MISSION STATEMENT

The Right Start Commission believes that every child deserves the right start. High-quality early learning and care, supportive family environments, and preventive health care are essential to ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive in school and life.
Rebuilding the California Dream

The Right Start Commission’s blueprint for a child-centered system that nurtures every child from the beginning of life
Today we are the leading nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

We Rate
Common Sense Media helps tens of millions of families make smart media choices. We offer the largest, most trusted library of independent age-based and educational ratings and reviews for movies, games, apps, TV shows, websites, and books. We partner with the leading media and technology companies to put our tools and content into the hands of over 45 million parents and caregivers, providing them with the confidence and knowledge to navigate a fast-changing digital landscape.

We Educate
Common Sense Education provides teachers and schools with the tools and training to help students harness technology for learning and life. Our K–12 Digital Citizenship Curriculum reaches over 100,000 schools and 5 million students each year, creating a generation of responsible digital citizens. Our advanced Common Sense Graphite education ratings and teacher-training platform help over a quarter of a million teachers better use the new educational tools, apps, and technologies to enhance their teaching and propel student learning.

We Advocate
Common Sense Kids Action is working on federal, state, and local levels with leading policymakers, industry leaders, and advocates to build a movement dedicated to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive in our rapidly changing world. Our Kids Action Agenda focuses on the building blocks of opportunity for all kids. Our Common Sense Legislative Ratings and advocacy tools leverage our unique membership base of parents and teachers in all 50 states who share our belief that America’s future depends on making kids our nation’s top priority.
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California has the second-worst standard of living for kids in the nation.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California’s future is deeply connected to the support our children receive today. To remain the Golden State, we must do more to ensure that every child has a sound foundation for success. The research is clear: Learning starts early, and quality matters. In fact, 90 percent of a child’s brain development occurs before age 5. The quality of the care and education that our youngest kids receive during these formative years defines their start to life.

In California, millions of children face challenges that could put them at a disadvantage later in life. Our state has the second-worst standard of living for kids in the nation. In families with young children, a single minimum wage earner cannot afford both rent and child care—the two largest expenses for most California families.

The state’s early childhood systems do not uniformly provide or allocate high-quality services to all children effectively. All parents want to give their children the best opportunities, but too many families are left scrambling to find safe and developmentally appropriate learning and care options.

Common Sense Kids Action convened the Right Start Commission based on the fundamental principle that every California child deserves the right start. High-quality early learning and care, supportive family environments, and preventive health care are essential to ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive in school and in life.

The goal of this commission has been to find a better way of providing essential care and early learning opportunities for all California children and to identify ways to bring those ideas to fruition. What follows is an assessment of the current child-services landscape and a sketch for the short- and medium-term future that members of the commission and Common Sense Kids Action will be working toward in the months and years ahead.

Over the last several months, respected business, civic, education, and policy leaders have come together to develop strategies to better serve California’s 9 million children, with particular focus on the 3 million children age 0–5. This report serves as a foundational document, reflecting the commission’s ideas and priorities for a more child-centered approach to our workplaces, our policymaking, and our civic life.

The Right Start Commission promotes policies and practices that better support children and families. Families are children’s first and most important teachers, advocates, and nurturers. Strong family engagement is central to children’s healthy development and wellness. Research indicates that families’ engagement in children’s learning and development can impact lifelong health and academic outcomes.

California’s institutions and services can do more to directly support children and promote family engagement. When families and the institutions where children learn partner in meaningful ways, children have more positive attitudes toward school, stay in school longer, have better attendance, and experience more school success.

We are building on years of investment and hard work by state and local policymakers and dozens of organizations, and we hope to lend our voice and our work to the ongoing effort to enhance the well-being of children in California.

We believe California must fundamentally change its approach to child well-being and embrace a public policy and broader societal approach that puts the interests of children first.

A strong early childhood environment will support children to be physically healthy, socially and emotionally adjusted, and equipped with the cognitive skills necessary for kindergarten. Below is a list of sample outcomes associated with each area:

- **Physical and mental**: Proper prenatal care and healthy birth; proper development of fine and gross motor skills; healthy weight and height measures; strong general and oral health; no physical or mental abuse
- **Cognitive**: Ready to take on kindergarten curriculum; early language and literacy skills; early mathematics skills
- **Social and emotional**: Able to form relationships; able to understand and express feelings; able to communicate needs; minimal exposure to toxic stress; able to self-regulate; able to understand and follow instructions; persistent and curious; able to work on a team
A CHILD-CENTERED APPROACH

It is essential that we do more at the first stages of life to ensure every child gets the right start. We know that what happens in early childhood has consequences that can last a lifetime. The science in this area is well established but relatively new. We need to transform our system of early childhood services on the state and local levels to reflect this new knowledge and provide better, more comprehensive care to all California children.

A child-centered approach provides continuity from birth through child care, through preschool, and into school, ensuring that kids receive the tools and services they need to succeed and thrive. As with health care, a more preventive approach, one that supports a child’s nurturing and learning from the beginning, is better for the child and cheaper for society.

A child-centered approach cannot exist without a family-centered approach. We need to support families as they raise their children. The reality in California is that too many families are unable to afford child care, preschool, or other supportive programs. By making sure that our families have the resources and services they need, such as food, shelter, and access to health care and educational opportunities, we allow our kids to get the right start.

Not all of this requires new government programs. By reorienting our system of delivering child-related services to one that is focused on the child, we can eliminate flaws and inconsistencies in our current system and do a better job of using the full menu of available public services to provide more strategic and comprehensive care.

Family education is another major part of this effort. Helping families instill a love for literacy and numeracy in their children from an early age through talking, reading, and singing is crucial. Through public education about how a child’s brain develops, we can impact the culture of parenting to help ensure a better start for all of California’s children.

The commission identified four areas of focus to improve early childhood well-being:

1. Child care, early childhood education, and preschool programs that ensure all children are safe and cared for in high-quality environments that provide age-appropriate development
2. Preventive health care that ensures all children receive the proper checkups and screenings for general, oral, and mental health
3. Parental and caregiver support, including increased public awareness and family education, that strengthens child development
4. Business policies that enable employees to be responsible parents and provide children with pathways to become skilled 21st-century leaders

Inability to afford child care

U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey 2013 1-Year Estimates,” team analysis
Our work is guided by clear evidence of what children need, and we are committed to core ideas that will improve the lives of children statewide.

• California must reorient its thinking to take a child-centered approach to public policy and workplace decisions. A child-centered approach that improves children’s opportunities and well-being necessitates support for our families. Services for children and families must be affordable, accessible, and of high quality.

• Not all problems facing California’s children can, should, or must be solved by the government. Businesses must take responsibility for providing a family-friendly workplace and adopt corporate policies that understand the needs of working families.

• In the public sector, we must centralize and simplify the wide array of early childhood services. This includes a comprehensive reorganization and coordination of the government programs that provide and promote early learning and care. Additionally, institutions must be held accountable for outcomes.

• A comprehensive coordination of services includes the reorganization of funding. Savings that are achieved through the integration of services should be reinvested in early childhood, and new investments are necessary.

California’s child-services system is fractured and diffuse, both in terms of how it is funded and the quality of care it provides to the millions of California children it serves. Our current standards and approaches to delivering services to children are grossly uneven, underfunded, and unnecessarily complicated. The commission envisions a different kind of system that prioritizes children’s opportunities for high-quality early learning and care throughout the state.

When it comes to the broad swath of services aimed at helping California’s children, the current bureaucracy is a labyrinth of disjointed boards, commissions, agencies, and departments. Currently, many related programs are scattered throughout different agencies, and it can be challenging for parents and caregivers to get connected with the services they need. Reorganization and simplification are necessary to create a system that serves the needs of our children.

To achieve a child-centered system, this commission recommends one single, affordable, accessible, high-quality, and integrated system of early learning and care.

This will require significant, strategic investment from both the public and private sectors. The public sector has a critical role to play in coordinating and delivering services, particularly to low-income children. The public investment will require new revenue and a reprioritization of current expenditures. It will be important to take advantage of the cost savings that can be achieved with a more efficient and integrated system.

We also know that investments in young children pay enormous dividends for decades to come and lead to long-term savings for taxpayers. For every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education, society saves $7. Not only do the children who receive these services do better—society as a whole does better.6

Stressing the importance of this type of greater social benefit and long-term thinking can help build the public case for significant, strategic investments in our children.

Rate of return on human-development investments per $1 invested

![Graph showing rate of return on investment by age group](image)

Carneiro and Heckman, 2003
For every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education, society saves $7.
California’s future depends on providing all children with a sound foundation for success that acknowledges their diverse life experiences. To better serve the children of California, the Right Start Commission recommends that we as a state:

Commit to Universal Access to High-Quality Early Learning and Care Programs for Children 0–5 Years Old

1. By 2021, ensure that all 4-year-old children have universal access to transitional kindergarten or other high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool, and ensure that children age 0–3 have access to safe, developmentally appropriate care.

   This system of child care, early childhood education, and preschool should be open to all families, regardless of their ability to pay. As with health care, the state should offer a sliding scale based on a family’s ability to pay for care, with full subsidies for the lowest-income families.

2. Create a “one-stop shop” online portal that operates in conjunction with physical regional referral centers to provide parents and caregivers with easy identification of and access to all available early childhood services.

3. Foster high-quality early childhood education by adopting an aligned and coherent system of goals and developmentally appropriate practices that runs through child care, preschool, transitional kindergarten, and primary grades. Early childhood professionals are essential to program quality and should receive workforce training aligned to integrated quality standards in a manner that protects workforce diversity and improves compensation.

4. Consolidate and coordinate the state’s early learning and care programs to simplify access and delivery of services for children and families.

Invest in Preventive Health Care

1. Increase the Medi-Cal reimbursement rates for providers to ensure that more than half of the state’s kids have access to vital health services.

2. Address the loophole in the Affordable Care Act that denies affordable care to tens of thousands of California children.

3. Bolster health care provider efforts to administer behavioral, developmental, and mental health screenings in accordance with recommended frequency, and add adverse childhood experience (ACE) screenings to existing standards of pediatric practice.

Support Public Awareness of and Family Education About the Importance of the Early Years

1. Invest in efforts to increase public awareness of, and expand evidence-based support programs that provide information to families about, the consequences of toxic stress and the importance of brain development. Such initiatives would highlight everyday opportunities to encourage early literacy and early math and stress the value of multilingualism in a culturally responsive manner.

2. To do this, the state should enlist a variety of messengers, including leaders of media, cities, counties, hospitals, libraries, business groups, schools, and other community organizations.

The movement toward a child-centered approach cannot and should not come exclusively from the government. The Right Start Commission recommends the following actions from the business sector:

Build a More Responsive Business Community

1. Provide a family-friendly workplace environment through policies that include child care assistance, reliable schedules, and paid family leave, among others, because the majority of parents and caregivers participate in the workforce.

2. Encourage prominent business leaders to leverage their networks and experiences to prompt their peers to invest in every child’s pathway to success, maintain California’s economic leadership in the 21st century, and support the workplace policies outlined above.
Roughly half of the children in the state are from families that are in or near poverty.
**WHO ARE CALIFORNIA’S CHILDREN?**

Understanding the changes needed in our child-services system requires knowledge of who California’s children are. When we talk about children in California, we are talking mostly about children of color. Roughly 76 percent of the 3 million Californians under age 5 are children of color. In the counties with the largest 0-5 populations, those numbers jump to 85 percent. The majority of the state’s child population, 52 percent, is Latino.

Approximately 1.5 million California kids under the age of 5 are first- or second-generation immigrants. A recent study from the University of Southern California suggests that 19 percent of California’s children have at least one immigrant parent who is undocumented. But more than 80 percent of these children are U.S. citizens.

Additionally, nearly 23 percent of California schoolchildren primarily speak a language other than English.

Meanwhile, California’s childhood-poverty rate is the worst in the nation after factoring in cost of living, according to data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Roughly half of the children in the state are part of families that are in or near poverty, according to a December 2015 report from the Public Policy Institute of California.

Childhood poverty is even more pronounced in certain parts of the state. Monterey and San Benito counties have the highest child-poverty rates in California, with 31 percent of all children in each county living in poor families. Those counties are also among the handful of California counties with majority Latino populations.

The child-poverty rate of Los Angeles, the state’s most populous county, is similarly high, at 29.5 percent.

But the face of California’s poor is changing in another important way. Increasingly in California, even a full-time working parent is not enough to keep a child out of poverty.

In 2013, more than 81 percent of poor children in California lived in families with at least one working adult. Roughly 60 percent of poor children lived in families with at least one full-time worker.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CA</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Half of them would be 1st- or 2nd-generation immigrants*</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>About 15 would live in households where adults are not fluent in English†</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almost 30 would live below the federal poverty line‡</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than half would be Latino§</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>The vast majority would live in urban or suburban areas*</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Urban or suburban areas defined as densely settled core of census tracts and/or blocks with at least 2,500 people.

*KidsData; †National Center for Children in Poverty Risk Calculator; ‡Kaiser Family Foundation
Latino and African-American children are far more likely to live in poverty than white or Asian children. The poverty rate for Latino children (32.6 percent) was more than double that of Asian (15.1 percent) and white (12.4 percent) children in California in 2013. The poverty rate among African-American children was also high — 24.0 percent.15

To best serve the children of California and ensure the future of the state as an economic leader, we must acknowledge that poverty and racial barriers limit opportunity and undermine healthy child development. We must make a concerted effort to recognize, address, and remove those barriers. The well-being of children and the state depends upon whether all kids under the age of 5 are able to reach their full potential.

The commission supports the goal of an early childhood system and a workforce that are prepared to serve children and families in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner.

Because our state has more children than any other state and represents diversity across ethnic, racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, and geographic lines, a successful system in California could also be a model for other states.

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

Over the last 20 years, the science on early childhood development has increased dramatically and demonstrated that what happens in the first five years of a child’s life matters to her future. We know that children’s brains develop at a dramatic pace during their earliest years, with 80 percent of brain development occurring by the age of 3. Research has also revealed that, by age 4, children in higher-income families have heard about 30 million more words than children in lower-income families.

Hearing fewer words translates directly to learning fewer words, and, by age 3, children in higher-income families have double the vocabulary of those living in lower-income families. This disadvantage — called the word gap — sets the stage for future disparities in education and even job earnings.

We also know that adverse conditions in a young child’s life can have profound and lasting consequences, and we must do more to teach families about how to reverse the harmful impacts of toxic stress, a prolonged and elevated stress response to circumstances such as violence, economic hardship, or abuse and neglect. Research shows that prolonged activation of stress-response systems in young children can have damaging effects on learning, behavior, and physical health. Such stress can be reduced if a child has the regular presence of a responsive adult who can act as a buffer against the intensity or frequency of exposure to adversity. If families are knowledgeable about this issue and informed about the importance of their role, they can be better equipped to ameliorate the devastating impacts of toxic stress.

Early childhood well-being is necessary to ensure that individuals grow and develop into healthy, self-sufficient adults who fully contribute to our society and economy. By investing in a child’s first five years, we can ensure that the 3 million children across California age 0–5 have an equal opportunity to thrive in school and in life.

Supporting early childhood well-being is a smart investment that can transform the trajectory of a young person’s life, leading to increased earnings and reduced crime-related costs. No other human-development intervention can match this return on investment.

Neural development throughout life: rate of synapse production

Jack P. Shonkoff, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*
80 percent of brain development occurs by the age of 3
We can ensure that the 3 million children across California age 0-5 have an equal opportunity to thrive.
THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The current child-services landscape in California is fragmented. There are currently at least 18 public programs available for children from birth through age 5 administered by at least 11 government departments. These are in addition to any local programs provided by cities, county First 5 commissions, or nonprofits that also provide child services. Early childhood programs often have conflicting eligibility requirements and can be difficult for caregivers to navigate. The lack of a single source for comprehensive information regarding the full set of programs adds to the confusion. A simple Web search for information regarding public programs returns incomplete or conflicting information from multiple sources.

The demand for child care, particularly among parents who need financial assistance, greatly exceeds the current availability of care. During the Great Recession, the state slashed billions of dollars from investments in state services, many of which provided assistance to children. Many of those cuts have not been restored, even as the state’s economy continues its strong recovery.

Along with housing and health insurance, child care is one of the largest expenses for families with young children. The average price of child care for infants at a center is more than $13,000 a year, according to KidsData, a project of the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health that collects data on the well-being of California children. For a preschooler, the cost is about $10,000 a year. The high cost of care, and lack of adequate public support for that care, means that licensed child care is unavailable to about 70 percent of California children under 6 years old.

California has made strides in recent years to rebuild the safety net that was cut dramatically during the Great Recession. But as we continue to restore funding to these core programs, the state also has an opportunity to take a more thoughtful, holistic approach to the entirety of services it offers to children.

Availability of licensed spaces in California: number of children (in millions) under 6 not included in the K–12 system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total children</th>
<th>Children with a stay-at-home parent</th>
<th>Potential need for child care</th>
<th>Licensed slots</th>
<th>Children who receive care in unlicensed settings</th>
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<td>3.0</td>
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Child care and family budgets (2012)

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<tr>
<th>One minimum wage earner*</th>
<th>Maximum income to qualify for child care subsidy†</th>
<th>State median family income‡</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100% = $16,640 annual income</td>
<td>100% = $42,216 annual income</td>
<td>100% = $60,435 annual income</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, “2013 Child Care Portfolio.” * CA Dept. of Industrial Relations (minimum wage); † based on 70% of state median income for a family of three; ‡ American Community Survey 2012 1-year estimate


3 Modeling based on data from the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network.

4 The term “family” is used to include all the people who play a role in a child’s life and interact with a child’s early childhood program or school. This may include fathers, mothers, grandparents, foster parents, formal and informal guardians, and siblings, among others. Definition according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, Draft Policy Statement on Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades, 2015.


14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.
CREDITS
Lead author: Briana Calleros
Editor: Craig Cheslog
Copy editor: Jenny Pritchett
Designer: Allison Rudd

The commission would like to extend a special thanks to the following individuals for their contributions and feedback on this report:
Linda Asato, California Child Care Resource and Referral Network
Kim Belshé, First 5 LA
Lara Bergthold, Rally
Fran Biderman, Bay Area Early Childhood Funders
Kim Pattillo Brownson, Advancement Project
Caren Calhoun, Educare Inc., Tulsa
Carolyn Chu, California Legislative Analyst’s Office
Mark Cloutier, Center for Youth Wellness
Susanna Cooper, Independent Consultant
Samantha Corbin and Danielle Kando-Kaiser, Corbin and Kaiser, LLC
Sarah Crow, Opportunity Institute
Shaibya Dalal, PolicyLink
Harriet Dichter, Delaware Office of Early Learning (former)
Tammy Parker Estes, Education Research
George Flores, M.D., M.P.H., The California Endowment
Mark Friedman, Thomas J. Long Foundation
Erin Gabel, First 5 California
Deanna Gomby, Heising-Simons Foundation
Jim Green, T4A.org
Grizzly Bear Media
Jacob Hay, Rally
Matt James, Next Generation (former)
Sharon Lynn Kagan, National Center for Children and Families
Moira Kenney, First 5 Association of California
Ted Lempert, Children Now
Anna Maier, Learning Policy Institute
Meera Mani, David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Debra McMannis, California Department of Education
Scott Moore, Kidango
Martha Moorehouse, Heising-Simons Foundation
Tina Mora, Greenberg Traurig, LLP
Anne O’Leary, Opportunity Institute
Chhandasi Pandya Patel, Heising-Simons Foundation
Kris Perry, First 5 Years Fund
David Pontecorvo, East Bay Community Foundation
Glen Price, California Department of Education
Jenny Quigley, Heising-Simons Foundation
Al Race, Harvard Center of the Developing Child
Monique Ramos, California Department of Education
David Rattray, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce
Bernadette Sangalang, David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Jack Shonkoff, Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard Graduate School of Education
Whitney Staniford, First 5 California
Katharine Stevens, American Enterprise Institute
Deborah Stipek, Stanford Graduate School of Education
Tamar Strain, Center for Youth Wellness
Blanca Turner, Univision Communications Inc.
Louis Vismara, M.D., California State Senate (former)
Catherine Walker, Assistant to Elizabeth Simons
Marcy Whitebook, Ph.D., Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Daniel Zingale, California Endowment

Among Common Sense staff, we also extend special thanks to:
Brooks Allen, Vice President of Policy and Legal Affairs
Maria O. Alvarez, Director of Latino Content and Outreach
Karen Berke, Senior Director of Foundations and Corporate Grants
Kristin Bumgarner, Creative Director
Linda Burch, Chief Education and Strategy Officer
Jeffrey Chung, Associate Product Manager
Alexandra Devoe, Administrative and Events Coordinator
Grace Jordan, Manager of Brand Marketing
Dwight Knell, Chief of Staff
Gaby Mercer-Slomoff, Events and Administrative Coordinator
Carina Mifuel, Executive Assistant to CEO
Olivia Morgan, Vice President of Communications and Strategic Programs
Taryn Rawson, Senior Manager of Education Strategy and Development
Nicole Atkinson Roach, Senior Director of Video
Gabriela Rodriguez, Latino Outreach Coordinator
JR Starrett, Senior Director for National Advocacy
Michael Tubbs, Board Member and Youth Engagement Coordinator
Danny Weiss, Co-Director and Vice President of Federal Policy
Buffy Wicks, California Campaign Director
Jordan Willox, Video Editor and Motion Graphics

Additionally, we are grateful to the many other organizations and individuals — too countless to mention — for their dedicated involvement in efforts to improve early childhood well-being across the state of California.

Thank you all for the work you do to help kids thrive!