



# Deep Pools of Promise

VECF Celebrates the Week of the Young Child • April 22-28

## When you look at a young child, what future do you see?

A teacher watching a child share a toy may envision a fulfilled adult who will enjoy rewarding relationships. A business leader viewing a toddler stacking blocks into a tall tower may see a future member of the workforce, with critical thinking skills that will lead a company to innovate and compete globally. And a parent whose baby gazes at her face, hearing and forming cooing sounds, will hope that her child's future will include success in school and life.

How do these seemingly simple acts of young children relate to how their future will unfold? The infant is beginning, even in the earliest months, to develop the foundations of communication and learning. The synapses in his brain are firing, stimulated by color, shapes, light, and the sound of his mother's voice. Day after day and with each growing year, the child hears and forms words and acquires language, with a growing range in vocabulary and sentence complexity. He holds books and experiments with puzzles and recognizes shapes and colors; he interacts with other children and caregivers who read to him, talk with him, and encourage his exploration. He learns to navigate communication, bolstered by good health, nutrition, and a sense of self-worth that help him focus his physical and mental capacity on learning, building skill upon skill.

These are the "baby" steps that lead to a third grader who can read with proficiency, in step with his peers. Successful skill acquisition is a process that evolves slowly but surely, and can be nurtured and promoted by parents and families at home, by health providers at regular preventative care visits, by teachers and child care providers in early learning settings, and within communities providing a web of supports that ensure the success of each child.

Grade level reading has become a mantra for educators, philanthropic investors, policymakers and governors across the country. Why? Proficient reading at third grade is a significant predictor of future academic and life success. A recent longitudinal study showed poor third grade readers to be four times less likely to attain a high school diploma than their proficiently reading peers.

For these struggling readers who also live in poverty, it is likely that 26% will not graduate from high school; the national high school drop-out rate is 27%. Not only do high school drop-outs earn just 64% the rate of high school graduates, but according to the Partnership for America's Economic Success, they also incur a lifetime societal cost of \$250,000-\$450,000 per drop-out.

When envisioning a child's future, whether it's your son or daughter, a grandchild, or a child from across the state, third grade reading stands out as a critical milestone on the road to a productive life. Successful third grade reading strategies do not begin in elementary school; reading proficiency is the culmination of multi-faceted experiences and skill-building beginning in the earliest years of a child's life. We have the chance to use this information to inform and guide efforts to improve outcomes for our future generation.

In recognition of the national Week of the Young Child, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation celebrates those who understand the value of each child to our communities and our Commonwealth – parents and families, teachers and care providers, community leaders and school officials, our state and local partners, our legislators, and our Governor. Focusing attention and investments to ensure that parents and communities can provide each child the opportunity for healthy growth and skill development – with the assistance of services like early screening, home visiting and parenting education, and access to affordable high quality child care and early learning— is not a partisan issue. It is both a moral imperative and an economic one as well.

T. Berry Brazelton, who has treated thousands of babies, once said that each time he gazes into an infant's eyes, he sees "deep pools of promise." We urge each citizen of the Commonwealth to celebrate Week of the Young Child by making your own promise to value each child as precious – not only for the child's future, but for the collective future, prosperity, and quality of life for all of us.

Kathy Glazer  
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