Building a Better Pre-K System
PAGE 4

Q & A with Senator Kennedy
PAGE 9

Preschool matters

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A Race to the Top?

Since the beginning of the decade, NIEER has collected and analyzed data that reveal the progress states are making in delivering high-quality preschool education. As the article on page 3 reports, the new State of Preschool yearbook shows an overall improvement in state pre-K for the school year that ended in 2008. Normally, we would be pleased to celebrate that fact and look forward to continued improvement. These are not normal times, however.

The steep drop-off in economic activity following the 2007-2008 school year left state leaders confronting stark fiscal realities that are forcing cuts to pre-K access and quality in a number of states. This is a tragedy in the making, not least because the states have been in the vanguard of developing the most effective public programs in the nation.

Illinois is a prime example. As the article on page 4 reports, leaders there have wielded solid research, effective advocacy, capable leadership, and sheer political will to craft an early education system that is becoming a model for others to follow. Illinois serves 31 percent of its 4-year-olds and 20 percent of its 3-year-olds with a program that meets nine of NIEER’s 10 benchmarks for program standards. What’s more, it’s the only state that is committed to making preschool education available to all 3- and 4-year-olds.

When Secretary of Education Arne Duncan joined us for the release of the new Yearbook, he underscored the Obama administration’s commitment to pre-K and ticked off the various ways new funding will be invested. In addition to major expansions of Head Start and Early Head Start, he alluded to ways funds from the federal stimulus package to the states can be used for state pre-K. Now the administration has followed up with 2010 budget proposals for Title I Early Childhood Grants to create incentives for school districts to use Title I funds for pre-K and Early Learning Challenge Grants for states to improve quality and coordination of birth to five programs.

When it comes to states being able to hold the line on pre-K funding in the face of declining revenue, the record is not encouraging. After the economic downturn of 2001-2002, we saw a retrenchment in a number of states. It has taken years to get back on track.

Secretary Duncan issued a challenge to the early education community to improve program quality. He made it clear he and President Obama expect pre-K quality improvement as a condition of new funding, inviting providers to join in the “race to the top.” This poses a question. Will Congress fully support the president’s new proposals that will enable the fastest runners to compete?  

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (left) and NIEER Director Steve Barnett read to preschoolers at The State of Preschool release.
Can State Pre-K Be Saved?


Spirits were high at NIEER’s State of Preschool 2008: State Preschool Yearbook press conference at the Oyster-Adams Bilingual School in Washington, D.C. this April. After all, spring was in the air and boisterous preschoolers contributed the sound effects. NIEER Director Steve Barnett described the gains made in state pre-K and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan outlined the Obama administration’s commitment to improving pre-K access and quality.

Rebecca Rime l, president of The Pew Charitable Trusts, noted the positive trends charted by the Yearbook but said the states are “by no means united when it comes to providing pre-K. At Pew we believe that every child should have access to a quality preschool education.”

The mood grew more somber when Barnett pointed out that in states where the most pre-K progress has been made, tough economic decisions are putting that progress at risk. That very day state senators in Raleigh, North Carolina were entertaining big program cuts for the state’s well-regarded More at Four program. In Albany, New York Governor David Paterson was in the process of deciding the best he could do was cut his proposed FY 2010 appropriations by $75 million. And in Sacramento, California, early educators braced for cuts they already knew were coming.

In many respects, state-funded pre-K is at a crossroads. Some of the biggest states with the biggest gains have their backs against the wall. Unlike the federal government, they must balance their budgets each year. Yet many are confronted with multi-billion-dollar deficits only the most draconian reductions in funding can address.

At the same time, state-funded pre-K has largely been left out of the picture when it comes to federal aid. The Obama administration’s economic stimulus package expands Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care subsidies and allows states to use Title I monies for pre-K, but provides no direct aid to state pre-K. And, pre-K is more vulnerable to cuts in most states because funding is discretionary and not formula-based like K–12 education.

In states where the most pre-K progress has been made, tough economic decisions are putting that progress at risk.

Barnett says this creates a sort of ‘perfect storm’ for state-funded pre-K that could set progress back years. A retrenchment in state pre-K would have major consequences for working families already struggling. Many would be left without services because most don’t qualify for Head Start. Progress on program effectiveness would be lost because many of the programs most vulnerable to cuts are the same programs research has shown to be the most effective at producing gains in kids. More at Four, the North Carolina program now being threatened with funding cuts and reductions in quality, is one of only two programs in the nation meeting all 10 of NIEER’s quality benchmarks.

Barnett says the only feasible solution is for the federal government to step in with direct aid to the states. “We propose that the federal government commit to doubling the rate of growth in state pre-K while raising state quality standards so that by the year 2020 all 4-year-olds in America will have access to a good education,” he says. To do this, Barnett suggests the federal government would match state spending with up to $2,500 for every additional child enrolled in state pre-K programs meeting basic quality standards. He says that, in addition, the federal government should facilitate increased integration of child care, Head Start, and state pre-K.

“If the federal government adopts such a course, all of our children will have a brighter future. If it does not, disparities in early education and school readiness will continue to increase, and another generation will pass without the benefits of quality pre-K for all,” he said.

Key Findings from The State of Preschool 2008

- Enrollment increased by more than 108,000 children. More than 1.1 million children attended state-funded preschool education, 973,178 at age 4 alone.
- Thirty-three of the 38 states with state-funded programs increased enrollment.
- Based on NIEER’s Quality Standards Checklist, 12 states improved the quality of their preschool programs. Only two fell back.
- State funding for pre-K rose to almost $4.6 billion. Funding for state pre-K from all reported sources exceeded $5.2 billion, an increase of nearly $1 billion (23 percent) over the previous year.
Illinois: Building a Better ECE System

Coordinating Resources Through an Early Learning Council Proved Successful

With preschool education on the fast track in many places, concern grows as to whether states have the capacity to expand programs, develop and retain a qualified workforce sufficient to meet demand, and husband their early childhood resources into something resembling a coherent system. Problems like lack of standards, poor coordination among programs, high teacher turnover, low pay, and uneven professional development plague many states. That is changing in Illinois where strong research, dedicated leadership, and a heavy dose of political will have combined to forge a blueprint for a high-quality early childhood system that could become a model for others.

Illinois began providing state pre-K to at-risk children in 1985. In 1998, the state began providing funding for pre-K as well as services for parents and younger children through its Early Childhood Block Grant. As the state’s commitment to early care and education grew, so did the realization that more should be done to link the various programs and its workforce into one system. Part of that vision began taking shape at the beginning of this decade when the McCormick Foundation funded an effort to look at the state’s early care and education workforce. The picture painted by the resulting 2001 Who’s Caring for the Kids? report pointed out weaknesses.

Big disparities existed in credentials required of teachers from one early childhood setting to another. The pay teachers received for doing essentially the same work also varied greatly. The state lacked a coordinated system of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development. Caregivers not under the purview of the regulatory system didn’t know where to get training, and program directors often lacked the skills needed to oversee their programs and handle personnel issues.

The push to correct these and other shortcomings began in 2002 with the creation of the state Professional Development Advisory Council. This group went about the job of developing a core body of knowledge for early care and education along with content and competencies expected for the various early childhood credentials and aligned them with state and national standards.

They designed a professional development support system that pulled the various pieces of the professional development puzzle together. The result was Gateways to Opportunity (http://www.ilgateways.com/), the online entity now linking the early childhood community and various players providing professional development.

Teachers and staff as well as those considering work in the field can find guidance through the Gateways interactive web site. A career lattice illustrates the various pathways available to prospective early childhood workers and a searchable registry locates suitably located degree programs that fit stated interests. Other services include a child care resource and referral system and guidance on scholarships and financial assistance.

Money is often the oil needed to lubricate the
professional development machine, so Illinois established Great START, a program that provides wage supplements to staff who possess educational qualifications exceeding the minimums set forth in licensing requirements. The program not only spurs staff to seek better credentials, it also helps programs retain them once they’ve acquired the education. Recipients must, among other things, have a record of maintaining employment at the same program site in order to qualify.

Subsequent research has shown that programs where Great START is in high use are rated significantly higher on classroom quality, teaching indicators, and management practices used by directors. Those programs are also three times more likely to be accredited.

Another key component of the vision came together in 2003, with the institution of the Illinois Early Learning Council (ELC), a strong coordinating body that has successfully pulled the state’s early childhood assets into a statewide system. The ELC was born of legislation aimed at expanding early education. Its 65 members represent a broad swath of stakeholders from advocates to academics.

Well-known children’s advocate Jerry Stermer, now serving as chief of staff to Governor Pat Quinn, says a primary reason this approach worked is that the office of then-Governor Rod Blagojevich made it plain that the conversation about early childhood education was expected to take place within the ELC even though the state’s early childhood programs reside in an array of state agencies. With Stermer on the ELC, that expectation is sure to continue.

The ELC reviewed all programs in the state, identified gaps in services, and collaborated with programs and agencies to develop the blueprint for eventually providing preschool for all. They defined what early learning programs should look like, wrote an expansion plan, and laid out the costs. They called for the creation of the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map to help guide allocation of assets. It provides a detailed spatial picture of where young children of various socioeconomic groups live and the services available to them.

These efforts laid the groundwork for bigger things to come. In 2006, the state launched Preschool for All (PFA), the first program in the nation aimed at providing pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds. At minimum, PFA provides 12.5 hours of weekly programming in classrooms staffed by at least one teacher with specialized training and certification in early childhood education. Roll-out is scheduled to be complete in 2012, and the program is already serving about 92,000 children.

In 2007, the Illinois Department of Human Services initiated a quality rating system that indicates various levels of quality. The star-based rating system provides parents a user-friendly frame of reference for judging programs. While participation in the program is voluntary, providers see the recognition that comes with the star ratings as positive and most seek to be part of it.

The seven-year period between the 2001 Who’s Caring for the Kids? report and the recently released 2008 update by the same name saw substantial progress. The state made gains in linking together the components of a sustainable early education system while managing a rapidly growing state pre-K program that delivers high quality in a variety of settings. Lead teachers with a minimum of a bachelor’s degree increased from 37 percent to 48 percent and about one-fifth of lead teachers in private programs now hold an early childhood certification in addition to a bachelor’s degree.

However, a lot of work remains. Only one-third of lead teachers working with infants and toddlers have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Fewer than half of family child care providers have an associate degree or higher. Disparities remain in compensation of teachers in public and private settings, and diversity remains an issue in the teacher corps. Even so, the new report documents the positive momentum in Illinois and makes recommendations for maintaining it into the future.

Abbott Preschool Program Faces Funding Changes

If approved, a new school funding formula in New Jersey will change the way the state’s well-regarded Abbott Preschool Program is funded. Proposed by Governor Jon Corzine and passed by the legislature last year, the formula calls for modifying the arrangement whereby funding for educating low-income children has been concentrated in the 31 neediest districts as ordered by the New Jersey Supreme Court. The new system, which must be approved by the court, metes out funding according to a formula that does not distinguish Abbott students from other low-income students in the state. The formula provides more state dollars to previously under-funded, low-wealth districts while reducing state aid to the Abbott districts.

The new formula eliminates features that many in the Abbott system’s poorest districts say are critical to success. Among them is the opportunity to provide line-item budgets of particularized needs so districts can obtain supplemental aid. That aid can be substantial and is used to provide a range of services, including tutoring, counseling, after school programs, interpreters to help bridge language barriers, and transportation. “We don’t contest the new formula as it applies across the state but we do contest its application in the Abbott districts, which are the neediest districts with overwhelming concentrations of poverty,” says Ellen M. Boylan, an attorney at the Education Law Center who represents the students in the Abbott districts.

Boylan says, “The essence of the Abbott v. Burke decision is responding to particularized need,” adding that supplemental aid for leased classroom space where there isn’t adequate capacity or for transporting preschoolers in unsafe environments are real needs not accounted for in the new formula.

Superior Court Judge Peter E. Doyne, appointed by the high court to review the formula, recommended that it be accepted but that at least three years of supplemental funding for the Abbott districts be provided. In court filings, the state said it supports Doyne’s finding but said continuing the supplemental funding gives Abbott districts added funding not available to other at-risk students. The New Jersey Supreme Court is expected to rule on Doyne’s recommendation this spring.

Jim Greenman: Wrote the Book on Learning Spaces

It would be impossible to calculate the number of children whose early educations benefitted from purpose-built facilities adhering to the principles espoused by Jim Greenman, the pre-K development and design expert who died in April. Greenman’s body of work addressed a critical and often overlooked need in early care and education—developing facilities with children’s physical and cognitive needs in mind.

His articles, columns and well-regarded books spelled out approaches to facilities development where children could spend six to nine hours per day and learn in ways appropriate to their ages and where teachers, staff and parents could interact effectively. Among his most popular books were Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children’s Environments that Work and Places for Childhoods: Making Quality Happen in the Real World. Greenman campaigned tirelessly for early childhood facilities that incorporated features such as large indoor spaces for children’s active play, learning centers where children gather for educational activities, and conferencing space for meetings with parents. And he was quick to point out that many of the square footage minimums set forth in state standards were too low to make inclusion of these features practicable.

A frequent contributor to magazines and journals, Greenman was senior vice president of education at Bright Horizons Family Solutions, the company specializing in providing employer-sponsored early care and education in the U.S. and abroad.
ELL Working Group Recommends Ways to Invest Stimulus Dollars

Many, if not most, states continue to struggle in meeting the needs of children and families for whom English is not their first language. The 14-member English Language Learner Working Group, which includes Eugene Garcia of Arizona State University, Diane August at the Center for Applied Linguistics, and NIEER Co-Directors Steve Barnett and Ellen Freder, has identified opportunities for states to address these shortcomings by way of economic stimulus money states are receiving from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The group recently released a set of recommendations that target specific opportunities for improving ELL outcomes through allocations to Title I, IDEA special education, technology, data systems, teacher grants, early childhood education, the National Science Foundation, and state stabilization grants. The recommendations are available at http://nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=256.

Overweight Preschoolers Show Early Signs of Heart Trouble

Researchers studying more than 3,000 children 3 to 6 years old found that those with large waist circumferences and high body mass indexes (BMIs) were more likely to show early signs of cardiovascular risk. As BMIs and waist sizes increased, levels of C-reactive protein, an indicator of heart disease risk, rose and levels of HDL cholesterol (so-called good cholesterol) declined.

Sarah Messiah, a University of Miami researcher who analyzed the data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, said the new findings are worrisome in light of the fact that about one-quarter of U.S. children aged 2 to 5 are overweight. The researchers noted that the links between children’s weight and levels of C-reactive protein and cholesterol varied somewhat according to gender and race. They said their findings show that the battle against obesity needs to begin in early childhood.

Jane Knitzer: An Architect of Change

The early childhood community lost an important leader when Jane Knitzer, prominent child development expert and executive director of the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University, died in March. Knitzer may be best known for calling attention to the need to promote the healthy social and emotional development of children in low-income families from infancy.

Her ground-breaking 1982 report Unclaimed Children: The Failure of Public Responsibility to Children and Adolescents in Need of Mental Health Services examined the availability of mental health services for emotionally disturbed children and is widely credited with spurring mental health agencies to step up efforts to serve children.

A 1990 report Knitzer co-authored, At the Schoolhouse Door: An Examination of Programs and Policies for Children with Behavioral and Emotional Problems, provided the first comprehensive look at the quality of schooling being provided children with emotional and behavioral disorders. It sparked policymakers to focus on expanding special education services.

While at NCCP, she emphasized strong policy research on family economic security, children’s mental health, and child welfare. Before joining the organization in 1994, she had been on the faculty at Cornell University, New York University, and Bank Street College of Education.

On the 25th anniversary of the Unclaimed Children report, NCCP published Unclaimed Children Revisited, finding that while knowledge about how to treat children’s problems has expanded, struggles remain in delivery of effective services. Jane Knitzer’s work is not yet finished, but her contributions continue to enhance children’s lives.
Child Development and Social Policy: Knowledge for Action grew out of a project designed to honor the work of Dr. Edward F. Zigler. Zigler is a renowned early education expert who is an Emeritus Yale Sterling Professor of Psychology, co-founder of the federal Head Start program, and NIEER Scientific Advisory Board member. Members of the executive committee of planning for this project pulled together a large body of research on child development and social policy, a field Zigler contributed to in many aspects. This resulted in this edited volume, containing 16 articles written by researchers in the field of child development and social policy and addressing various topics related to Zigler’s contributions to the field. The volume is divided into four major sections, each according to a theme based on Zigler’s work.

In Part I: “Making History: Child Development and Social Policy,” the chapters come together to tell the story of the emerging field as it combines the best of research to move toward action. As the editors of the volume note, “good science, rigorous research and clear thinking are necessary, but not sufficient to benefit children” (p. 4). These chapters put Zigler’s contributions into historical and political context, describing how his work influenced the development of the field.

The chapters in the second part, “Ensuring Good Beginnings for All Children,” are devoted to an important problem facing children and families—the wide gap between what children need in the early years and what they currently receive. In this section, the reader learns about the formation of the Head Start program and various reforms to the program designed to help narrow this gap. Other topics addressed concerning the gap between what programs should and do provide for young children are the merits and pitfalls of both universal and targeted programs. Here, NIEER researchers contribute to the debate with a chapter devoted to analysis of the movement toward universal preschool education programs throughout the United States. Also addressed in this section is the overlap of research and advocacy in promoting the successful development of early care and education policies.

“Addressing the Needs of the Most Vulnerable Children and Families,” the third part of the volume, moves beyond Head Start to address larger issues contributing to poverty and its effects on children. The chapters here describe work, all of which was either conducted or supported by Zigler, done in a variety of areas related to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Moving from focus on the whole child to a focus on the factors influencing the child’s development brings the reader to the final section of the book, titled “Strengthening Children, Families, and Communities.” Here the reader learns about Zigler’s influence on parent education via his aim to serve parents as well as children through the Head Start program. Other specific topics addressed in these final chapters include children’s social and emotional development, the family support movement, and the impact of new media for disseminating information and advancing child development initiatives.

The book ends with an epilogue from Zigler himself. In a few pages, he briefly outlines his journey from empirical scientist to policy implementer to researcher and advocate—and calls for the torch of useful research to be carried on by his students and others throughout the nation.

This book successfully provides a broad overview of the field of child development and social policy while also pointing the reader to specific programs and issues that have led to past developments, that modify current thinking, and that will ultimately affect the future of the field.

Reviewed by Jen Fitzgerald
Public Information Officer, NIEER
Senator Ted Kennedy on the Federal Role in Early Care and Education

Few people have been as involved in the struggle for health and education services for children for as long as eight-term Senator Edward J. Kennedy. A staunch supporter of Head Start and other early childhood programs, Kennedy serves as chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. Preschool Matters asked him about the state of early education and the federal role in it.

Q: Perhaps more than anybody in Washington, you have fought the longest and hardest for early childhood education. As you well know, garnering support for dedicating the kind of resources needed to effectively educate young children has been an uphill battle. Now that substantial new funding is coming by way of the stimulus plan, what are your thoughts?

A: Overall, the recovery investment is a major step toward ending the current economic nightmare and renewing the promise of the American dream, and early childhood education will be one of the most important beneficiaries. More teachers can be trained and hired, and the quality of early learning programs will be increased. There will also be needed new support for child care, which means that more young children will be cared for while their parents are at work or looking for jobs. These steps are significant, but more remains to be done.

I look forward to working with Congress and the administration to see that all young children receive the early learning and support they need to be successful when they reach school.

Q: What do you say to those who maintain that ramping up funding for early care and education in a stimulus plan is setting up the early childhood community for a fall since the money coming from stimulus is not permanent funding?

A: Each year of a child’s life is important. We can’t deny young children today based on what we may or may not do two years from now. These funds are critical to keeping parents working and children in safe and productive early learning environments. In Massachusetts alone, I’ve heard countless stories of parents no longer able to afford the high cost of child care, and schools struggling to cover basic costs for transportation, food and staff. Few federal dollars are better spent. These investments need to be maintained and even increased, so that all children are not only ready for school, but are also well-prepared to become successful members of the workforce.

Q: With the enhanced funding for Head Start and some bills in Congress aimed at helping states fund their pre-K programs, some say we should be moving toward a more coordinated system of federal/state preschool. Do you think that’s a good idea?

A: Yes. Many states have begun to invest in early childhood education and child care programs. In Massachusetts we have Head Start, Early Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten and other community-based early learning programs for children and their families. Better coordination of these investments at all levels will reduce gaps in services, increase cooperation among early childhood educators and providers, and optimize the impact of these investments. That’s why state advisory councils were included in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act passed by Congress in 2007. Councils will help states align their programs and coordinate investments in early learning and child care. The role and responsibilities of these councils will assure the continuing success of early learning programs. We must also see that the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services coordinate in ways that optimize programs for young children and their families.

Q: Taxpayers need to know how effective any new investments in early childhood education are at producing positive results. Are there issues or questions that research might address that would help you and your colleagues develop better policy?

A: The science of brain development and years of data from high-quality early childhood programs such as Head Start, Perry Preschool and Abbott have made Congress and the country much better aware of the importance of investing in this area. In coming years, it will be important to have research that sheds additional light on the short-term benefits associated with high-quality early learning opportunities and gives us a better understanding of the key components of high-quality programs, such as staffing...
What Leads to Literacy?


Children begin their journey on the road to literacy early, interacting in myriad ways with adults and other children and in the process picking up language, the alphabet and other literacy-related aspects of their environment. How this process unfolds and is nurtured by parents and teachers is more important than previously thought, since it builds skills that determine how well kids will read, write and spell later.

A long-awaited report from the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) sheds some light on which early skills and teaching approaches in the early years most closely correlate with later reading success.

The panel reviewed a broad swath of research in its quest, examining more than 500 research articles that were judged to offer some insight into the question: “What skills and abilities are linked to later outcomes in reading, writing, and spelling?” These were then included in a large meta-analysis, or quantitative summary, of the literature.

Six of the many literacy-related variables the NELP looked at were found to consistently predict later literacy outcomes. They are the ability to:

• Know the names and sounds associated with printed letters (alphabet knowledge),
• Hear and play with the sounds of language (phonological awareness—for example, rhyming or alliteration),
• Rapidly name a sequence of letters or digits (rapid automatic naming),
• Rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures, colors or objects,
• Write letters in isolation on request or write one’s own name, and
• Remember spoken information for a short period of time (phonological short-term memory).

Other early literacy-related skills were moderately correlated with later literacy achievement but their effects weren’t consistent across the studies. Surprising to many was the finding in this analysis that oral language skills were in and of themselves a relatively weak predictor of later reading success. Some components of oral language, such as listening comprehension, grammar, and learning what words mean, relate more strongly to reading achievement but the panel said focusing on vocabulary alone is not sufficient for helping children become good readers.

Implications for Instruction

The panel also looked at the effectiveness of teaching strategies, practices and programs in developing early skills that lead to later literacy. Teaching children how to understand the alphabet (code-focused interventions) had moderate to large positive effects on a broad range of early literacy outcomes. Book-sharing interventions, home and parenting interventions, preschool programs, and language enhancement interventions also had positive effects.

Dorothy Strickland, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Professor at Rutgers University and NIEER Distinguished Research Fellow, served on the panel and says that in light of the new findings, there are some things at which educators, programs and parents of preschoolers should be looking. “Educators need to consider these findings in terms of their
and professional development, curriculum, class size, standards, and resources and their direct benefits. Research will also give us a better analysis of workforce development; beyond general statistics on early childhood educators, broadly it would be helpful for legislators to have a more detailed understanding of the skills, training, opportunities and challenges facing early education providers working with infants and toddlers in quality early learning settings.

Q: The preponderance of responsibility for public education has traditionally rested with the states but the federal role is clearly growing. How big do you think the federal role should be?
A: The aim of the federal government is to become a resource by providing a framework for setting achievement benchmarks that will make our country globally competitive. Because of the unfortunate reality of unequal access and unequal quality in education nationwide, the federal role has to expand in order to level the playing field among the states, improve early childhood education and child care standards, and make certain that students are educated in ways that will enable them to be successful in the 21st century global economy. The challenge is for the federal role to grow in a constructive partnership with the states.

Q: During the previous administration you made a special effort to reach across the aisle and work with your Republican colleagues on issues such as the Head Start Reauthorization. Yet examples of that spirit have seemed the exception rather than the rule in recent years. Do you see us returning to an era of more bipartisanship?
A: Reaching consensus on the issues and achieving the best outcome for the nation will always be our priority. We’ll continue to reach across the aisle to achieve our goals on these issues. All of us are encouraged by President Obama’s commitment to such bipartisanship, and I’m hopeful that we can keep these key issues out of the partisan arena.
About 10 percent of children experience a pattern of being victimized physically or socially by peers during their school years. This can lead to problems like depression, low self-esteem, and substance abuse. Research shows the behaviors associated with peer victimization are present by age 4 or 5 but until recently, there wasn’t much research looking at both child- and family-level predictors of victimization at this age. A large study of Canadian children participating in the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development corrects this and sheds light on common trajectories of peer victimization among young children and the factors that predict them.

Edward D. Barker, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa and colleagues in Canada and the United Kingdom used responses to questions about peer victimization from teachers, parents and children themselves at various ages up to 6 years to identify common trajectories of victimization. The researchers identified three trajectories that children commonly follow. Most common was low level of victimization but increasing, followed by moderate level but increasing and finally, high level and chronic. Seventy-one percent of the children fell in the lower level, 25 percent in the moderate level, and 4 percent in the high/chronic level.

Once the trajectories were defined, they looked at factors that predict those trajectories such as harsh, reactive parenting, insufficient parental income, and greater physical aggression in the child. The best predictor of both the high/chronic and moderate/increasing trajectories was high levels of early physical aggression displayed by the kids. Children displaying aggression as early as 17 months of age were more likely to experience peer victimization in preschool. In contrast, hyperactivity and internalizing behavior at early ages did not predict peer victimization in preschool—although the authors cautioned they may do so in later grades.

Another key finding is that both harsh, reactive parenting and insufficient parental income predicted preschool peer victimization above and beyond a child’s aggressive behavior. Harsh, reactive parenting distinguished the high/chronic group from the two others whereas insufficient income distinguished the three trajectories.

The authors speculate that the coercive processes that typify harsh parenting may provide a training ground for children to further develop aggressive patterns with peers, ultimately resulting in rejection from the group. Whatever the case, the findings in this study suggest intervening early with parents and children could help prevent a lifetime of victimization and disappointment.

Predictive Validity and Early Predictors of Peer Victimization Trajectories in Preschool is the first large study using multiple informants to provide evidence that patterns of peer victimization emerge from the time children begin interacting socially. It’s available in the Archives of General Psychiatry, October 2008 and online at http://archpsyc.ama-assn.org/cgi/reprint/65/10/1185.