

## **Benji**

About twenty minutes south of the gleaming edifices of downtown Seattle, in a neighborhood surrounded by industrial warehouses, two-year-old Benji is growing up in the house his parents, Bill and Brooke Caldwell,\* bought a few years earlier with visions of starting a family.† Their small, low-rise, ranch-style house is typical of the housing stock in this affordable, working-class residential enclave. Bill and Brooke's home sits less than a quarter-mile from the middle school where they first met, and a half-mile in the other direction of where they first started dating their senior year of high school.

Bill and Brooke are arranging Benji's education and care while planning for their second child, who will be born in six months. Both have had steady employment since reaching adulthood. Both completed approximately one year's worth of college courses while also working full-time before losing their financial aid; once they married at age nineteen, their combined earnings disqualified both of them. Bill has been working full-time the past three years at a charity organization, earning \$650 per week (\$33,000 annually). Brooke works full-time for the local school district as a tutor for English Language Learners, making a \$39,000 salary. Brooke was home with Benji for only a month after he was born before she needed to return to work—she had only recently started the job at the school district and could not afford to give up the income.

Brooke's mother cares for Benji at no cost. Bill and Brooke would like to pay her something, especially since she has fewer resources than they do, but she refuses to take any money. They cannot imagine trusting anyone else with his care while he is so young. Brooke says,

“Family is really important to us, him being around his grandma and being able to have a relationship, and our peace of mind knowing he’s okay. . . . We are so blessed to have family here or one of us would not be able to work.”

Although they are grateful that they can rely on Benji’s grandmother, Brooke and Bill wish they could have enrolled their son in a center-based preschool program by the time he turned two because they feel he is ready. Bill says a center-based program would bring Benji together with other children and offer school-like daily activities that would prepare him to learn:

I’ve been at some of those Head Start programs, and you know, they’re really cool. I mean, the kids, they learn how to wash their hands, and they’re brushing their teeth, and they’re eating snack—and you know, just to learn how to act with other kids . . . you know, just things he’s ready to do, and he’s going to need to learn before he gets into school.

Brooke herself, in fact, attended Head Start, an opportunity to which her mother attributes her love for education. However, Bill points out, they are not income-eligible for Head Start or any other publicly funded early care and education programs, and yet they are also unable to afford a private preschool: “A lot of the programs around here—you know, it’s only for real low-income kids. . . . Most of the time we fall into the category where we don’t qualify for any of the services, but we don’t really make enough money where we can have extra money to pay for something either.” Brooke and Bill have even asked the local Head Start program director whether Benji could attend Head Start when he turns three if one of them stops working. They were told that they still would not qualify.

When Brooke and Bill are interviewed again one year later, Benji, who has just turned three, excitedly announces that he has a baby brother, Pedro. Both parents are working full-time at the same jobs; now both Benji and six-month-old Pedro are cared for by their grandmother. Though things seem stable now, Bill and Brooke report that the last year has been a struggle. Very soon after the interview last year, Brooke had pregnancy complications in her fourteenth week, had to have emergency surgery, and almost lost the child. Put on bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy, she was out of work for six months. The couple struggled financially, borrowing money from

both of their families to make their mortgage payments and avoid overdraft fees. Brooke used up her vacation and sick leave before being put on unpaid leave because she had not been given the necessary paperwork to complete when she was first employed to be eligible for short-term disability insurance. Luckily, both of their families lived nearby and chipped in, cooking meals and buying diapers while Brooke was bedridden.

Because of the financial pressures, Brooke returned to work within two weeks after Pedro's birth, and her mother began looking after the baby as well as Benji at the Caldwells' home. They are grateful for the large network of family and friends who have supported them, and especially for Brooke's mother and her devotion to caring for their children. Still, even with two parents working full-time at better than median-wage jobs, Brooke and Bill are disappointed that they cannot afford better early learning opportunities for their young son. More than ever, they wish they could start Benji in a group learning environment. Brooke puts it this way:

Bill and I know all the programs near here—there are several within a few blocks. Our restriction is because of our income, which makes it harder. . . . We both wish we could have started Benji in a more structured early education program at least a few days per week when he was two, because we know he wants to be challenged more and that in that type of setting he would be stimulated in different ways, would learn routines, and how to be around and accept care and direction from other adults.

Bill adds: "If there was a drastic change, like we were to have a lot more income or there was more funding, then we could put Benji in a good full-time child care center. . . . Because children really need to have the chance to learn . . . to get an early education."

## **Adrienne**

Diane Harvey<sup>†</sup> was thirty-three years old when she gave birth to Adrienne, the third child and first girl for her and her husband Daryl. We meet them when Adrienne is two years old. Mother and daughter share a buoyant, almost puckish, spirit. The family of five—Adrienne's brothers are Daryl Jr. and Gary, ages five and seven—lives in a modest apartment in Upper Manhattan.

Diane returned to work within the first two months of her first two children's lives. Little did she suspect that she would be forced into an even earlier return to work after Adrienne's birth. Laid off from her job when she was eight months pregnant, Diane at one blow had lost access to six weeks of paid maternity leave and the additional sixty days of benefits that New York's Temporary Disability Insurance Program provides. Instead, she returned to work just seven days after Adrienne's birth to support her family as the primary earner.

Con Ed [the electric company] stuck me with a large electricity bill that summer that we still had not paid off, and even though we were paying it down, they said they were going to cut our electricity. I'd been home four days with Adrienne when I am on the phone arguing with the electric company. [That was] when I get a call from G. at the temp agency and asked if I wanted to take a temp job that was paying \$16 an hour. I got off the call with [the electric company] and told her to go fax my résumé. I went to work the next day.

I did not want to go back to work right away—she was only a week old. . . . I had to get back to work, and I had no time to arrange child care. So Adrienne went to my mother's, who lives an hour from here in Brooklyn. Her father drove; he picked her up and dropped her off every day on his way to and from his job.

Diane was fortunate that her mother was available to provide free care on short notice. But because of the distance, this was not an arrangement they could sustain long-term, nor could her mother sustain it. When the advertising agency where she took the temporary position offered her ongoing employment, Diane—who took charge of making all the arrangements for the children—began the difficult search for infant care:

When she was two months, we started sending her to a child care in a woman's home with someone called Ms. Shannon. She lived further uptown [twelve blocks north] from here. She went there from when she was two months until she was six months, and we just paid out of pocket about \$75 [per week]. That was a lot less for a two-month-old than anyone else I could find; others were charging \$125 or \$140, but she was just starting and said, "I know where

I live and what the people in my area make and I can't feel right charging that much." I thought it was great, so I just said thank you.

It turned out that the affordability of this child care setting, with twelve children, was in fact too good to be true:

It was the lady and her daughter. It was not bad care or anything, but it was not structured. I got the impression the kids watched a lot of television, and [there] were lots of people going through the house. It was also hard because I had to bring all the food. She provided some food for the older kids, but Adrienne was a baby, and formula is expensive.

Diane had applied to the city for child care subsidies from the time her youngest son was one year old. She had called or knocked on the doors of every major infant care provider for a mile in every direction from her home, in search of a subsidy-providing setting. A full five years after she first applied, her persistence paid off:

I had wised up and knew I would never get off the ACD wait-list. [The Agency for Child Development is the former name for the public agency that handles child care subsidies, and many families still use the acronym ACD for the program, though New York City's Administration for Children's Services absorbed responsibility for the child care subsidies program in the 1990s.] Instead, I went directly to as many of the ACD [contracted] programs in the community I thought looked okay, and put the children on wait-lists, hoping if they got a spot, the program would help push through the subsidy application. . . . Sure enough, Daryl Jr. got a spot with Love Thy Neighbor's after-school program.

When she called to check in with Love Thy Neighbor, she learned that they had an opening not only for Daryl Jr. but also for Gary in their center, and there was an additional opening for Adrienne with a family child care provider in their network. With the subsidies, Diane's weekly copayment was \$75 for all three children, covering Daryl Jr. and Gary's after-school and full-time care in the summer, and Adrienne's full-time care with Ms. Spelling. "I liked Ms. Spelling the most of all my children's care providers," Diane says. "She was really orga-

nized and had her house arranged with lots of books and toys. She had been providing family child care for almost twenty years. Addy loved her and thought she was her grandmother.”

Adrienne would remain with Ms. Spelling for eleven months until Love Thy Neighbor informed Diane that she was no longer eligible for her child care subsidy because her income had increased:

I got kicked off ACD. That January I had negotiated an increase in my hours and my pay. I had been at \$16 an hour for six hours [per day], and I got it up to seven hours for \$19 an hour. Now they said I was over-income. We paid Ms. Spelling the full amount for like one week, but we could not afford that. I had to scramble all over again.

Having fought for the raise and extra hours, Diane then faced an increase in child care costs that eclipsed her income increase. Moreover, all of the available alternatives have been poorer in quality. Adrienne, at eighteen months old, is about to start her fourth child care arrangement, this time with a young woman Diane met from church who will also watch the two boys after school.

When Diane is interviewed a little more than one year later, she relates her disappointment that a pre-K slot she had hoped would come through for Adrienne did not:

We planned to enroll her in school in September, but it looks like Addy won't be able to go. I wanted her in pre-K because she is so bright and could get ready for school, and the pre-K program is free. . . . But today was enrollment day, and they said that I am not in "the zone." You know me, I visited them three months ago, I was the first one at the school this morning, [and] I had already called them five times before that to ask about enrolling her, and no one said anything about a zone. And besides, I am only two blocks from there. What can the zone be?

By the time Adrienne is three, Diane has made nearly twenty-five different primary and secondary care arrangements for their three children. This latest challenge, trying to get Adrienne into pre-K, has left her devastated: "They have such few places that they want to serve those who live closest to the school, and they know there would be no places available. They told me to try another school, but I knew

[that] pre-K program was for fours [four-year-olds]. . . . The lady was just trying to find the soft way of putting the dagger in my heart.”

The life of the young child in the United States has changed dramatically over the course of the last two generations. In 1965, three-quarters of children under age six had a stay-at-home mother, and fewer than one-quarter of mothers worked.<sup>1</sup> Most of today’s grandparents spent their early years at home with their mothers. In contrast, the majority of their grandchildren are in nonparental care settings by age one. By 2015, the proportion of mothers with young children who were employed had grown to 64 percent, including a majority of mothers who had returned to work before their child’s first birthday.<sup>2</sup> Over the last fifty years, the proportion of children living in homes in which their parents work has grown dramatically, and successive cohorts of American families have placed their children in early care and education at younger and younger ages. Nonparental care and education is now the normative experience for young children in the United States and in much of the world.<sup>§</sup>

In our research over the last twenty years, we have heard stories like those about Adrienne and Benji from hundreds of families all over the country, and we have visited the wide range of early care and education settings where children spend their days.<sup>3</sup> The challenges that the Caldwells and the Harveys face are not unique or relegated to the large urban centers of the country. In fact, in some ways Adrienne’s and Benji’s family circumstances are not as challenging as those of many of the other families we have met in our research. And New York City and Seattle provide considerably more early care and education resources than many other parts of the country.

Early care and education in the United States is in crisis. Family budgets and routines have been stretched beyond their breaking point. Too many children are getting overlooked during their earliest years when early attention and adequate investments would put them on a more solid path educationally and give them a fair shot in life. In a nation with ample resources to provide good opportunities to all its citizens, we are burdened with a system that creates unequal sets of experiences among our youngest children and growing disparities in cognitive and behavioral skills that worsen rather than remedy inequality across generations. Despite the strong and grow-

ing preference of families to place their children in high-quality early care and education, the enrollment of children under five in these settings and public investments lag far behind those of other developed countries and show large disparities by family resources. The crisis affects everyone, but the impact on the middle class and disadvantaged families is much more severe.<sup>4</sup>

Few things matter as much to the prospects of a person, a family, a community, or the nation than the learning, health, and development of young children. There have been revolutionary advances in knowledge in recent years across the diverse disciplines of biology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, economics, and other fields that make it clear that the period from birth until age three is the most promising and possibly consequential stage of human development. The research evidence from developmental science demonstrates the enormously sensitive and expansive learning and development that occur during this period and shows, in fact, that the well-documented gaps in achievement and development begin prior to preschool. The neuroscience literature, which has vastly expanded over the last twenty years, has shown the importance of the earliest period of life for the brain's developing architecture. There is now strong evidence of the importance of early learning opportunities for basic skills development, school readiness, and lifelong learning trajectories.

Indeed, these connections have become widely understood among parents, as shown by their decisions to provide greater early learning opportunities for their children, particularly among those who can afford to do so. Public support for greater public investments in early care and education has increased as well. In recent national polls, ensuring that all kids get a strong start in life was ranked as one of the most important national priorities, tied for first with improving public education and ahead of creating jobs in one poll and second only to creating jobs in a second poll.<sup>5</sup>

High-quality early care and education is in short supply, and when available, it is very expensive relative to most families' means. Across the United States, communities large and small, affluent and poor, lack the infrastructure for the care and education of young children. Over the past few decades, the market has slowly responded, and more affluent families have shifted to investing substantially more

in the early learning of their children. Families of lesser means have not been able to keep up. As a result, a great many children simply do not have the opportunity to further develop their skills to move ahead, and socioeconomic disparities in early education, school readiness, and longer-term outcomes in educational attainment and employment have widened markedly. The children of families with means have seen vast increases in parental time and financial investments during the first five years of life, including much higher levels of enrollment in center-based education, than children from low- and middle-income families. As such, early childhood has increasingly become a developmental period when a great many children lose the opportunity to develop a foundation for learning and inequality is reinforced. As presently structured, our system of early childhood care and education replicates social stratification rather than reducing it.

The learning gaps that are rooted early in life are precursors to gaps in longer-term human capital outcomes, including educational attainment and labor market success. The lost opportunities in early childhood limit development later in life because, as the economist James Heckman has termed it, “skills beget skills.”<sup>6</sup> The underinvestment in early child development is especially foolhardy given that, to compete in today’s information- and knowledge-based global economy, citizens must attain a high level of skills and education. The United States lags behind most other developed nations in public investments in children under age five. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranks the United States near the bottom among developed nations in the level of public expenditures to support early care and education, and thirtieth out of thirty-two countries in enrollment of three- and four-year-olds in early childhood education.<sup>7</sup> The United States trails other nations with advanced economies in levels of college completion, labor force participation, and economic mobility—areas in which it was once a world leader.

As public investments in early care and education have lagged, women have disproportionately borne the burdens of caregiving. Most mothers work and are increasingly family breadwinners, especially in many low- and middle-income families. The lack of an infrastructure for early care and learning opportunities has negative consequences for the productivity and earnings of parents, particularly

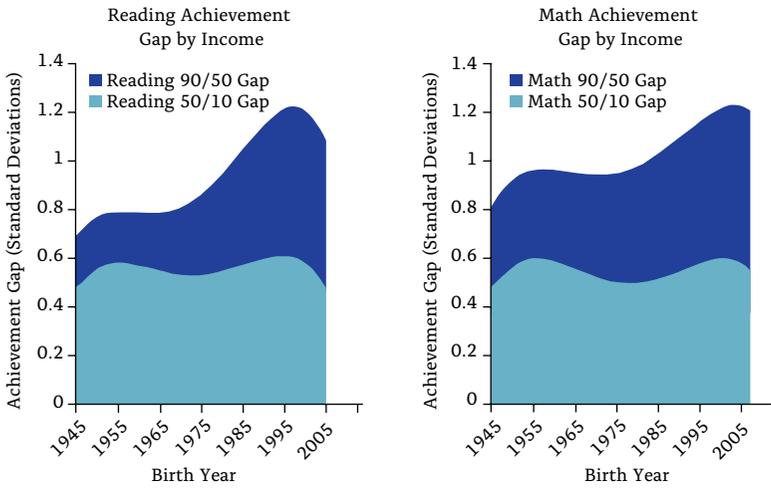
mothers. Many women have little choice but to return to jobs quickly after giving birth. When they do so, many families then struggle to find and afford reliable and high-quality child care, and this continues to be a critical challenge until the child enters kindergarten.

The central thesis of this book is that early care and education in the United States must be restructured to support children's learning and behavioral development from birth to school entry, in the context of families' work, economic, and caregiving realities. There is a huge gulf between the system we have today and one that will allow children to realize their full potential and provide the nation with the educated population it needs to achieve a more prosperous and secure future. We propose an integrated set of national and state policies that can support families in nurturing their children's learning and development to promote not only the children's long-term success but also our nation's.

## **Large and Growing Gaps in School Readiness and Later Outcomes**

From birth, there are wide disparities in access to opportunities for growth and learning. Higher-income parents are more likely to have paid parental leave benefits at work and are more able to take unpaid leave to spend time with their newborn children. Nearly one-quarter of children today are being raised by two college-educated, full-time working parents, and it is these children who most often experience two or more years of formal center-based care and education before reaching kindergarten.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, children growing up in low- and middle-income households typically receive at most one year of preschool learning in center-based settings. In effect, current inequities in early learning opportunities put children from affluent families on a vastly different track compared to children from low- and middle-income families.<sup>9</sup>

For many years, we have known there are large disparities in measures of children's cognitive skills, social and emotional development, and behavior across a range of family and individual characteristics, including family income, race-ethnicity, maternal education, and home language.<sup>10</sup> Figure 1.1 shows the trends in achievement gaps for math and reading test scores based on a comprehensive analysis of

**Figure 1.1** Trends in Achievement Gaps by Family Income by Birth Cohort, 1945–2006

Source: Sean F. Reardon, based on data in Reardon (2011) and Reardon and Portilla (2016); used with permission of the author.

dozens of studies covering the years from prekindergarten to twelfth grade by Sean Reardon and Ximena Portilla.<sup>11</sup> In math and reading, children from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution (above \$120,000) are more than one year—more than one full standard deviation in statistical terms—ahead of their peers from families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution (below \$25,000). Children from families with the highest incomes also substantially outscore children from moderate-income families (with incomes at the median level, \$62,000).<sup>12</sup>

These income disparities have been widening over time. The gaps in test scores between the ninetieth and tenth percentiles of family income (the midpoints of the top and bottom quintiles) grew substantially in the last quarter of the twentieth century—by about 40 percent overall between birth cohorts since the late 1970s. The gap between the top and the middle actually widened even more in these years, enlarging the gap between children from families with incomes at the ninetieth and fiftieth percentiles to be as large as the gaps between those with family incomes at the fiftieth and tenth percentiles.<sup>13</sup> This growing gap has not happened because children from lower- and middle-income families are doing worse—actually, their scores have been increasing modestly over this period—but

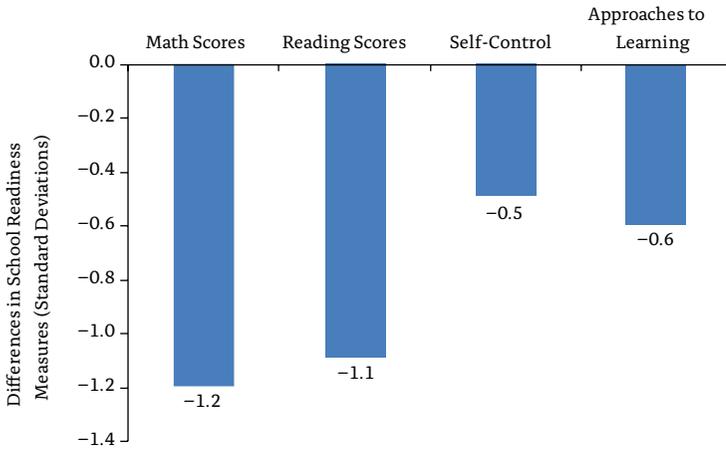
because children from families with the greatest means have been pulling away in their early skills. Sean Reardon and Ximena Portilla suggest that the significant increased investments made by higher-income families, including enrolling their children in early learning and preschool settings at younger and younger ages, are contributing to the significant gains among this group. This suggests that with the right kind of investments in high-quality care and education opportunities, many more middle- and low-income children could also improve their skills and school readiness.

By the time children start kindergarten, disparities in school readiness across the full continuum of family incomes are already huge. Figure 1.2 shows that the disparity in reading and math school readiness between children from families at the tenth and ninetieth income percentiles amounts to roughly an entire year of early learning (between 1.0 and 1.2 standard deviations). This disparity is similar to the overall achievement gap measured across the school years in figure 1.1. Figure 1.2 also shows that children from families with higher incomes are substantially ahead on measures of social and emotional development, including teacher-reported self-control and approaches to learning.<sup>14</sup>

These disparities begin well before kindergarten, appearing as early as infancy. Disparities by income in terms of cognitive skills, health, and behavior have been found as early as nine months of age. Two-year-olds from lower-income families are already six months behind in language development and word acquisition compared to children from higher-income families.<sup>15</sup> In other words, most of the achievement gap in reading and math skills measured at later points in childhood is present before children first set foot in kindergarten.<sup>16</sup>

Why do these large differences in skill levels and early disparities matter? A great many children in the United States have low skill levels when they start kindergarten and are not nearly as ready as they should be. Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) indicate that nearly half of all children who entered kindergarten in 2010 had low proficiency levels in a range of literacy and math skills: 49 percent had low literacy skills, and 48 percent had low math skills. Furthermore, two-thirds of children whose family income was in the lowest 20 percent had low literacy and math skills (68 percent and 66 percent, respectively).<sup>17</sup> Research shows that read-

**Figure 1.2** School Readiness Gaps at Kindergarten Entry in 2010 Between Children at the Ninetieth and Tenth Family Income Percentiles



Source: Reardon and Portilla (2016); Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011 (ECLS-K: 2010–2011).

ing, math, and behavior skills in kindergarten and the early primary grades predict later educational and adult outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Longitudinal studies and other research over the last several decades have documented the significantly worse adult outcomes for health, education, income, and criminal activities for those living in disadvantaged circumstances during childhood and into adulthood compared to their better-off peers.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, there is evidence that access to high-quality early childhood services can improve children’s outcomes and reduce disparities. The strongest evidence comes from the very few program evaluations that have included both poor and nonpoor families and tested the effects of high-quality early care and education on each group. The Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) served lower-income, low-birth-weight newborns across eight urban study sites in the 1990s, made frequent home visitations in the first year, and offered full-day, high-quality early care and education beginning when infants were one year old and continuing until they turned three. IHDP essentially eliminated the income-based gap in early cognitive skills at age three and reduced such gaps at ages five and eight by between one-third and three-quarters, thus increasing the predicted lifetime earnings of participants by an estimated 13 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Other evidence to support the particularly strong effects of quality early care and education on children from disadvantaged families comes from national studies of preschool effects and evaluations of universal prekindergarten programs in Boston and Tulsa.<sup>21</sup>

The Head Start program serves many more children than the more intensive IHDP, and there is more variation in quality among its program providers. Nevertheless, Head Start has been shown to increase participants' likelihood of attending college by six percentage points, decrease their likelihood of being teen parents by two percentage points, and decrease their likelihood of being in poor health in their early twenties by seven percentage points.<sup>22</sup> Although these effects are smaller in scale than the long-term outcomes from small-scale demonstration programs such as the Perry Preschool Project or the Abecedarian Project, they still represent sizable improvements. This is especially true given that per-child, per-year spending on Head Start is less than half what it is with the other two interventions, and that these results are based on receiving Head Start program services for one year (the typical amount of time that many children are enrolled in Head Start); children in Abecedarian and the IHDP received five years and three years, respectively, of more intensive and continuous program services.

In sum, the body of evidence suggests that low skill levels and socioeconomic disparities early in life contribute to starkly different long-term adult outcomes, and that early childhood interventions, particularly those characterized by high instructional quality, can improve educational outcomes that reduce disparities. These findings motivate our call for a coordinated plan to fix the early care and education crisis in the United States.

## **How a New Vision for Early Care and Education Could Reduce Inequalities**

School readiness gaps are not intractable problems. Expanding access to high-quality early care and education could significantly increase the level of skills and access for children in low- and middle-income families, ameliorating the sharp inequalities they face and ensuring that many more of them are ready for school. To be sure, investments in high-quality early childhood care and education for all children

would not completely eliminate the gaps, since it is likely that many other aspects of inequality contribute to the disparities, including later resources and learning opportunities. But a carefully designed program of subsidies and instructional improvements could significantly improve children's skills, reduce the size of the gaps in school readiness, and shrink subsequent gaps in educational and economic outcomes.

In this book, we point out several deficiencies in the existing hodgepodge of early learning programs: services are underdeveloped, leaving large gaps in coverage; on average, programs are of mediocre quality; and the components of the early care and education system are often fragmented and working at cross-purposes. As a result, the system is not coherent. Another important deficiency is that those who might benefit the most from high-quality early care and education opportunities are the least likely to attend. All of these deficiencies contribute to maintaining and increasing inequality in early learning and later success rather than reducing it.

Many early childhood policy efforts tinker at the edges, focusing on single incremental steps that could prove feasible for one program area (for example, state pre-K) or on one problem with existing services (such as low-quality care or lack of equity in access). We present a comprehensive policy proposal spanning the first five years of life that will fulfill the promise to provide opportunities in the early years for success for all, while helping to close the large and growing gaps in access to high-quality early childhood experiences.

We believe that a framework to support the development and education of young children requires a comprehensive approach grounded in an understanding of how current gaps in early child care access and quality contribute to the growing deficits in school readiness and educational outcomes over time. This book offers a proposal that addresses those gaps with the most evidenced-based policies to support children's early learning and long-term success.

## **Principles to Help Guide Early Childhood Investments**

Our plan addresses what we see as the key challenges across the range of early childhood services. In addition, it is based on research evidence and guided by a set of core principles.

First, the proposals we offer *tackle disparities in both access and quality*. We describe how large and growing gaps in access and quality by family income at each developmental stage have contributed to the widening of school readiness disparities. Both access and quality problems present challenges for supporting children's ability to reach their full potential. The widening gap in children's access to early care and education opportunities has contributed to achievement gaps by providing children from higher-income families with the means to race further ahead. Broadening access to high-quality early learning can level the playing field so that more American children can have an opportunity to succeed and development and school readiness gaps can be narrowed.

Second, in designing our early childhood proposal, we have aimed to *support both children's early learning and parents' employment*. These two goals can be complementary when high-quality, affordable care and education are designed to reflect the needs of working families. We expect that improved early care and education resources in the very earliest years not only supports children's development but can also lead to increased and more stable parental employment.

Third, we seek to *support parents' own choices for nurturing their children's early development*. The family is most influential in shaping children's development. The policy framework that we advance aims to expand families' access to a broader set of early learning opportunities by improving their availability, quality, and affordability. Our policy framework does not offer a "one-size-fits-all" solution.

Fourth, this vision *accords a central role to equality of opportunity in learning and education* in shaping policy for early care and development. Developing their capacities through educational endeavor is a principal means by which individuals achieve social mobility and success. In enhancing the development and learning opportunities that begin from birth, our policy framework is consistent with the value this country has historically placed on providing a level playing field: in the establishment of universal public primary and secondary education, antidiscrimination policies in employment and housing, affordable health care, and voting rights.<sup>23</sup>

Fifth, *supporting children's developmental needs in the early years is a shared private and public responsibility*. Even as the costs of paying for children's care prior to school entry have often been considered a pri-

vate family responsibility, children's elementary and secondary education in the United States has long been viewed as an area of public responsibility in that it supports the development of future workers and the citizenry. Many states and localities are coming around to this view of early education in the preschool years as well. We believe that the public and private responsibility for children's early care and education need not be viewed dichotomously. It seems reasonable to expect parents to contribute to the cost of nonparental early care and education to the extent that their resources permit because doing so is their core responsibility and they are best positioned to make decisions regarding the most appropriate investments. Yet stable and high-quality early learning environments are often beyond the financial reach of many families. As vital as early education is to skill development in the years before formal schooling and to a child's ability to make the most of the public schooling that follows, public resources are needed to supplement the resources that parents can reasonably commit for this purpose.

We consider and discuss these core principles in more detail as they arise in the context of the specific policy proposals across this book's chapters. Our aim in developing and discussing the policy framework here is not to prioritize any one principle over the others, but to consider how together they can inform a comprehensive plan for early care and education.

## **The Organization of the Book**

This book presents a vision for an early care and education policy to meet the challenges of the coming decades. Our proposal centers on integrated supports to allow families to nurture their children's development. Chapters 2 through 5 are devoted to each of the components of our policy proposal. Chapter 2 proposes a new *paid parental leave system* to provide parents with time and support after birth. In chapter 3, we propose two related policy mechanisms to support families' capacity to pay for high-quality child care: a *child-care assurance or guarantee* for low- and moderate-income working families with young children, and an expansion of the existing *child care tax credit* to help support the child care costs of families across a broader age spectrum. In chapter 4, we argue for *universal, high-quality early educa-*

*tion* that starts by age three. Chapter 5 describes our proposal for a *reconceptualized Head Start* that begins at or before birth and targets the highest-need children and families with early and continuous intervention and developmental services until school entry.

In chapter 6, the final chapter of the book, we summarize the key elements of our strategic vision and present how the four components of our policy proposal are integrated and coordinated. We discuss the proposal's merits, estimate how many families and children will be served, develop cost projections, and describe long-term benefits. We briefly describe how the components could be sequenced and phased in over time within a ten-year window. Finally, we discuss the challenges and opportunities for making this vision a domestic priority for our children, ourselves, and our posterity.