

# TWO GENERATIONS, ONE FUTURE INNOVATIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

To learn more about Ascend at the Aspen Institute and two-generation approaches, visit:  
web: [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org)     [@aspenascend](https://twitter.com/aspenascend)     [/aspenascend](https://facebook.com/aspenascend)

Photo: Ascend Fellow Steve Lis



In September 2013, Ascend at the Aspen Institute kicked off a series of forums on early childhood and the two-generation approach. Two-generation approaches focus on creating opportunities for and addressing the needs of children and their parents together. They build education, economic supports, social capital, and health and well-being to create a legacy of economic security that passes from one generation to the next.

The kick-off early childhood forum, hosted in partnership with The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, had two segments. One was a broader conversation with a range of early childhood and other experts. The other was a more in-depth discussion with the Ascend Fellows on lessons for early childhood from their two-generation work.

Below are key takeaways from this first conversation to spark and advance new ideas. Ascend invites those working for better outcomes for children to consider the potential for a two-generation approach in their work.

## NEED FOR TWO-GENERATION APPROACH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

In the United States today, nearly 45 percent of all children — more than 32 million children

— live in low-income families. Almost three-fourths of single-mother families with children are low income. We believe that a country in which millions of families are struggling for economic stability is neither an equitable nor sustainable one.

Early childhood programs are a gateway to help both children and their parents, yet participants acknowledged that the field has struggled with effective family engagement in today's 21st century reality. One expert suggested that addressing that disconnect means thinking about parents differently and identifying with them through both their parenting and career roles. Using this perspective offers a way to help children and their parents move forward together.

---

*"In this room, there are really influential people. As we all craft our path forward, thinking about how we link these important sectors is very important. This is the first of many conversations."*

- Ascend Fellow Dr. Meera Mani,  
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

---

## PARENT VOICES INFORM DESIGN

We must work **with** parents. They are the experts in their own lives. We need to understand what motivates them and seek leadership opportunities for them.

Understanding parents' needs must be at the core of program design. For example, in one study of 100 mothers in a home visiting program, researchers captured what mothers said they wanted and needed as part of the

clinical home visiting. Surprisingly, the number one request from mothers was skills-training and jobs.<sup>1</sup> This was not the core of the program, but it was important to parents.

---

*“[We were doing] all the things that we are supposed to be doing, but no one was grading us on them. I brought a child report card to the table and asked [the program] to give us a report card. How are we doing?...That was something they took...Parent involvement increased; reading to their children increased. Who wants to see an F?”*

- Tameka Henry, Mother; former Policy Committee chairperson, Acelero Learning Clark County; Board Member, National Head Start Association

---

At the forum, Ascend shared the findings from a bipartisan series of focus groups with low-income mothers, commissioned in 2013. Mothers expressed optimism but also continued economic concerns, even post-recession. They seek independence and stability, and they see college as key for their children. Mothers want to be healthy, financially stable, and free of debt. They define success for their children in terms of overall happiness and the ability to pursue the career of their choice. For the complete findings from this series, *Voices for Two-Generation Success*, see [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org).

Social capital – or family and community networks – is a key component of a two-generation approach. Participants discussed the importance of being intentional in fostering social networks through program design. One practitioner shared the importance of tapping natural networks to increase parent enrollment in postsecondary education and job skills classes. However, the bigger payoff comes through strengthened friendships as cohorts of parents experience the challenges of school and work demands together.

---

*“Early childhood programs and policies are gateways for two-generation approaches. Putting research into action is so important since it is clear that the conditions of the family affect child development.”*

- Dr. Joan Lombardi, Advisor, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

---

## ESSENTIAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

Discussions with the Ascend Fellows, who are leading innovators in the two-generation field, delved deeper into two-generation design elements. Many concurred that, regardless of program size or goals, strong community partnerships are vital to ensure that services are effective for both children and their parents. When asked about other essential features of successful two-generation programs, the following themes emerged:

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Darius Tandon, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, remarks given at early childhood forum, Los Altos, Calif., 25 September 2013.



Photo: Ascend Fellow Steve Liss

## FORUM PARTICIPANTS

Participants included early childhood development policy experts, program innovators, parents, educators, researchers, and representatives from philanthropy. The Ascend Fellows brought their experiences from implementing two-generation programs and policies to the discussion.

Katie Albright, San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Center  
Letty Bass, Chambers Family Fund  
Reggie Bicha, Colorado Department of Human Services  
Dr. P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Northwestern University  
Steven Dow, CAP Tulsa  
Dr. Teresa Eckrich Sommer, Northwestern University  
Dr. Susan Engel, Williams College  
Phyllis Glink, Irving B. Harris Foundation  
Dr. Todd Grindal, Abt Associates  
Janice M. Gruendel, Ph.D., M.Ed., CEO/Founder, Gruendel & Associates, LLC  
Tameka Henry, Mother; Board Member, National Head Start Association  
Artishia Hunter, Evanston Community Foundation  
Dr. Bette Hyde, Washington State, Department of Early Learning  
Judy Langford, Center for Study of Social Policy  
Carol Larson, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
Dr. Joan Lombardi, Advisor, Ascend at the Aspen Institute  
Dr. Meera Mani, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation  
Scott Miller, Acelero Learning  
Rick Noriega, AVANCE, Inc.  
Rosita Ramirez, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials  
Dr. Sandra Smith, University of California, Berkeley  
Mary Anne Snyder, Colorado Office of Early Childhood  
Abigail Stewart-Kahn, San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Center  
Cynthia Stringfellow, Ounce of Prevention, Center for Study of Child Care  
Dr. Darius Tandon, Northwestern University  
Matt Taylor, IDEO.org  
Carla Thompson, W.K. Kellogg Foundation  
Wanda Walker, Jeremiah Program  
Dr. Alandra Washington, W.K. Kellogg Foundation  
Albert Wat, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices  
Dr. Alan Weil, National Academy for State Healthy Policy  
Dr. Marcy Whitebook, University of California, Berkeley  
Henry Wilde, Acelero Learning

### Ascend at the Aspen Institute Staff:

Anne Mosle, Vice President & Executive Director  
Nisha Patel, Deputy Director  
Dr. Jennifer Stedron, Senior Program Manager  
Sarah Haight, Program Manager

- **Leadership:** Context matters, and this includes leadership. A strong leader who understands and can execute a two-generation approach is as important as the organization's position within the community or network.

The Jeremiah Program offers single mothers and their children a safe, affordable place to live; quality early childhood education; life skills training; and support for career-track, postsecondary education. The program has sites in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. Its dynamic leader, Ascend Fellow Gloria Perez, is currently helping replicate their work in Fargo, North Dakota and Austin, Texas.

---

*“Innovations in the early childhood field are breaking down silos and building pathways to community colleges and workforce programs for parents. To borrow from innovators in technology, we need to ‘Think different.’ Two-generation approaches in early childhood programs have enormous potential to move children and their parents forward together.”*

- Anne Mosle, Executive Director, Ascend, and Vice President, The Aspen Institute

---

- **Segmentation:** The question of whom to serve is an important one. For example, identifying and recruiting only those who are academically ready for college is necessary for jobs programs that include the attainment of associate degrees. All agreed that reaching less-skilled, harder to serve families requires time and increases the need for a coach or other support person. Decisions around whom to serve link directly to the type and intensity of preparatory work needed for parents to be successful.

In Evanston, Illinois, community partners are in the process of designing a two-generation program and determining whom to target for education and services. They recognize only some of the parents in their community have the necessary skills and support to complete the proposed program. Therefore, a strong coaching and mentoring relationship, as well as additional academic programming, will be essential in order for the program to be effective for the community.

- **Build, Buy, or Buy-in:** Fellows discussed different approaches to two-generation service delivery, since it is unlikely that any one organization can deliver all necessary components to every family. For example, education needs might be filled by local top-performing community colleges or Head Start centers. To develop comprehensive two-generation approaches in early childhood settings, some leaders may “build” specific programs or services themselves – hire experienced case managers or provide extensive staff training. Alternatively, they may “buy” or contract out services from a partner. In a third scenario, partners may buy-in and partner to provide services without any financial transaction occurring - because they see it in their common interests to do so.

The Community Action Project of Tulsa (CAP Tulsa) started by providing families with high-quality early childhood education. Seeing a need to stabilize families financially, they applied lessons from the New Hope project to design a career skills training program for parents. They partnered with local postsecondary institutions to provide workforce training in health care occupations, purchasing blocks of classes for cohorts of parents.

- **High-Touch Role:** A coach, case manager, coordinator, or other person who provides consistent, intensive support is essential. Programs that tried to go without dedicated, high-touch staff had challenges with retention and completion, especially with harder to serve populations.

The San Francisco Child Abuse Prevention Center employs client care coordinators who develop service plans in conjunction with the family. This position requires a combination of advanced clinical and effective case management skills as both are critical to helping families.

- **Data-Driven Design:** Data-driven decision-making is necessary for high-quality program design. In this emerging field, where we are testing new ideas and exploring models, data is especially critical. Program designers need to be clear about the outcomes they seek and build solid data systems from the beginning. The focus should be on performance – the child and parent outcomes the program aims to deliver – not just compliance.

## EMERGING ISSUES: HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Practitioners increasingly highlight the role of health and well-being in family stability and security. Participants discussed how to knit early childhood programs with the Affordable Care Act, noting that insured parents do better at getting health care for their children and that access to health care results in better developmental and academic outcomes.

---

*“We are talking about population health in ways we have not before. It’s very exciting. Ten years ago we started working with states, and now states are pursuing the medical home concept; it comes out of children with special health care needs. Its origins are family-centered.”*

- Dr. Alan Weil, National Academy for State Health Policy

---



Photo: Family Independence Initiative

Participants discussed whether there could be a stronger family-focus as a result of the Affordable Care Act. The recent growth in federal funding to expand evidenced-based programs provides an unprecedented opportunity for program and research collaboration, yet some participants discussed whether the evidence-based focus was a deterrent to the development of new and innovative programs.

Other pressing concerns center on mental health and how to provide treatment within the family context. Home visiting programs, for example, are recognized as an important strategy for providing support services to families with young children.

## LEVERAGING PHILANTHROPIC IMPACT

Representatives from the philanthropic community discussed their motivations for funding two-generation approaches. One talked about how difficult it had been a decade ago to fund programs focused on birth to three years because such efforts were seen as interfering in parents' choices. Now, with greater awareness of research findings on the importance of parents in early childhood development, acceptance of supporting these programs has grown. These funders also seek opportunities to engage employers and the public sector, recognizing those partnerships as paths to greater impact.

---

*"We see a two-generation strategy as part of the work. The lens is families and children. We're thinking about two-gen because children don't live outside the context of their families."*

- Carla Thompson, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

---

## AN EVOLVING MINDSET FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

During the forum, Ascend shared an early draft of a paper, *Gateways to Two Generations*. In their feedback, participants underscored this evolution in thinking for many early childhood programs. Focusing on parents, in addition to children, calls for a new orientation and expertise. Many already engage parents to some degree, but this is a deeper form of engagement – with different results. One

aspect of that deepening is an emphasis on building social capital, which is particularly important for parents who live in areas where neighborhood networks are weak.

Participants were concerned the approach not be seen as additional work for early childhood programs already stretched by the demands on their staff and time. Instead participants focused on how early childhood partnerships with adult-serving organizations offer the opportunity for better outcomes for children and their parents together, reaping benefits for the whole family. The forthcoming paper will further explore the early childhood field as a window of opportunity for two-generation programming.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ascend at the Aspen Institute would like to thank everyone who contributed their insights and expertise to this important discussion. We extend a special thanks to Dr. Meera Mani and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation for hosting the event.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and their parents toward educational success and economic security. Ascend takes a two-generation approach to our work – focusing on children and their parents together – and we bring a gender and racial equity lens to our analysis. We believe that education, economic supports, social capital, and health and well-being are the core elements that create an intergenerational cycle of opportunity. As a new model of social innovation, we are elevating and investing in two-generation programs, policies, and community solutions; building a network of diverse leaders through a national fellowship program and learning network; and engaging the perspectives, strengths, and resilience of low-income families to inform programs and policies.

### Ascend at the Aspen Institute

One Dupont Circle, NW  
Washington, DC 20036-1133

Tel: 202.736.5800

Email: [ascendinfo@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:ascendinfo@aspeninstitute.org)

Web: [ascend.aspeninstitute.org](http://ascend.aspeninstitute.org)