

Testimony for
The United States House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor

Hearing on
H.R. 2343, Education Begins at Home Act

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Submitted by:

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Prevent Child Abuse America and its network of 44 state chapters and over 400 Healthy Families America program sites in 41 states thanks the Chairman and the other distinguished members of the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor for this opportunity to provide the organization's perspective on the Education Begins at Home Act (EBAH, HR 2343). Through this testimony, our organization, including our National Board of Directors, intends to identify the value of home visiting and the outcomes that EBAH can achieve to enhance our nation's ability to promote healthy early childhood experiences.

About Prevent Child Abuse America

Prevent Child Abuse America was founded in 1972 and is the first organization in the United States whose sole mission is "to prevent the abuse and neglect of our nation's children." We undertake our mission by providing testimony such as this, to legislative as well as executive policy makers about the importance of a full range of services needed to promote healthy child development and provide parents regardless of wealth with the information they need to be the kind of parents they want to be. Based in Chicago, the National Office and our networks manage over 350 different locally-based strategies to meet the mission of the organization, including 2900 home visitation workers, supervisors and program managers oversee and implement Healthy Families America, a voluntary home visitation service.

The Importance of Development

Our nation is recognized for meeting any challenges brought before us, our communities, and our workforce, but our continued position of leadership is greatly impacted by how we raise our children today. Healthy child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a thriving society. The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Extreme and sustained stressful environments for children, also known as "toxic stress," damages the developing brain and adversely affects an individual's learning and behavior, as well as increases susceptibility to physical and mental illness. When considering that the ability to change behavior decreases over time, it makes sense (and cents) to "get it right" early when it is more beneficial to society than trying to "fix it" later. This is why Prevent Child Abuse America promotes the prevention of child abuse and neglect before it ever occurs. This is why early childhood home visitation services, as contemplated in the legislation, are so important to families, communities and our nation.

Role of Early Childhood Home Visitation

All expectant parents and parents of newborns have common questions about their child's development. Early childhood home visitation provides a voluntary and direct service in which home visitors can help parents understand, recognize and promote age appropriate developmental activities for children; meet the emotional and practical needs of families; and improve the manner in which parents achieve better outcomes for their children.

Research has shown that voluntary home visitation is an effective and cost-efficient strategy for supporting new parents and connecting them to helpful

community resources. Quality early childhood home visitation programs lead to proven, positive outcomes for children and families, including improved child health and development, improved parenting practices, improved school readiness, and reductions in child abuse and neglect.

Healthy Families America

Healthy Families America is Prevent Child Abuse America's nationally recognized, signature home visitation program. Through Healthy Families America, well-respected, extensively-trained assessment workers and home visitors provide valuable guidance, information and support to help parents be the best parents they can be. Healthy Families America focuses on three equally important goals to: 1) promote positive parenting; 2) encourage child health and development; and 3) prevent child abuse and neglect.

A review of 34 studies in 25 states, involving over 230 Healthy Families America programs allows me to say with confidence and conviction that the benefits of Healthy Families America are proven, significant, and impact a wide range of child and family outcomes.¹ In particular, Healthy Families America:

- **Improves Parenting Attitudes.** Healthy Families America families show positive changes in their perspectives on parenting roles and responsibilities.
- **Increases Knowledge of Child Development.** Healthy Families America parents learn about infant care and development; including child care, nutrition, and effective positive discipline.
- **Supports a Quality Home Environment.** Healthy Families America parents read to their children at early ages, provide appropriate learning materials, and are more involved in their child's activities, all factors associated with positive child development.
- **Promotes Positive Parent-Child Interaction.** Healthy Families America parents demonstrate better communication with, and responsiveness to, their children. This interaction is an important factor in social and emotional readiness to enter school.
- **Improves Family Health.** Healthy Families America improves parents' access to medical services, leading to high rates of well-baby visits and high immunization rates. Healthy Families America also helps increase breast feeding, which is linked to many benefits for both babies and moms.
- **Prevents Child Abuse and Neglect.** Healthy Families America has a significant impact on preventing child maltreatment, particularly demonstrated in recent randomized control trials.

¹ Study designs include 8 randomized control trials and 8 comparison group studies. More information on the studies can be found in the Healthy Families America Table of Evaluations at www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/research/index.shtml.

In addition to our stewardship of Healthy Families America, Prevent Child Abuse America partners with other effective home visiting models working in communities across the country to create nurturing environments for children. Our national home visiting partners include Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI USA), the Nurse-Family Partnership, The Parent-Child Home Program, and Parents as Teachers.

Together, we have accepted the responsibility to improve the home visitation field. Together, we share research findings and best practices, work together towards common goals, and create areas for cross program cooperation and learning that strengthen the home visit field as a whole, as well as enhance individual programs. At the local level, Healthy Families programs partner with other home visiting models to reach a broader population of families, to ensure that families are receiving the home visiting service model best suited to their needs, and to maximize limited resources.

The Need for Reliable Funding and a Coordinated Approach

Across the country, home visitation services struggle with unreliable and unsustainable funding. Federal programs that have traditionally provided significant support to home visitation, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF), have been subject to recent statutory changes and funding cuts that hamper states' abilities to invest in home visitation. The current patchwork of funding results in a home visitation system that serves only a small percentage of families. By one estimate, approximately 400,000 children and families participate in home visitation services each year.² As a reference point, there were 4.1 million live births in the U.S. in 2004.³

The Education Begins at Home Act (EBAH, HR 3628) introduced by Representatives Danny Davis and Todd Platts will address the current home visiting funding crisis by establishing the first, dedicated federal funding stream to support parents with newborns and young children through quality, voluntary home visitation at the state and local levels.

EBAH authorizes \$500 million over three years to help states establish or expand quality early childhood home visitation programs. Of this funding, \$400 million will be divided among states to provide eligible families with voluntary quality early childhood home visitation on at least a monthly basis. The remaining \$100 million will be equally divided between two competitive grant programs designed to address the specific needs of military families and families with English language learners.

EBAH dollars will enable programs to reach thousands more families with young children. Strict quality controls established in the bill will ensure that

² Gomby, D. (2005). Home Visitation in 2005: Outcomes for Children and Parents. Invest in Kids Working Paper No. 7. Committee for Economic Development: Invest in Kids Working Group. Available at www.ced.org/projects/kids.shtml.

³ Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Sutton PD, et al. Births: Final data for 2004. National vital statistics reports; vol 55 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2006.

only the highest quality programs are funded with the new money. In order to be eligible, home visitation programs will need to use a model with a strong evidence base and must show that they can adequately monitor their program for quality assurance. Additionally, there will be standards for staff training and referral networks, and programs will be independently evaluated.

The legislation empowers states to develop statewide plans for home visitation that best suit the needs of their communities. In order to draw down EBAH funds, states will have to assess the reach and scope of existing early childhood home visitation efforts and identify gaps in services. Taking this intentional approach to implementation will lead to: greater coordination among the various models of early childhood home visitation and the broader child-serving community; a more efficient use of resources; and a greater assurance that families are receiving the most appropriate and effective home visiting services to meet their needs. This model allows for a clear outcome driven national public policy that promotes consistent results and allows states to manage the services in accordance with their specific existing service delivery systems, on-going best practices and existing public-private partnerships.

Conclusion

Home visitation is an effective, evidence-based, and cost-efficient way to bring families and resources together, and help families to make choices that will give their children the chance to grow up healthy and ready to learn. Making quality home visitation programs more widely available in all communities is one of Prevent Child Abuse America's top priorities, and I assure you that our national network is mobilized in support of this legislation. Research also is clear that failing to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring costs the America taxpayers over \$103 billion per year.⁴ EBAH does not represent an expenditure but rather an investment in our children and families. It also contributes to more productive adult members of our society that promote stronger families, but also can be more productive in the workplace. This naturally contributes to our competitiveness in an expanding global economy.

While no one piece of legislation can prevent child abuse and neglect, I believe that EBAH is an important step towards ensuring that all children have the opportunity to grow up in a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment. I look forward to working with members of this Committee to make the well-being of our nation's children a priority. I hope that this legislation will help to turn our country's priorities and choices toward more comprehensive and effective ways for communities and systems to care for children and families.

⁴ Wang, C & Holton, J. (2008). Total estimated cost of child abuse and neglect in the United States: Statistical evidence. Chicago, IL: Prevent Child Abuse America.