

Access to Preschool Won't End the Literacy Problem in America, Experts Say

Advocates say parents need to do their part to spend more time reading and talking to their children

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John Veihmeyer, chief executive officer of KPMG, and his wife Beth read to children during a Family for Literacy program. Some say expanding access to preschool is only part of eradicating illiteracy in America.

Educators, activists and politicians have recently intensified their calls to expand access to quality early childhood education. But opening the doors to young children is only part of the solution, experts say, as economic and social factors have caused literacy gaps among low-income children to increase.

Ann O'Leary, vice president and director of the children and families program at Next Generation, estimates that by the time low-income children reach 3 years of age, they have amassed a vocabulary of about 500 words. But by the same age, children from more affluent families have vocabularies more than twice as large, with about 1,100 words.

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This phenomenon, known as the "word gap," is one of many factors that hold lower-income children back from becoming proficient in reading and writing, says O'Leary, who helps lead the [Too Small to Fail campaign](#). The initiative, a collaboration between the Clinton Foundation and Next Generation, focuses on providing parents with information to improve the health and well-being of children between birth and age 5.

"The fact of the matter is that there really aren't enough people paying attention to what's happening with some of these big changes for kids in America," O'Leary says.

On Nov. 13, a bipartisan group of legislators – Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., and Rep. Richard Hanna, R-N.Y. – introduced legislation to improve access and affordability to early learning programs over the next 10 years by funding preschool for 4-year-old children from families earning below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, among other provisions.

"Education is often cited as the 'great equalizer' of opportunity leading to greater employment opportunities and economic prosperity," Miller said in a statement. "The fact is, quality early childhood education works. The problem is, most kids don't have access to it. The Strong Start for America's Children Act will help close the achievement gap, job gap and wage gap between rich and poor."

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While that's an important part of improving early childhood literacy, O'Leary says what happens – or doesn't happen – at home has even more of an effect on children.

"We have a very different racial and ethnic composition now than we did even 10 years ago, and we also have children who now are experiencing more and more chronic health problems – everything from asthma to mental health to disabilities," O'Leary says. "A lot of the issues we're working on are not necessarily new issues, but what is new is how much we know."

Despite the fact that the stresses and health consequences associated with poverty can have an [adverse effect on children's brain development](#), O'Leary says many low-income, less-educated parents also don't have the time to spend interacting with their children – reading to them, talking to them and helping them expand their vocabularies. And according to [federal data](#), children of less-educated parents are being read to with less frequency today than in 1993. Although children whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher are read to much more frequently than others, the numbers have remained relatively stable over time for all education levels.

But why has the message of the importance of brain development during a child's early years broken through more to wealthier families? Investigating that information barrier, O'Leary says, is key to solving the problem.

"They kind of wildly underestimate that that matters, in terms of their child's future ability to succeed in school," O'Leary says. "We really have to do a much better job of providing parents with the information they need to understand these early years are so critical and that it will really pay off."

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Often, children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are already behind by the time they reach kindergarten. And that gap only grows as the kids get older, [research shows](#). Those children who have lower vocabulary and math skills in kindergarten tend to be the same ones with weak skills in seventh grade, and through high school.

O'Leary says in order to help close this literacy gap, companies from the private sector can use their size and influence to spread the word and break down that information barrier. In the retail

community, for example, O'Leary says companies can provide information to parents when they're purchasing diapers, baby wipes, or food, about what they should be doing during those early years.

Additionally, O'Leary says the private sector can help support working and lower-income parents by providing more workplace flexibility and support for quality, affordable child care, as well as access to learning materials.

John Veihmeyer, chief executive officer of KPMG, says the auditing company began a program about five years ago to do just that. Through its Family for Literacy program, KPMG employees, retirees and their family members go to schools with large populations of low-income children, donate books, and more importantly, take the time to sit down and read to them.

One of those schools is Don Pedro Albizu Campos, a public school in New York City with a large percentage of low-income, minority and English Language Learner students.

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"For the kids to see people who are actually totally different from them and care about them enough to come to the school and spend some time reading with them, talking to them, creates a really nice dynamic," says Peter Kornicker, the school's dean of development.

He says the book donations don't just benefit the students in the school, but also their siblings and even parents.

"One of the big issues we have is a lot of the parents come from rural farm areas of the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico, and they're illiterate," Kornicker says. "So even though we want them involved and working with their kids, they have a difficult time because they don't feel they have enough knowledge to do it."

But when the students are able to bring books home to share with their families, "it sort of brings them together," Kornicker says.

Veihmeyer says it's important to address the issue at a young age because many times, children with weak literacy and numeracy skills end up dropping out of school altogether.

"When you look at the impact in lost earnings, lost revenue, social service expenses that dropouts create, it's hundreds of billions of dollars that this costs society," Veihmeyer says. "It's ignoring the opportunity cost of what those students could be contributing if in fact they made it through high school and could be successful."

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The ratio of the number of books-to-child in middle-income neighborhoods, Veihmeyer says, is about 13 books for every child. But in low-income neighborhoods, that ratio is much different, with about one age-appropriate book available for every 300 children. Just by helping contribute materials to students who don't have access to them, Veihmeyer says, could help to start solve the problem.

"There's no silver bullet and there's no one solution," Veihmeyer says. "But I think we're trying to attack this at the source of access to materials that are going to help children become proficient at age-appropriate levels."

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