

A Guide for Community Dialogues in West Virginia

MAKING THE
MOST OF THE

FIRST THREE YEARS

How can we give
our youngest
children a good
start in life?

Early Childhood Advisory
Council of West Virginia

West Virginia
Center for Civic Life



Welcome to the Dialogue!

The first three years of life are crucial ones. Early experiences play a tremendous role in shaping children's minds, bodies, emotions and ability to form relationships. What happens to children during this phase of their development has ripple effects that touch all of us, directly or indirectly.

This guide was written for everyone who cares about the future of our children and our state. Its purpose is to help people examine and discuss different ways that we can give our youngest children the best possible start in life. It offers three perspectives on the issue to help launch the dialogue. This enables people to consider multiple points of view and the potential advantages and drawbacks of each one.

The guide can be used for a single discussion or series of discussions. The dialogues can take place within an existing group or as a separate event for the general public. The questions at the end are designed to help groups take action on the issue, within and beyond their communities. In addition, a statewide summary of all the dialogues will be shared with the public and the media and considered by state officials as they work to improve early childhood programs and policies.

ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVISORY COUNCIL OF WEST VIRGINIA

The mission of the Early Childhood Advisory Council is to create a high-quality, coordinated system of services that support early childhood development. Its members include representatives of state agencies, community organizations and business and labor groups. The Council is part of the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts and is chaired by Cabinet Secretary Kay Goodwin. For more information, contact:

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ABOUT THE WEST VIRGINIA CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE

The West Virginia Center for Civic Life is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that helps engage citizens in community discussions of important public issues that affect our state and nation. The Center provides training and assistance on framing issues and developing discussion guides; convening, moderating and reporting on forums; and moving from dialogue to action. For more information, contact:

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MAKING THE MOST OF THE FIRST THREE YEARS

How can we give our youngest children a good start in life?

Table of Contents

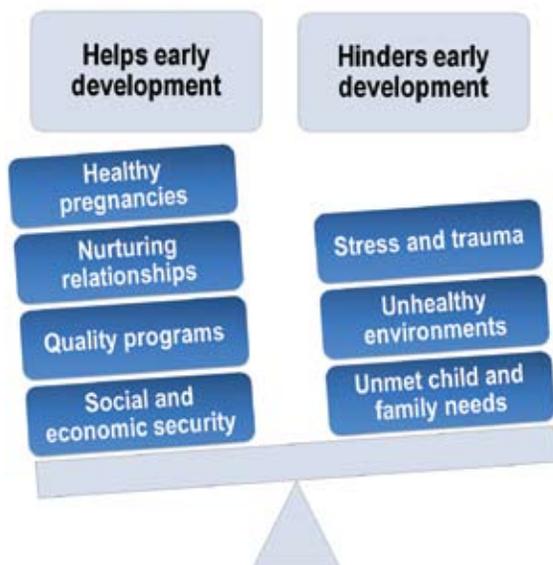
Introduction	4
<p>The first three years of a child’s life are a time of great opportunity, as well as risk. We can tip the scales in favor of healthy development by providing early experiences and relationships that help infants and toddlers thrive. Our failure to do so can lead to long-lasting harm to our children, communities and economy. This dialogue will explore three different perspectives about what we can do to ensure a good start for all children. Although the perspectives overlap, they suggest different priorities and trade-offs to consider.</p>	
1 Support caring and capable parenting.	8
<p>From this perspective, parenting knowledge and skills are the linchpin of healthy child development. Parents and other primary caregivers are the most influential people in the lives of infants and toddlers. We should provide high-quality programs to educate parents, strengthen families, and prepare those who are planning to have children.</p>	
2 Create family-friendly communities.	10
<p>From this perspective, the relationships and resources of the community are essential to healthy child development. Children and families don’t thrive in a vacuum. We should do more to include and support families with young children in our social networks, places of worship, public facilities and workplace policies.</p>	
3 Ensure opportunity for all.	12
<p>From this perspective, we have a societal responsibility for the well-being of young children. We should support infant and toddler development with the same level of public commitment we give to school-age children. We also need to level the playing field by addressing social and economic issues that create barriers to success for many families.</p>	
Reflections and Next Steps	14
Learn More & Get Connected	15

Introduction

The first three years of a child’s life are a time of great opportunity, as well as risk. We can tip the scales in favor of healthy development by providing early experiences and relationships that help infants and toddlers thrive. Our failure to do so can lead to long-lasting harm to our children, communities and economy. This dialogue will explore three different perspectives about what we can do to ensure a good start for all children. Although the perspectives overlap, they suggest different priorities and trade-offs to consider.



Figure 1: Examples of the multiple factors that help and hinder early childhood development.



For most parents, there is nothing more memorable than the birth of their children -- cuddling their new babies, calling relatives with the good news, taking snapshots for the baby book or to post online. In conversations with parents during the preparation of this guide, many also said that their happiness was coupled with a profound realization of what was at stake.

“The first time I held my daughter I felt overwhelming love and joy – and also a certain level of fear...Would I really be able to give her what she needed not only to survive, but also to thrive and succeed?”

During the past two decades, we have learned a great deal about the experiences and relationships that help babies and toddlers thrive, as well as factors that hinder their development.

Healthy child development begins during pregnancy.

Good prenatal care and maternal self-care lead to healthier babies, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Factors that can lead to unhealthy births include environmental toxins (such as air pollution and pesticides), as well as maternal stress, poor nutrition, smoking, substance abuse and domestic violence.

In West Virginia, a particular concern is the teen birth rate. While the national teen birth rate has dropped to an all-time low, West Virginia’s rate has been on the rise since 2005. Teen mothers are half as likely to finish high school, according to the CDC. Their children are more likely to have health problems, struggle in school, and be unemployed as adults.

Nurturing relationships are central to healthy development.

Relationships with parents and other caregivers are key to healthy brain development, particularly during the first three years of life, according to the Institute of Medicine. Multiple influences affect the quality of those relationships, including culture, child rearing knowledge and practices, and caregiver stress levels.

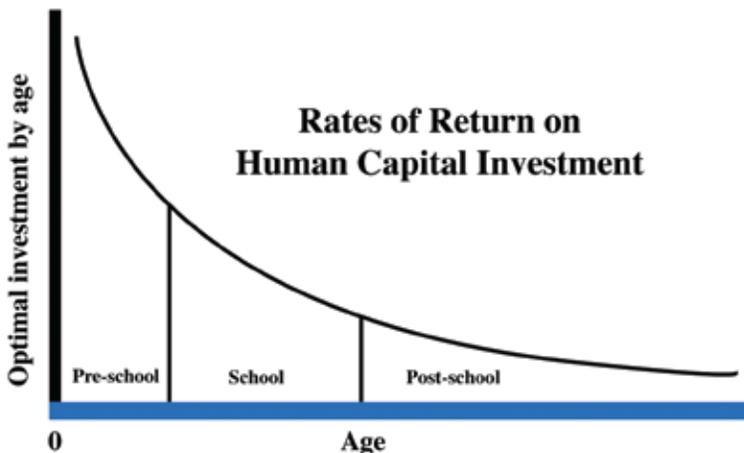
In West Virginia, more than half (54 percent) of children under age six rely on nurturing relationships with childcare providers while their parents work. High-quality childcare programs require well-trained staff and good staff-to-child ratios, according to West Virginia KIDS COUNT. Yet less than eight percent of the state's licensed childcare centers have national accreditation for quality care. Among family childcare providers, less than seven percent have received certification from the Apprenticeship for Child Development Specialist program.

Quality programs for infants and toddlers yield long-term rewards.

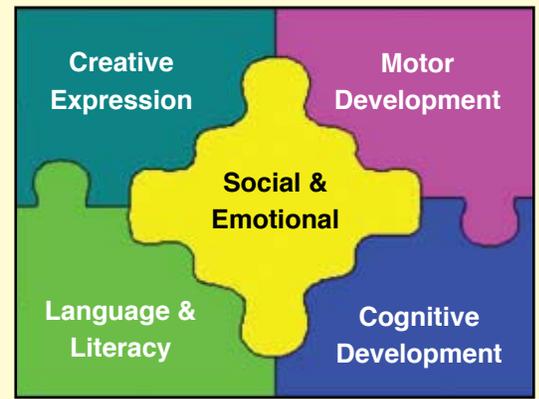
Young children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to succeed in school and adult life, as well as contribute to society and the economy, according to Nobel-winning economist James Heckman. His research on investments in human development found that the highest returns came from programs serving infants and toddlers.

In West Virginia, the long-term economic benefit of early childhood programs is estimated at \$5.20 for each dollar invested, based on a study by the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University.

Figure 2. Investments in high-quality early childhood programs yield highest returns.



The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children, Heckman and Masterov



Infant and Toddler Development: What's at Stake?

- 1. Social and Emotional Development:** The relationships that babies form with the adults in their lives and, later with other children, are the basis for social and emotional development. This is the foundation for all other development.
- 2. Creative Expression:** Infants and toddlers need opportunities to discover, enjoy, and create in ways that are safe and healthy. These learning experiences are the infrastructure for future growth and development.
- 3. Motor Development:** Movements in newborns are uncontrolled and reflexive. As babies explore their environments, connections in the brain are made that allow children to progressively gain control over their movements.
- 4. Language and Literacy:** Babies learn to respond to familiar voices and later learn to follow verbal directions. The cooing and babbling of early infancy evolves into recognizable words, and two- and three-word sentences. Literacy skills emerge when children show interest in stories and books.
- 5. Cognitive Development:** Intellectual development in infants and toddlers occurs in six main areas: categorizing, cause and effect, use of tools, object permanence, understanding space, and imitation. These set the stage for later learning at school.

Source: *Early Learning Standards Framework for Infants and Toddlers*, West Virginia Partners Implementing an Early Care and Education System
http://www.wyearlychildhood.org/resources/WV_Early_Learning_Standards_Framework_Infant_Toddler.pdf

The effects of adverse childhood experiences can last a lifetime.

Traumatic events trigger high levels of stress and anxiety in young children that can impair brain development, according to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study conducted by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente. Adverse events include child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, substance abuse, and break-up of the family due to divorce or incarceration.

The effects of early adverse experiences are cumulative. The more one has, the greater the impact on the brain and the higher the risk for long-term problems, such as high blood pressure, addiction, depression and premature death.

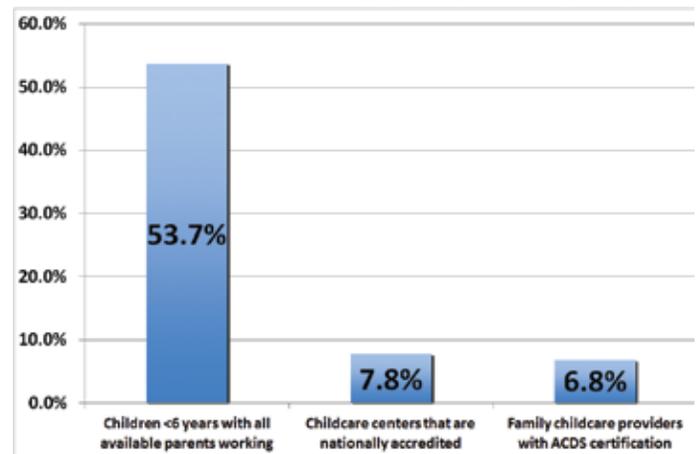
In West Virginia, the rate of child abuse and neglect has declined by more than 20 percent since 2005, though it still remains above the national average. The CDC has estimated that child abuse could be reduced by as much as 40 percent if early childhood home visitation programs were widely available.

Social and economic security is critical for child and family well-being.

Poverty contributes to serious conditions that undermine healthy brain development, according to the National Center on Children in Poverty. These conditions include inadequate nutrition, poor quality child care and unhealthy neighborhoods. In addition, physical and social isolation can limit access to the supportive relationships that both children and parents need.

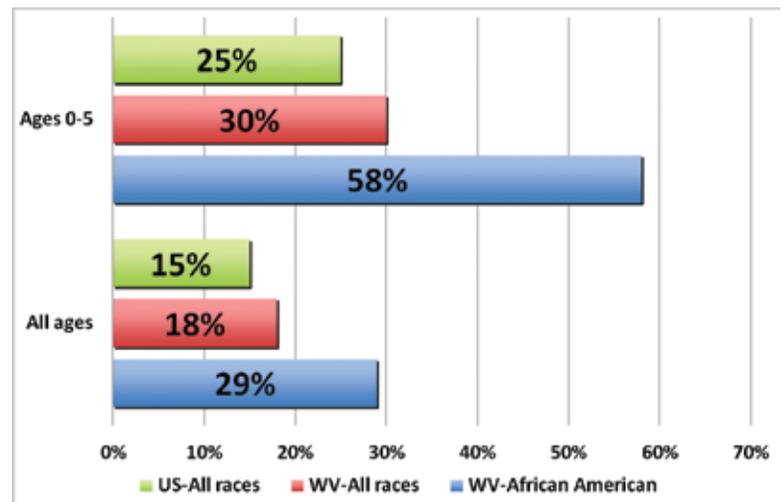
West Virginia has one of the highest child poverty rates in the country. Almost a third (30 percent) of the state’s children under age six live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. The rate soars to 58 percent for African American children.

Figure 3: Quality childcare for infants and toddlers is in high demand and short supply.



Source: WV KIDS COUNT, 2011 KIDS COUNT Data Book (ACDS refers to the Apprenticeship for Child Development Specialist program)

Figure 4: Poverty rates are highest for the youngest Americans.



Sources: 2010 poverty rates from Annie E. Casey KIDS COUNT Data Center, accessed 3/20/12 at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/>; 2006-2008 poverty rates for African Americans from *Legacy of Inequality: Racial and Economic Disparities in West Virginia*, Partnership of African American Churches and others, 2010.



What can we do to support healthy infants and toddlers?

This dialogue will explore three different, though overlapping, approaches to providing a good start in life for West Virginia's youngest children:

- 1 Support caring and capable parenting** by providing high-quality programs to educate parents, strengthen families, and prepare those who are planning to have children.
- 2 Create family-friendly communities** by doing more to include and support families with young children in our social networks, places of worship, public facilities and workplace policies.
- 3 Ensure opportunity for all** by increasing public investments in early childhood development and reducing social and economic inequities.

The questions at the end of the guide are designed to help people think about what actions they might take on the issue, individually and together. In addition, a statewide summary of all the dialogues will be shared with the public and the media and considered by state officials as they work to improve early childhood programs and policies.



1

Support caring and capable parenting.

From this perspective, parenting knowledge and skills are the linchpin of healthy child development. Parents and other primary caregivers are the most influential people in the lives of babies and toddlers. We should provide high-quality programs to educate parents, strengthen families, and prepare people who are planning to have children.

“They give you stacks of information when you leave the hospital, but when you get home you don’t know what to do with it.”

– Wood County father of three young children



A welcome visitor: Home visiting programs provide parenting education and support to families in their own homes. Many programs start before birth and continue to at least age three. Examples include Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Maternal Infant Health Outreach Workers, Parents as Teachers, Right From The Start Program, and Healthy Start/Helping Appalachian Parents & Infants (HAPI) Project.

The following are a few examples of what we can do to support caring and capable parenting.

- **Reduce the teen birth rate.** For example, the West Virginia Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Initiative conducts hundreds of classroom presentations each year, including the “Wise Guys” curriculum to promote male responsibility and “Reducing the Risk” to help teens build skills that prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.
- **Strengthen support for pregnant women.** For example, early and regular prenatal care, smoking cessation programs, childbirth classes, breastfeeding education, and reducing cesarean deliveries are ways to help ensure healthier babies and mothers, according to the West Virginia Perinatal Partnership.
- **Expand parenting education and support in all parts of the state.** For example, home visiting programs provide information, support and referrals to new parents by trained staff who come to the family’s home; Circle of Parents convenes parent-led groups that provide mutual support and advice for their members. More funding is needed to make parent education and support programs available in all communities.
- **Ensure extra support for children and families with special needs.** For example, West Virginia Birth to Three provides services to babies and toddlers who have or may be at risk for developmental delays; the West Virginia Perinatal Partnership is funding four pilot projects to provide comprehensive services for pregnant women and new mothers with substance abuse problems.
- **Improve early childcare quality and options for parents who work.** Childcare for babies and toddlers is expensive, and more financial assistance is needed for low-income families to purchase quality care; also, the state has adopted a Quality Rating and Improvement System for childcare, but funding is needed to implement it.
- **Expand support for early learning.** For example, libraries can promote early literacy by featuring good books for babies and toddlers and sponsoring “book clubs” geared to very young children and their parents; West Virginia’s Early Literacy and Language Initiative trains early childhood program staff to help families use everyday activities and routines to teach literacy and language skills.

Discussion Questions

1. What are we already doing to support caring and capable parenting?

2. What more could we do – in our families, communities and state?

3. What actions would make the most difference?



Extra help for a good start: West Virginia Birth to Three serves families with infants and toddlers who have or are at risk for developmental delays. The program offers a wide range of developmental, health and social services, typically in the home or other community setting.



Peace of mind for working parents: Playmates Child Care programs in Cabell County provide high-quality early learning and care, with accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The NAEYC accreditation system sets professional standards for early childhood education and helps families identify high-quality programs.

2

Create family-friendly communities.

From this perspective, the relationships and resources of the community are essential to healthy child development. Children and families don't thrive in a vacuum. We should do more to include and support families with young children in our social networks, places of worship, public facilities and workplace policies.

The following are a few examples of what communities can do to be more welcoming of young children and their families.

"Communities are the extended families and a key part of the child's environment. The things that children see and hear in the world around them shape what they do as they grow up."

– Early childhood program director in Kanawha County



Businesses on board: West Virginia KIDS COUNT's *Business on Board with Childcare!* program recognizes employers who meet state and national criteria for providing a childcare-friendly workplace. WVU at Parkersburg has earned the program's highest award level by offering on-site childcare for its employees and other family-friendly benefits.

- **Build community awareness and support.** For example, local organizations and businesses can sponsor community-wide baby showers, fairs and other special events for expecting and new parents; places of worship can provide rocking chairs in their sanctuaries for mothers and their babies; faith-based and other groups can sponsor a "Mother's Day Out" by providing free infant and toddler care for several hours. Family resource centers offer a variety of family services and activities at a convenient community location.
- **Make public places comfortable and safe for young children.** For example, local governments can adopt "complete street" policies that include curb cuts and safe routes for pedestrians with strollers (as well as wheelchairs); playground sponsors can include equipment for toddlers; local and state governments can adopt policies that protect a child's right to nurse in public places; public buildings can provide convenient places for breastfeeding.
- **Make businesses baby-friendly.** For example, businesses can designate special parking for customers with young children, install changing tables in restrooms, and provide high chairs in restaurants that are safe for infants and toddlers.
- **Adopt family-friendly workplace policies.** For example, employers can offer onsite childcare and/or assistance to employees in finding and paying for childcare; employers can adopt leave policies that include extended maternity and paternity leave and care of sick children; employers can offer flexible hours, including part-time and compressed work weeks (e.g. four 10-hour days), as well as options such as telecommuting.
- **Provide more support for students with young children.** For example, high schools and colleges can offer parenting classes and onsite childcare that help students with children finish school while learning to be good parents; schools can sponsor fatherhood programs that help young men be active and responsible parents.

Discussion Questions

1. What are we already doing to make our communities welcoming to families with infants and toddlers?

2. What more could we do – in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, businesses and public facilities?

3. What actions would make the most difference?



One-stop support: Family Resource Centers bring together a variety of family services and activities in a single location, such as a school or other neighborhood building. There are currently 19 centers in West Virginia. For details and locations, see http://www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/eces_services.asp.



Welcoming all babies: Several counties sponsor communitywide baby showers open to all local families who are expecting or have new babies. For example, Monroe County holds two showers each year that include parenting education, food and fun, as well as useful gifts like baby car seats and a baby quilt made for each family by local quilters.

3

Ensure opportunity for all.

From this perspective, we have a societal responsibility for the well-being of all young children. We should support infant and toddler development with the same level of public commitment we give to school-age children. We also need to level the playing field by addressing social and economic issues that create barriers to success for many families.

The following are a few examples of what we can do to ensure that all young children thrive.

“This affects everyone. If we don’t provide early education, children’s brains won’t develop to their full capacity. They may require additional help in school and have less chance of giving back to society.”

– Community planner and mother of two in Berkeley County



Economic empowerment:

High school students who attend the Middle College program at West Virginia Northern Community College earn their high school diplomas plus college credits, which position them to obtain college degrees and be better prepared to support a family.

- **Ensure high quality in all programs serving infants and toddlers.** The effectiveness of early childhood programs hinges on quality, and quality hinges on care that is appropriate to the child’s stage of development, as well as staff who have the preparation needed to work with young children. West Virginia could support higher quality by funding and implementing the Quality Rating and Improvement System for childcare; increasing subsidies for childcare so that low-income families can afford quality childcare programs; and raising the requirements and wages for childcare workers.
- **Help more students graduate from high schools, technical schools and colleges.** We could reduce child poverty by increasing the educational attainment of young adults who are or will become parents. For example, high school students in Brooke, Marshall and Ohio counties can enroll in the Northern Middle College Early Entrance High School, where they earn college credits by the time they graduate from high school.
- **Promote the economic empowerment of young families.** For example, local agencies can provide training and direct services that help families increase their job skills, start their own businesses, manage and invest their money, and purchase their own homes. Community and economic developers can support businesses that provide jobs with livable wages and health and retirement benefits. State policymakers can adopt policies that expand health insurance options and create a state Earned Income Tax Credit modeled after the federal credit.
- **Improve the service system for families with special needs.** For example, the development of children – especially very young children – can be seriously affected by mental illness, substance abuse, incarceration, and domestic violence in the family. State policymakers can help by adequately funding community-based programs, including re-entry programs for parents who have been in prison.
- **Reduce racial disparities in health, education and employment.** For example, schools, businesses and organizations can sponsor diversity training for their students, employees and members; the state can fully support the implementation of the new Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs, which was created by the Legislature in 2012.

Discussion Questions

1. What are we already doing to ensure that all young children and families thrive?

2. What more could we do – in terms of local action, as well as state policy?

3. What actions and policies would make the most difference?



No place like home: The Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action (KISRA) offers education, employment, economic empowerment and behavioral health services in Kanawha and other southern counties. Its services include guidance to low and moderate-income families who want to achieve the American Dream of homeownership. Financial assistance with down payments is also provided to families that qualify.



A voice for working families: The West Virginia Alliance for Sustainable Families (WVASF) supports research, education and advocacy on issues that help families build assets and achieve economic security. Projects include a statewide outreach effort for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for low and moderate-income families.

Moving from Dialogue to Action

Most people who participate in community dialogues want to do more than talk about the problem; they also want to consider actions that will improve the situation. What are the opportunities for action that emerged from this forum?

REFLECTION ON THE DIALOGUE

What new information or insights did you gain?

What actions are we most willing to support, and why?

What actions are we least willing to support, and why?

What tough choices do we still need to grapple with?

MOVING TO ACTION

What can we each do personally to support early childhood development, particularly for babies and toddlers?

What can our communities do about the issue?

What policies – local, state or national – should be created or changed?

DECIDING WHERE TO START

What actions are most likely to have the greatest impact?

What actions are the most doable in terms of time, resources, and public will?

Who needs to be involved?

What will be our next steps?

Learn More & Get Connected

The Early Childhood Advisory Council of West Virginia

www.wvearlylearning.org

The Council is located in the Department of Education and the Arts and chaired by Cabinet Secretary Kay Goodwin. The Council includes these organizational members:

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR)

- Division of Early Care and Education, Bureau for Children and Families, www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/ece/
- Early Childhood Health Project, Bureau for Public Health, www.wvdhhr.org/echp/
- West Virginia Birth to Three, Bureau for Public Health, www.wvdhhr.org/birth23/
- West Virginia Head Start Collaboration Office, Bureau for Children and Families, www.wvheadstart.org
- West Virginia Home Visitation Program, Bureau for Public Health, www.wvdhhr.org/wvhomevisitation/

West Virginia Department of Education

- Office of School Readiness, <http://wvde.state.wv.us/osr/>
- Office of Special Programs, <http://wvde.state.wv.us/osp/>
- Local Education Agencies

Other agencies and organizations

- AFL-CIO Appalachian Council Head Start, www.appcouncil.com
- Higher Education Policy Commission, <http://wvhepcnew.wvnet.edu/>
- Imagine West Virginia, www.imaginewestvirginia.com/right-and-smart.html
- Office of the Governor, www.governor.wv.gov/
- Partners in Community Outreach, www.wvpartners.org
- West Virginia Childcare Centers United, www.wvccu.com
- West Virginia Head Start and Early Head Start programs, www.wvheadstart.org
- West Virginia KIDS COUNT Fund, www.wvkidscountfund.org
- West Virginia's Promise—The Alliance for Youth, www.fivepromises.wv.gov/Pages/default.aspx

Other Helpful Websites:

- **Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action (KISRA)**
www.kisra.org
- **Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia**
A program of TEAM for West Virginia Children
www.preventchildabusewv.org
- **West Virginia Alliance for Sustainable Families**
www.wvasf.org
- **West Virginia Center for Civic Life**
www.wvciviclif.org
- **West Virginia Perinatal Partnership**
www.wvperinatal.org
- **West Virginia Public Broadcasting, Ready to Learn**
www.wvpubcast.org/education.aspx?id=21086
- **ZERO TO THREE**
A national organization focused on infants and toddlers
www.zerotothree.org





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