unmet needs, they take the lead in tapping the variety of federal and state grants available for education, family preservation and job skills and training. – *Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama - The PARCA Quarterly: Winter 2013*



## Provide Access to Comprehensive High Quality Services *for All Children*

If we want to provide children with a strong foundation during their first three years of life, then we must offer wide access to necessary support services. Alabamians must make genuine commitments to invest in education, healthcare, and nutrition for all infants and toddlers; otherwise, growing children may face challenges that will impact them for the rest of their lives. Parents, guardians, caregivers, and community groups cannot

provide everything that children need during their first three years – some services and support must be provided by institutions and agencies. Also, access to and use of existing services may be limited due to lack of awareness and understanding. Alabama must expand access to high-quality early learning programs, educate parents and guardians on existing health and nutrition programs, and provide transportation options to parents and guardians.



# POSSIBLE ACTIONS

Expand access to affordable high quality early learning and child development programs for children ages 0–3.

Educate parents and guardians on ALL Kids – Alabama’s Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)<sup>3</sup>. Assist eligible parents and guardians with applications and enrollment.

Educate parents and guardians on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)<sup>4</sup>. Assist eligible parents and guardians with applications and enrollment.

Develop and implement the Alabama Quality STARS Initiative<sup>5</sup> for early learning and child development programs in Alabama. Use the Initiative to regularly review child development measures and share ratings with the public.

Offer transportation options for all parents and children to early learning and child development programs, healthcare facilities, and community services.

# CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

Expanding access to high quality early learning and child development programs will require additional funding. Also, expanding access will not guarantee enrollment and participation.

Education may increase awareness, but some parents and guardians may lack the resources necessary to pay ALL Kids premiums.

Parents and guardians may not purchase healthy and nutritious food with the funds that they receive from SNAP.

Only state licensed early learning and child development programs can participate in the Alabama Quality STARS Initiative. Also, very few studies have evaluated the benefits of such initiatives on child development outcomes, showing mixed results.

Expanding transportation will require vehicles, drivers and insurance.

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## NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> *ALL Kids Insurance* is administered by the Alabama Department of Public Health and provides low-cost healthcare coverage for children and teens under age 19 who live in Alabama. – *Alabama Department of Public Health* – <http://www.adph.org/allkids/index.asp?id=2947>

<sup>4</sup> *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)* offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to families. – *U.S. Department of Agriculture* – <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

<sup>5</sup> *Alabama Quality STARS Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)* is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs. Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, QRIS award quality ratings to early and school-age care and education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their State’s QRIS, early and school-age care providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. Even providers that have met the standards of the lowest QRIS levels have achieved a level of quality that is beyond the minimum requirements to operate. – *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*  
<https://ocqqrsguide.icfwebsiteservices.com/index.cfm?do=qrisabout#1>

# Early Childhood Development Resources *in* Alabama

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**Alabama Association for Young Children (AAYC)**

“is dedicated to improving educational opportunities for children, birth through eight years, by offering professional development and training to the early childhood community.”

[www.alabamaayc.com](http://www.alabamaayc.com)

**Alabama Children’s Policy Council System**

“support[s] providers of children’s services as they work collaboratively in developing community service plans to address the needs of children ages 0–19 and their families.”

[www.children.alabama.gov/cpc](http://www.children.alabama.gov/cpc)

**Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES)**

“collaborates with many partners to help people and communities improve their quality of life and economic well-being.”

[www.aces.edu/family](http://www.aces.edu/family)

**Alabama Department of Children’s Affairs**

“provide[s] state leadership that identifies, promotes, and coordinates services for children, their families, and communities.”

[www.children.alabama.gov](http://www.children.alabama.gov)

**Alabama Department of Human Resources**

“help[s] families receive the least disruptive services they need, when they need them, and only for as long as they need them in order to maintain children in or return them to a safe, stable home.”

[www.dhr.alabama.gov](http://www.dhr.alabama.gov)

**Alabama Department of Public Health**

“works closely with the community to preserve and protect the public’s health and to provide caring, quality services.”

[www.adph.org](http://www.adph.org)

**Alabama Early Childhood Advisory Council**

“is building a comprehensive early childhood collaboration of systems by effectively integrating efforts and resources to improve the lives of Alabama’s children and families.”

[www.children.alabama.gov/first-class](http://www.children.alabama.gov/first-class)

**Alabama Head Start Association** is “part of a national program which provides comprehensive developmental services for Alabama’s low-income, pre-school children ages three to five and social services for their families.”

[www.alabamaheadstartassociation.org](http://www.alabamaheadstartassociation.org)

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**Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers** “is an organization of non-profit agencies or programs that provide a wide array of services designed to protect children and to strengthen and support families in Alabama.”

[www.anfrconline.homestead.com](http://www.anfrconline.homestead.com)

**Alabama Partnership for Children** “work[s] in partnership with other public and private entities to maintain an effective state and local system of resources and support that enables parents, families, and others who care for young children to ensure that they are healthy, protected, nurtured, and offered every opportunity to succeed in life.”

[www.smartstartalabama.org](http://www.smartstartalabama.org)

**Family Guidance Center of Alabama** “strengthen[s] families through partnering with families, organizations, and communities and through the provision of an accessible comprehensive system of coordinated programs and services designed to enable people of all ages in Alabama to envision and achieve their goals.”

[www.familyguidancecenter.org](http://www.familyguidancecenter.org)

**Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPIY) of Alabama** “is an evidence-based program that works with families in the

home to support parents in their critical role as their child’s first and most important teacher.”

[www.hippyalabama.com](http://www.hippyalabama.com)

**United Way “Success By Six” Program** “is [an] initiative focused on increasing access to quality early learning...[that] focuses on: Improving School Readiness, Promoting Health and Physical Activity, Building Partnerships and Engaging the Community.”

[www.unitedway.org](http://www.unitedway.org)

**VOICES for Alabama’s Children** “helps Alabamians understand the current conditions of our children, how we can improve those conditions, and what the consequences are for all of us if we don’t.”

[www.alavoices.org](http://www.alavoices.org)



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