

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES BY STRENGTHENING THE NEXT GENERATION

- WHO WE ARE -

Shepherding the Next Generation is a nationwide movement of Shepherd Advocates: evangelical pastors and ministry leaders who are committed to speaking out on behalf of children at risk and equipping the Church to live out the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Shepherd Advocates desire to see each child grow up in a strong, stable and healthy family.

The Bible teaches us that God created the family to be the primary place for educating a child on how he or she is to live. It is within the context of the family where values are taught and nurtured (Dt. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:5-8; Pro. 1; Eph. 6:4; 2 Tim. 1:5). However, some parents have a more difficult experience in child rearing than others, often lacking the knowledge, resources, or the support of a spouse to raise their children towards lives of health, opportunity and values. As followers of Christ we are called to love our neighbor. For our most vulnerable neighbors, children at risk, we can do this by providing support for families so that each child at risk today will have the opportunity to become a responsible adult and a good neighbor.

To that end we call on our local, state and federal policymakers to embrace the following evidence-based interventions as one way to help strengthen American families. We all have a part in ensuring that the next generation develops the values and skills they will need so that one day they too can contribute to the needs of the next generation by leading their own families well.



*“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.”
Proverbs 31:8a (NIV)*

Across all ages, there are effective interventions for children and their parents. Some start before birth, others are proven to work with older youth, even serious juvenile offenders. While no program can prevent every problem within families and communities, these evidence-based interventions are based on the latest research about what really works:

- **Voluntary parenting support for teen mothers;**
- **Early education and care for at-risk children;**
- **Interventions for troubled youth and their families; and,**
- **Fathers present in the lives of their children.**

Parenting Support for Poor Mothers

We want all parents to be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to raise a healthy, vibrant child. However, when an at-risk teenager is pregnant, she is facing a teachable moment. Offering the mother-to-be voluntary home visiting before her child is born and continuing for up to two years after the birth of her first child, is proven not only to help the mother get her life in order, but also to help her become a competent and caring mother to her child. One program, the Nurse-Family Partnership, found that:

- Abuse and neglect was cut nearly in half;
- The children’s involvement in later crime was cut by more than half;
- The fathers were more involved in their families; and
- The mothers were up to a third less likely to be dependent on welfare.¹

In addition, when mothers-to-be abuse drugs, the long-term impacts on their children can be irreversible or even deadly. A program that provided substance-abuse coaching and treatment to pregnant women in Baltimore cut the number of births of very low birth-weight babies and their time in the newborn intensive care units so dramatically that the treatment paid for itself even before the babies were taken home from the hospital.²

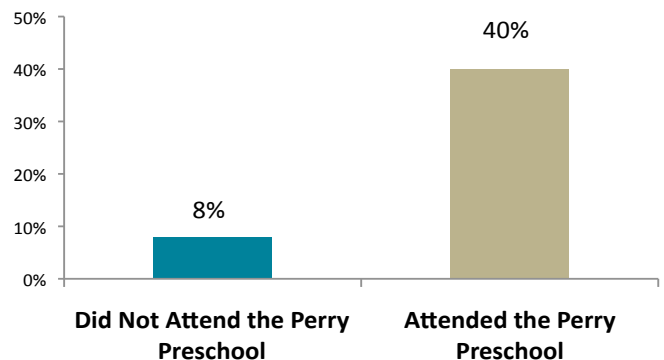


Another effort for younger children called Triple-P, the Positive Parenting Program, offers parents a range of voluntary options for picking up valuable parenting skills. These specific skills help parents teach their children how to behave responsibly.

The Triple P system was tested in counties throughout South Carolina. Compared to the counties that did not receive the program, Triple P counties averaged 25 percent fewer cases of abuse and neglect, 33 percent lower foster care placements, and 35 percent lower emergency room visits or hospitalizations for abuse.³

Girls attending the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely by age 27 to be married and living with their husband.

Women married and living with their husband



Schweinhart, 1993

Early Educational Opportunities

For young children, early education can help lay the foundation for future academic and social success. For many children at risk, their parent cannot afford quality early education programs and the surrounding circumstances often take priority over a parent ensuring their child is ready for school. As a result, too many disadvantaged children start school already behind their classmates in early math and reading skills. They often lack the social skills needed to follow teachers’ directions and get along with their peers. These problems can create a pattern of failure that lasts a lifetime. High-quality

early childhood education can give at-risk children the strong start they will need in school and in life.

For example, a rigorous study found that among the children who participated in the Perry Preschool program:

- High school graduation rates were 44 percent higher by age 27;
- Incomes were 36 percent higher by age 40; and
- The girls who had been in the program were five times more likely to be married and living with their husbands by age 27.

For those *not* in the program:

- The men were 63 percent more likely to have had children they did not raise; and
- Youth were five times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 27.⁴

Another rigorously studied early education program, Child-Parent Centers (CPC), has served over 100,000 children in Chicago. The children who participated in that program were almost a third more likely to graduate from high school, whereas similar children left out were 87 percent more likely to be in foster care due to abuse or neglect, and 39 percent more likely to have spent time in jail or prison by age 26 than the children participating in the program.⁵

Interventions for Troubled Youth and Their Families

Over 2 million juveniles are arrested every year in America.⁶ If their crimes are serious or frequent enough, they will face placement in a group home or other juvenile facility. For many, this is only another step along the path to further involvement in juvenile and then adult crimes, destroying families and communities, as well as their own futures.

Many ministries are already reaching out to both juvenile and adult offenders, desiring each one to return to their family and community a changed family member and citizen. Aside from these ministries, there are family coaching programs that can provide supportive help for the family of the delinquent.



According to rigorous research, three well-established family coaching programs provide valuable parenting guidance and help parents better direct their children's behaviors away from lives of delinquency. New arrests of youths in these family-coaching programs were cut by as much as half compared to similar troubled youths in families not receiving this help.⁷

Fathers Present in the Lives of their Children

For many children at risk, their fathers are missing from their lives, which can lend to problems that can follow them for the rest of their lives. An approach offering voluntary alternative high schools called Career Academies was not specifically designed to be a fatherhood program. However, it delivers solid fatherhood results. Career Academies provide small learning communities combining academic and technical curricula with a career theme, such as the culinary arts or the construction trades. The academies emphasize hands-on training with internships and partnerships with local employers.

Eight years after high school, the academies had increased the average incomes of the at-risk young men who attended by \$4,332 per year, increased the number of men who were married and living with their wives by 33 percent, and increased the number of men who were living with their children by 45 percent. Apparently, helping young men become employable also helps them be present in the home as husbands and fathers.⁸

And, as already noted above, the girls who had been in the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be married and living with their husbands by age 27.

OUR CALL

Pastors and ministry leaders are already working to strengthen families and help children at risk within their own communities. Therefore, they are in an appropriate position to educate our nation's policymakers about these important evidence-based interventions that can serve our nation's most vulnerable citizens early in life. Investments in what works are necessary to help them live with dignity, safety, and health; make positive contributions to society; and someday, raise strong, healthy families themselves.



Saving Money

As Christians we are concerned with stewardship, ensuring that we consider the intergenerational ramifications of the spending decisions we make. The programs we advocate for not only help children at risk and their families, they also produce substantial savings by cutting welfare, incarceration and other costs.

For example:

- The Nurse-Family Partnership home visiting program produced net benefits, on average, of almost \$21,000 per family and returned \$3 for every \$1 invested.⁹
- The Child-Parent Centers in Chicago returned, on average, \$83,000 per child and over \$10 for every \$1 invested.¹⁰
- Helping troubled teens with family coaching returned, on average, \$22,000 to \$57,000 per child.¹¹

Endnotes

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