



Strengthening Families

Strengthening families means that children should grow up in conditions that maximize their opportunities for success. This means investing in programs that specifically target children’s growth and development, but also investing in policy solutions that help their families provide them with the best life chances.

Unfortunately, many children who grow up during the Great Recession may face scarring effects that limit their long-term life prospects. Half in Ten partner, The Coalition on Human Needs, has issued a report, “[Recession Generation](#),” which states that, “Evidence is mounting that damage from the Great Recession that has punished the nation for nearly three years will be long lasting—especially for its youngest victims. Research tracking young people through previous recessions shows a loss in earnings that continues for years. Similarly long-term studies of young children show that growing up in poverty, especially if that poverty is persistent, reduces the likelihood of finishing high school and increases the chance of being poor in adulthood. Lost jobs, damaged educational opportunities, reduced family resources and a decrease in family economic stability are drastically limiting the opportunities available to those growing up and coming of age during this recession. The impact is so widespread that it threatens our country’s future prosperity.”

How does strengthening families cut poverty?

Investing in children and families represents one of the most important strategies for breaking the cycle of poverty. Policies focused on children such as [access to good education](#), [adequate nutrition](#), and early learning opportunities such as Head Start and quality child care ensure that poor children can enter school and the workforce more on par with their higher income peers. In order to comprehensively tackle child poverty, however, we must also advocate for solutions that strengthen entire families such as engaging disconnected fathers and youth, and ensuring that quality and affordable child care is available to low-wage working parents.

Policies that create strong families

Improving the child tax credit. The child tax credit is one of the most important ways to protect families' economic security. The CTC gives working parents additional funds to help them cope with the rising costs of maintaining a household and raising their children. The CTC allows families to claim up to \$1,000 for each child, depending on the family's earnings. The credit represents an essential way to help families achieve and maintain their basic quality of life.

Yet the CTC's effectiveness depends a great deal on how the credit is structured. The credit was not able to meet its full potential in the past because program rules often denied low-income families the full benefits of the credit. In fact, annual earnings below \$13,000 were not considered in calculating tax credit, denying the credit to those who needed it most. Congress made sensible reforms to the CTC last year that allow low-income families to count all but \$3,000 of their yearly earnings in calculating eligibility, but these changes are temporary and are scheduled to expire at the end of 2010.

Ending these improvements would be devastating for low-wage families across America. A parent who works full time in a minimum wage position will have his or her credit reduced from \$1,800 to \$320 at the end of 2010 if Congress does not make the change permanent.

This reduction would seriously threaten the ability of low-income, hard-working families to maintain their economic security and self-sufficiency. And it would push 600,000 children of working families into poverty. We recommend making the child tax credit available to all low- and moderate-income families, starting with the first dollar of earnings.

Reducing child care costs for low-income families: Child care costs often represent a significant portion of low income families' budget, with poor families spending nearly a third of their income on child care. With such a high percentage of income going towards this expense, low-wage working families often cut costs in other areas. They may be forced to turn to welfare, choose lower quality care, or take time off of work, all factors which can reduce family income and represent a significant barrier to establishing long-term financial stability.

In its 2007 report, “[Poverty to Prosperity](#),” the Center for American Progress proposes that we guarantee child care assistance to low-income families and promote early education for all. CAP recommends that federal and state governments guarantee child care help to families with incomes below about \$40,000 a year, and calls for an expanding the child care tax credit. States should be encouraged to improve the quality of early education and broaden access for all children at the same time. The Urban Institute calculated that the child care expansion would raise employment among low-income parents and help nearly three million parents and children escape poverty.

Reconnecting disconnected youth: [Research](#) shows that only about half of African-American and Hispanic students graduate from high school, and just 30 percent have completed a bachelors degree or higher. Poor youth who are out of school are disconnected from the labor market, and are often less prepared to enter adult society. Educational attainment is a significant determinant of income and employability and plays a large role in alleviating the effects of poverty and ensuring employment and a living wage for youth.

The education system is failing many poor youth, and state-run programs aimed at serving this population are underfunded. Federal funding is needed to help localities create comprehensive services to connect young people with jobs, training, and a route back to education. The president’s proposed FY 2011 budget would create a \$154 million dollar Youth Innovation Fund to test innovative models for delivering year-round work experiences to disconnected youth. The budget proposal also included a significant increase in education funding intended to support college and career readiness, and to foster innovation dealing with the nation’s lowest-performing schools. Finally, Half in Ten has supported opportunities in [national service](#) as a way to help disconnected youth attach to the labor market and access educational opportunities.

Greater inclusion of fathers in antipoverty policy: Both parents often play a role in their children’s lives, whether or not they live together under one roof. Efforts to help children, however, often involve supports for mothers instead of for both parents. Low-income men, many of whom are men of color, face significant obstacles in providing for their children. Scarce job opportunities and low wages make it difficult for them to help put food on the table or provide adequate housing. These problems are often tied to a lack of education and skills—those with the least education earn the lowest wages. And these problems are compounded by the general lack of affordable housing and high rates of incarceration.

Unfortunately, for some men, these challenges can strain their relationships with children and families or completely sever them.

Recognizing and addressing these challenges fathers face is to move toward a whole family approach to addressing poverty. This approach also complements necessary efforts to strengthen and expand services to mothers who struggle with some of the same challenges fathers face, as well as other issues.

We must tackle the issues that hinder *both parents* if we are serious about improving the well-being of poor families of this nation. The proposed Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund would provide \$500 million to create two equal funding streams—one particularly targeting the challenges fathers face and the other focused on mothers. Reforms to other antipoverty and benefits programs must accompany implementation of the fund. For example, we need to restore funding to and reform our child support enforcement system so that it does a better job of serving whole families and fulfilling its mission to collect support for children. Identifying and establishing manageable support orders would greatly advance efforts to reform the system, as would efforts to connect fathers with employment, training, and other supports.

We can reduce poverty and improve childhood outcomes by supporting the needs of whole families, including both parents and children. This will mean paying greater attention to fathers and their connections to families. It should also involve more support for family, relationship, and financial counseling and skill development.