



Ascend at the Aspen Institute

creates a society where every family passes a legacy of prosperity and well-being from one generation to the next. In 2010, Executive Director and Aspen Institute Vice President Anne Mosle founded Ascend to spark and spread breakthroughs in the ways we think about and invest in leadership to foster the well-being of children and the adults in their lives, together.



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The Aspen Institute

is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners.

TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES TO FAMILY WELL-BEING

Meeting Children and Parents Where They Dream

Two-generation (2Gen) approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together. 2Gen, simply put, begins with the mindset that by designing pathways to educational and economic success that support children and families together, the resulting structure is stronger and better for both generations. Communities do better as everyone achieves their full potential. As children, parents, and families grow and change across their lifespan, 2Gen approaches align opportunities to help families pursue their goals and thrive, optimizing each person's potential along the way.

As we undertake the hard work of a just recovery from the pandemic and a full reckoning with racial injustice, this aspirational mindset underpinned by research is essential. This mindset must be embodied and embedded in the policies and practices we advance. For example, if parents qualify for a state or federal tuition grant to pursue postsecondary education, then it makes sense to see if a high-quality childcare program is available to make sure that while they are studying, their children are learning, too. (See voter poll data below.) This 2Gen mindset and approach can unleash new possibilities for greater impact from dollars already spent on Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), childcare and workforce programs, and more.



Don't meet parents where they are. Meet parents where they dream."

– Janine McMahon, Ascend at the Aspen Institute Parent Advisor

Since 2010, Ascend at the Aspen Institute, founded and led by Anne Mosle, has built a national [Network](#) of nearly 500 partners and is propelling a national movement of practitioners, policymakers, philanthropic leaders, and researchers to seed and sustain 2Gen approaches in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The [Ascend Fellowship](#) identifies and invests in visionary leaders, who are working across sectors that impact the vitality and wellness of families, from reinventing systems of care and learning to unlocking capital that opens doors for economic inclusion and justice, to breaking ground with research that changes the daily lives of children. Through the collective reach and leadership impact of this growing movement, 2Gen is bearing results for 12 million families.

What We're Going For: Family Well-Being

The well-being of children and families is the strongest and most fundamental signal of the state of our communities and country. The 2Gen approach defines well-being holistically, just as parents themselves do. Parents express a sense of well-being when they have opportunities to thrive financially, they experience physical and mental health, and their children demonstrate educational success and are secure and happy.

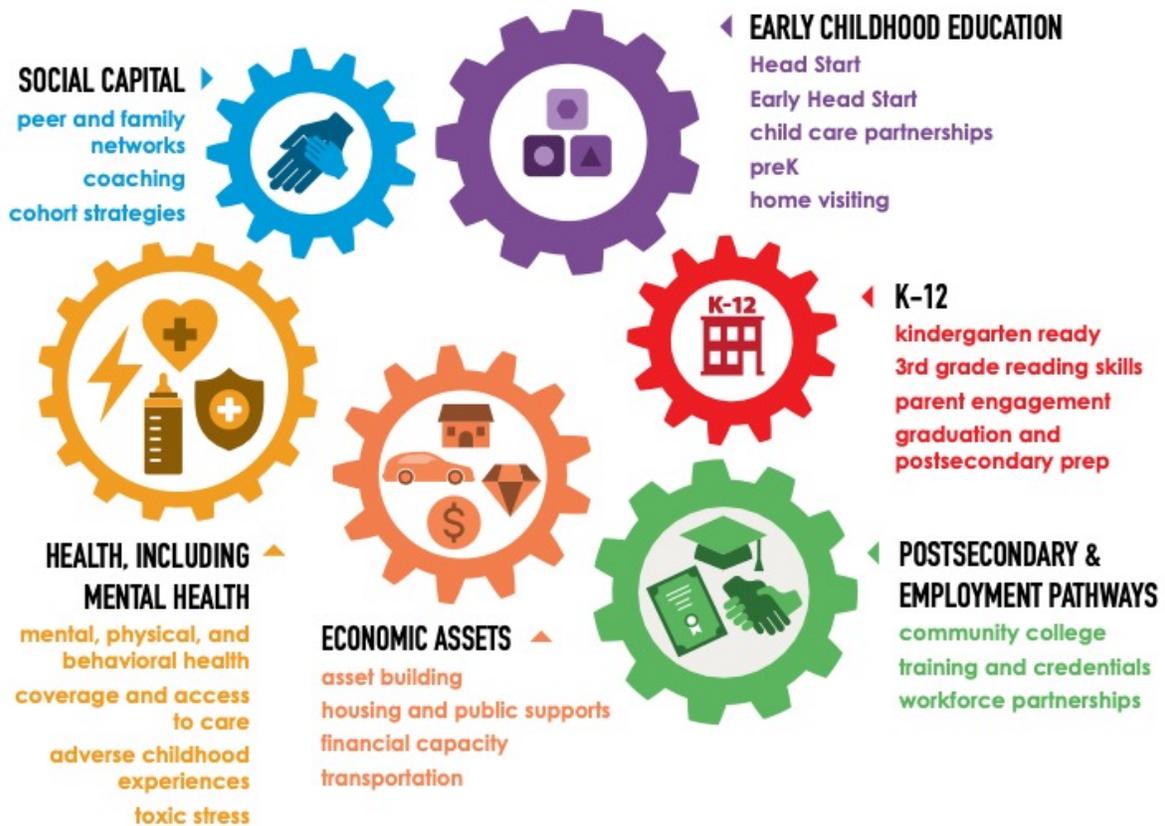
National polls conducted since 2012 demonstrate strong and enduring public support for the 2Gen approach. Voters across the political spectrum and in all regions of the country endorse the 2Gen approach, with 85 percent of 2020 respondents expressing support. The bipartisan polls, conducted by Lake Research Partners and the Tarrance Group, have found that a 2Gen approach is a common-sense way to address poverty that appeals to both sides of the political aisle and nearly all demographic cohorts. Support for this pragmatic, deliberate whole-family approach has remained strong and consistent for the past decade.



A two-generation approach that helps lift low-income families out of poverty and lines them up to get an education and champion their way to success together.” – Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM), who has introduced the bipartisan [Two-Generation Economic Empowerment Act](#) bill with Senator Susan Collins (R-ME).

Six Key Components of 2Gen

A 2Gen approach involves working with families in six key areas:



- 1. Early childhood education:** Development programs, like childcare, Head Start, and home visiting; family literacy. Investments in high-quality early education yield a [13% per year](#) return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced social costs.
- 2. K-12 learning:** More K-12 schools are adopting two-generation approaches. Schools serve as community anchors and provide strong platforms for both children and the adults in their lives to thrive.
- 3. Postsecondary and employment pathways:** Parents who complete a college degree [double their incomes](#). A parent's level of educational attainment is also a strong predictor of a child's success.
- 4. Economic assets:** A relatively small increase in household income can have a significant, lasting positive impact on the life of a child. A \$3,000 difference in parents' income when their child is young is associated with a [17% increase](#) in the child's future earnings.
- 5. Health, including mental health:** The caregiving and family context is the [most critical factor](#) influencing development for young children ages birth to 3 years old. Pediatric well baby visits—of which there are seven during the first years of life and 12 by the time the child turns 3 years old—comprise the most frequent point of contact with the healthcare system for families with young children.
- 6. Social capital:** Institutional conditions that support social networks can [significantly increase](#) access to and retention of parents in programs and services, as well as improve connection and relationships among families and parents.

How We Get There: The Hallmarks of the 2Gen Approach

Ascend partners with leaders across research, practice, policy, and philanthropy around a set of five core principles to guide policy, practice, and systems changes. Across numerous initiatives and innovations at the federal, state, Tribal, and local levels, the process of putting these principles into action has yielded a set of hallmark characteristics that describe what a 2Gen approach, strategy, organization, or system looks like. In most 2Gen efforts, you will notice people consciously and conscientiously choosing to do the following:

- Measure and account for outcomes for both children and their parents.
- Engage and listen to the voices of families.
- Ensure equity.
- Foster innovation and evidence together.
- Align and link systems and funding streams.

2Gen in Action

Under Founder Anne Mosle's leadership, Ascend focuses on the networks and systems most able to influence the lives of families as illuminated in the landmark report [State of the Field: Two Generation Approaches to Family Well-Being](#). These include the trillion dollars in public human services resources, community colleges, Head Start, United Ways, and community action agencies, among others. Examples of 2Gen in action:



1. The [Jeremiah Program](#) provides housing, early childhood education, and life skills, and partners with local community colleges for postsecondary education. It began in 1998, in the Twin Cities in Minnesota, and is designed to help single mothers complete postsecondary education while their children are successfully prepared for kindergarten.

Under the dynamic leadership of Ascend Fellow Gloria Perez, and CEO Chastity Lord, Jeremiah has expanded to North Dakota and Texas. Jeremiah has also partnered with Endicott College on another 2Gen pilot for student parents in the Boston area.

2. Twelve states have implemented 2Gen approaches to align and coordinate their agencies and strengthen programmatic supports for families, including linking child care and early learning programs to workforce development and economic pathways, adopting new models of home visiting, and creating effective parent and child supports as states seek more effective and equitable outcomes for children and families: Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and Washington. Recently, the District of Columbia reimaged its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to embrace a 2Gen approach.
3. There is an active 2Gen research community, including [Northwestern University's Two-Generation Research Initiative](#), and [University of Minnesota's Future Services Institute](#). At the University of Denver, Ascend Fellow Dr. Sarah Watamura and her colleague Dr. Pilyoung Kim, offered a compelling case in [Two Open Windows: Infant and Parent Neurobiologic Change](#) for the transition to parenting as a distinct and important sensitive period in which the brain undergoes neural development and growth. More recent updates to their research demonstrated that it is the act of transitioning to parenthood – whether as a biological parent or not – that opens a time-limited window where both new parent and baby are especially receptive to being shaped by their environments. This window of opportunity offers a second chance for young adults and caregivers to strengthen skills and capacities that can not only shape the critical interactions that build their babies' brains, but also influence the behaviors that shape their health and employment.