



# Supporting forgotten fathers

Changing systems, norms, and outcomes for young fathers in support of healthy child development and community safety

## Introduction

Fathers and father figures are essential members of families and communities who play many roles, including raising children and fostering safety in the community. Across the country, young men take pride in participating in the nurturing of young children, some of whom are their own, many of whom are not. They may be younger siblings, relatives, or neighborhood children. Much of this fathering is informal and voluntary, often taking place in recreational settings. Young men show children how to tie shoes, read, make music, fix bikes, repair cars, safely walk to school, catch a bus, and play sports – only to name a few examples. However, the dominant narrative portrayed in media rarely accounts for these daily acts of fathering. All too often, the policies and practices of many systems create barriers to fathering, especially for young men of color in neighborhoods with high rates of violence (referred to in this paper as young fathers).

Photo credit: Charles Daniels, Fathers' Uplift

Father involvement is less emphasized than maternal engagement in early childhood systems,<sup>a</sup> and reinforced by narrow gender norms around masculinity and fatherhood. Due in part to norms and policies that promote female responsibility for child raising, young fathers are only now beginning to be included more intentionally in child and family support resources, and too frequently they face barriers to full participation in early childhood development efforts. Further, many young fathers are affected by violence and the criminal justice system. With policies and norms that do not recognize or address the systemic factors that underlie community violence and rely on punitive approaches, young fathers are afforded fewer opportunities and face disproportionate involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup>

The [Cradle to Community: A Focus on Community Safety and Healthy Child Development](#) project brought together early childhood systems builders concerned

<sup>a</sup> Early childhood systems include healthcare, public health, early care and education, and family support focused on the prenatal period through age eight, or a subset such as birth to age five. Working together, this system reflects an understanding of the critical importance of early childhood in setting the foundations for life-long health, learning, and well-being.

with optimal outcomes for young children, and violence prevention practitioners interested in reducing rates of violence to explore linkages that could achieve greater outcomes. Together, practitioners recognized that to support community safety and healthy childhood development, shifts in norms and changes to systems are needed to better support young fathers. The findings and examples presented in this brief are based on a 2016 peer learning forum series with Prevention Institute’s UNITY City Network and the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s EC-LINC communities. Practitioners identified changing systems, norms, and outcomes for young fathers as a shared goal that both early childhood systems builders and violence prevention practitioners could work toward. Drawing on a combined early childhood and violence prevention lens, this brief outlines challenges and barriers in the early childhood system and the criminal justice system, opportunities for systems changes, and examples of on the ground efforts to change systems, norms, and outcomes. To change conditions for fathers, their children, families, and communities, solutions are needed that recognize young fathers as assets, lift up and support the many ways they already support children, and expand efforts through the leadership of young fathers in the program and policy development process. This includes immediate opportunities within the early childhood system and the criminal justice system, as well as sectors such as media, employment, and housing, to embed a more intentional focus on supporting fathers.

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*How can we say that fathers matter and they’re essential to child and family well-being if that’s not what is reflected in our language?”*

*– Early childhood systems-builder*

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## Challenges and barriers to supporting young fathers in systems

There are challenges and barriers to supporting young fathers in many systems and sectors. To maximize outcomes for young children and promote community safety, there are numerous opportunities to better support young fathers through changes in norms, language, policies, and practices in multiple sectors and systems. In this section we outline some of the challenges and barriers that are apparent within the early childhood system and the criminal justice system.

### Challenges and barriers in early childhood systems

**Father involvement is less emphasized in early childhood systems and hampered by narrow gender norms. This contributes to less than ideal father engagement in early childhood systems.** The proverb goes, “it takes a village to raise a child,” but fathers continue to be overlooked in comparison to mothers. Looking at early childhood systems, it was not until 1973 that a bill was introduced in the US Congress to formally permit fathers in delivery rooms during the birth of their children, and it only became a standard of practice across American hospitals in the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup> Even today many early childhood systems are mother-centric.<sup>3</sup> Fathers encounter institutional barriers to being included in early childhood systems like healthcare and child welfare. These systems often recognize mothers as primary caregivers, and are predominantly staffed by women, normalizing the idea that fathers are less involved in supporting early childhood development.<sup>4</sup> Clinic walls and brochures display pictures of mothers and their babies and even if the father is present, clinicians may defer to the mother. Support programs are explicit in their focus on mothers such as the nutrition program, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or maternal and child health programs. As a consequence, young fathers may feel invisible or may not be supported or socialized into as strong of a fatherhood role as is ideal for healthy childhood development. While some programs are making efforts to address the needs of fathers, as a whole, gaps in support to fathers within early childhood systems remain.



Image courtesy of Forward Together. Artist credit: Ernesto Yerena

Forward Together's Strong Families campaign counters narrow gender norms about parent involvement through visuals that support fathers.

Together, narrow and harmful gender norms persist and influence the practices of early childhood systems and other systems and environments thereby affecting outcomes for young fathers and their children. Norms that reinforce the role of mothers as the primary care provider for families and fathers as financial providers linger in systems to reinforce a non-expectation of engagement in the vital roles that fathers play in the social and emotional development of children.

**Punitive child welfare policies and practices have added challenges for young fathers who have contact with the criminal justice system.**

For example, because fathers constitute a large portion of the incarcerated population, the amount of child support debt owed by incarcerated men has risen significantly in recent decades, contributing to financial instability and further incarceration.<sup>5</sup> Child support payment is an important responsibility, yet punitive enforcement mechanisms such as fines, prison time, and further incarceration can further jeopardize the capacity of fathers who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated to support their young children.<sup>6</sup>

## Challenges and barriers in the criminal justice system

**Young men of color are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system, affecting their ability to parent their children.**

Young men of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, trauma, and violence, and are thereby affected by violence at higher rates than white people.<sup>7</sup> Further exacerbating inequities, zero-tolerance policies in schools have resulted in higher suspension and expulsion rates for students of color, contributing to a school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>8</sup> This happens as early as pre-school and can increase the likelihood of contact with the criminal system.<sup>9,10</sup> Drug policies and harsh sentencing laws have contributed to a cycle of mass incarceration, breaking apart families, and destabilizing significant portions of communities. As a result of these and other policies and practices, men of color have higher rates of police contact, arrest, and juvenile detention, which have fed into inequities in incarceration.<sup>11</sup> Approximately 45 percent of men aged 24 or younger who are in state or federal prisons are fathers.<sup>12</sup>

Racism, sexism, and negative stereotyping of African American men in particular are at play when young African American fathers are disproportionately portrayed as absent from the lives of their families.<sup>13,14</sup> In reality, more African American fathers live with their children than those who live apart,<sup>15</sup> and when they do not, their inability to be with their families is largely

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*“We did focus groups regarding the child welfare system with young fathers of color. One father shared that he was requesting increased visitation time with his child and the worker’s response to him was ‘Well the mother needs to spend more quality time than you’ and did not grant him that extra visitation time.”*

*– Early childhood systems-builder*

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## Summary of challenges and barriers in systems

### From an early childhood systems perspective

Under-involvement: Father involvement is less of a focus in early childhood systems, and reinforced by narrow gender norms.

- 1973 Congress bill formally permits fathers in delivery rooms, becoming a standard practice in the mid-1980s.<sup>17</sup>
- Early childhood systems often recognize mothers as primary caregivers and miss opportunities to engage fathers.<sup>18</sup>
- Many parental support programs are explicit in their focus on mothers such as the nutrition program, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) or Maternal and Child Health programs.

### From a community safety perspective

Over-involvement: Young men of color in neighborhoods with high levels of violence are disproportionately affected by violence and the criminal justice system.

- Students of color are greatly affected by the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>19,20</sup>
- Men of color have higher rates of police contact, arrest, and juvenile detention.<sup>21</sup>
- The leading cause of death for African American men aged 15 to 34 is homicide.<sup>22</sup>
- African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons across the country over five times more than the rate of white people.<sup>23</sup>
- Approximately 45 percent of men aged 24 or younger who are in state or federal prisons are fathers.<sup>24</sup>

due to mass incarceration and early death.<sup>16</sup> Structural inequities and harmful policies and practices have persisted across multiple generations, maintaining the norms and conditions for violence and accelerating the production of negative outcomes for African American fathers, families, and communities.

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*“Young men of color often are portrayed as being absentee parents when they very well may desire to be involved, but there are systemic issues preventing that.”*

*– Violence prevention practitioner*

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## Opportunities for systems changes

To maximize outcomes for young children and promote community safety, there are numerous opportunities to better support young fathers through change in norms, language, policies, and practices in multiple sectors and systems. In this section we outline some of opportunities that are apparent within the early childhood system and the criminal justice system. Taking initial steps to introduce practices supportive of young fathers and fatherhood can improve outcomes for young fathers, their children and families, and entire communities.

### Opportunities for early childhood systems to support and include fathers

With a vested interest in optimizing outcomes for young children, early childhood systems can more fully recognize and take steps to support full inclusion of fathers. Father involvement in childrearing is linked to positive social-emotional development and strong connections between fathers and children— decreasing the likelihood of child maltreatment and neglect.<sup>25,26</sup> At the same time, a father's absence can hinder children's social and emotional development.<sup>27</sup> Recognizing the barriers built into the systems and beginning to shift practices are essential building blocks to support inclusion and improve outcomes.

The following are examples of how early childhood systems can begin to take action in support of fatherhood:

- **Early childhood systems can use language that is inclusive to fathers.** Through their work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, CSSP has been drawing attention to the unmet needs of expectant and parenting youth in the foster care system and their children. At first they used the phrase “pregnant and parenting youth” to describe the population. As CSSP began to rethink this phrasing, they realized that young fathers were inherently excluded in the wording “pregnant.” As a result, they have since changed their language to “expectant and parenting youth” to be more inclusive of fathers and to support father engagement. This has spread across early childhood systems, including New York’s child welfare system, where practitioners have begun identifying ways to include fathers through using father-friendly language.



© rmarmion / Depositphotos

*CSSP tries to use language that is more inclusive of fathers like “expectant and parenting youth.”*

- **Including men in policy and program development – as staff and as people affected by programs and policies – can strengthen systems’ supports for fathers.** Hiring and engaging men, and specifically young men of color, can help identify needs they may have in caring for their young children. For example, men (and women) may share a preference for access to services after traditional working hours.<sup>28</sup> Child welfare systems and others involved in early childhood systems are, for example, conducting focus groups and conducting parent and resident engagement activities that are explicitly inclusive of men and their roles as fathers.
- **In lifting up the role of fathers, early childhood systems can do more to recognize the diversity of family structures beyond the traditional nuclear family.** Family structures are diverse, and support to fathers needs to account for and embrace grand-father involvement, father figures such as uncles, and single as well as multiple-father families. For example, in the child welfare system, agencies can prioritize the identification and inclusion of nonresident fathers (i.e., fathers who do not live with their children) to improve safety, permanency, and wellbeing for children. This is important because nearly half of nonresident fathers are not contacted during their child’s stay in foster care,<sup>29</sup> even though father involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of reunification and better outcomes for children.<sup>30</sup>

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*“There is a growing body of research that talks about the optimal child outcomes when children have involved fathers, but not only that, there are improved outcomes in wellbeing and health for men when they are more involved with their families and their children.”*

*– Early childhood systems-builder*

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## **Opportunities for the criminal justice system to support fathers**

The criminal justice system can do more to recognize young men who are having contact with the criminal justice system as fathers and father figures. Becoming a father is a critical developmental period for many men, which comes with great joy, stress, and potential. The birth of a child can be a transformational time; for some, a time of greater urgency to pursue a pathway to decreased risk for involvement with violence. Yet for too many young fathers, this time of challenge and opportunity is marred by separation due to incarceration. In fact, approximately 45 percent of men aged 24 or younger who are in state and federal prisons are fathers.<sup>31</sup> Young children benefit tremendously from the support of parents and other caregivers in safe, stable, and nurturing environments, and this support is disrupted for children who have an incarcerated father.<sup>32</sup>

Examples of increasing recognition and systems changes in support of fathers and fatherhood include:

- **The criminal justice system can connect men at higher risk for violence with resources to support their role as fathers.** The City of New Orleans’ Group Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS) recognized that being a supportive parent is an important goal for many of its clients. It also recognized that many people at risk for involvement with violence, including those who are among the highest risk for shooting or

shot-calling (e.g. in gang- or group-involved violence), lack access to important resources and supports to be an effective father. GVRS has a practice of asking all new clients whether or not they have young children, and combines enforcement strategies with access to resources through a primary service provider, Total Community Action. This agency includes a Head Start and access to referrals for housing, clothing, and more. Partnering with Healthy Start, efforts in New Orleans to provide fatherhood supports to those at higher risk for violence are expanding, such as home visits, and parent education on infant health and development milestones, including by text. Supports through Healthy Start are now available for GVRS clients, Ceasefire (New Orleans’s violence interruption program based on the Cure Violence model) participants, midnight basketball participants, people returning from incarceration, and as of 2017, any community members who are interested. Such supports may help fathers overcome barriers and access options and opportunities so they may reduce their risk for violence.

- **The criminal justice system can support incarcerated parents and provide safe and quality parent-child contact through friendly, accessible visitation environments.** Given the number of young fathers who are separated from their children due to incarceration,<sup>33</sup> visitation support can be critical to supporting the parent-child relationship. Parental incarceration disrupts the parent-child relationship, and is associated with higher risk for mental and physical health problems in young adulthood among the children of incarcerated parents.<sup>34</sup> For people who are incarcerated due to violence, successful re-entry is crucial to reducing the likelihood of recidivism.<sup>35</sup> Supporting parent-child relationships, and broader family connectedness, increases the likelihood of successful re-entry, and can reduce the risk of future violence. Strong bonds are beneficial to the child and parent. In-person visitation is the most effective, but often, there are barriers that prevent this, such as distance and visiting hours. Offering

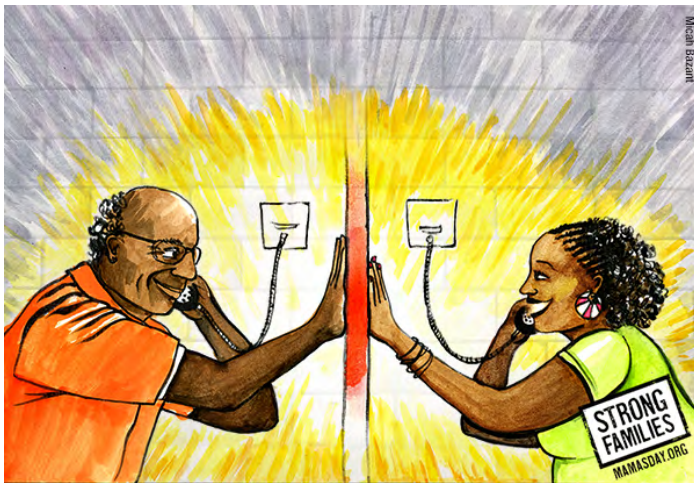


Image courtesy of Forward Together. Artist credit: Micah Bazant

*For families affected by incarceration, visitation support can benefit parent-child relationships and broader family connectedness.*

video conferencing is one way to support parenthood if a prison is too far, transportation is unaffordable, or if the physical environment is inappropriate for young children.<sup>36</sup> In Hillsborough County, Florida, the Family Reunification Program allows parents who are incarcerated to connect with families and children through a supervised live video visitation.<sup>37</sup> Children are able to speak with their parent through video conference and have support to travel to the prisons quarterly. Prior to visitations (video and in-person), the parent is advised about any news or accomplishments related to their child, to support conversations and strong bonds.

- **The criminal justice system can help build fathers' parenting skills.** To support successful reentry and reduce recidivism, many Departments of Corrections facilities and Federal Bureau of Prisons locations are helping fathers develop greater confidence and skills to care for and connect with their children.<sup>38</sup> The Department of Corrections in Kentucky found that fathers who completed the Fatherhood Initiative's InsideOut Dad Program had lower recidivism rates than the state as a whole.<sup>39</sup> Within prison, the program fosters a culture focused on families and helps fathers be effective parents out of prison.

## Opportunities for media, employment, housing, and other sectors to support fathers

There are opportunities for broader systems and sectors to influence norms around the role of fathers in their children's lives. Norms are powerful forces in shaping behavior, and the actions of systems such as media, employment, and housing can shape these norms and contribute to meaningful gains in improving community conditions for safety and optimal child development.

The following are examples of changes that can be made outside of the criminal justice and early childhood systems to strengthen norms supportive of young men as fathers:

- **Frame men of color as fathers in the media to shift norms and perspectives toward inclusion.** The news media shapes people's perceptions and can reinforce harmful assumptions about community violence, especially among people who do not have direct personal experience or exposure. Race, youth, and violence are often conflated in the news, distorting perceptions of young people of color and stereotyping them as perpetrators of violence.<sup>40</sup> There are opportunities for the media to infuse a fatherhood lens and change norms around how young men of color, who may also be fathers of young children, are viewed. News media can also help normalize diverse family structures, so that nonresident fathers and non-biological father figures are valued.
- **Implement local, fair hiring and living wage policies to support economic opportunities for fathers, especially among those most affected by violence.** Diminished economic opportunities and high unemployment rates increase the risk for multiple forms of violence.<sup>41</sup> Increasing economic opportunity is beneficial to families and children, and systems can remove barriers to such opportunities. For example, government and other employers can back Ban the Box – a policy that is increasingly in use that prevents employers from asking potential employees if they have criminal convictions. The purpose of Ban the Box is to institute fair hiring practices—eliminating employment restrictions on individuals who are formerly incarcerated. This is important because many people who are formerly incarcerated struggle

with labor market discrimination and barriers to economic stability.<sup>42</sup> Governments and employers can also pass policies to support local hiring and living wages. These policies can promote employment of residents and help close racial wage gaps that persist across the country (i.e., gaps in wages even when controlling for education level).<sup>43</sup> Stable employment is important for families and early childhood development as it can help decrease family stress and improve ability to access basic resources that support young children.<sup>44,45</sup>

- **Institute paid parental leave, time off work to attend school events, and/or the ability to work from home to support economic opportunities for families, and specifically fathers who face the most inequities due to social and economic barriers.**

Fathers are able to better engage with their children when their employers are flexible and supportive to families.<sup>46</sup> However, a 2012 Department of Labor study found employers offer paid parental leave more frequently for women than men.<sup>47</sup> Parental support policies should explicitly be available for fathers.

- **Increase the availability of safe and affordable housing, with consideration of the specific needs of people returning from incarceration.** Preventing housing discrimination can help fathers and families stay together. For example, violence prevention and early childhood practitioners can work with local housing authorities to implement the Fair Housing Act and push back against the local practice of applying Section 8 restrictions. There is a commonly utilized practice which prohibits people with felony convictions from living in Section 8 voucher and/or public housing programs. Widely believed to have been a policy of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), HUD has clarified that this practice was not federal policy, but rather done at local public housing authority discretion. When local housing authorities bar people with felony convictions, families involved with the criminal justice system face additional barriers to residential stability and living together. This affects family structures and impacts individuals with felony convictions or outstanding warrants, and their children.

- **Support networks of young fathers as advocates and influencers for safe and healthy communities and families.** Building networks and enhancing skills among men and boys helps them to become champions within their neighborhoods to collectively advocate for policies and practices that support safety, better outcomes for children, and community wellbeing. For example, in Boston, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation's Male Engagement Network (MEN), brings together longstanding coalitions from the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. The network fosters connections between people, communities, and organizations. One participating organization, Fathers Uplift, works with community organizations, clinicians, and peer support specialists to help fathers find permanent housing, jobs, and mental health services. The network organizes regular gatherings to create a safe space to foster mentoring, skills-building, and sharing across generations.

## Conclusion: It's time to increase support for fathers and fatherhood

Young children benefit greatly from father engagement – not only for financial support but also social and emotional development. Contrary to harmful media stereotypes, fatherhood is an important role for young fathers, and the transition to fatherhood is a developmental period of great opportunity. Yet young fathers of color in particular face a double jeopardy – living within systems that deemphasize support for fatherhood (with largely a focus on mothers), overemphasize criminal justice involvement, and conflate race, crime, and violence. Eliminating barriers and building in more intentional focus and concrete supports within early childhood systems and the criminal justice system can promote better outcomes for young children, reduce criminal justice system involvement, and strengthen families. Further, and importantly, changes in broader systems and sectors such as media, employment, and housing can contribute to meaningful gains in outcomes for fathers, healthier children, and safe communities.



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**CRADLE TO COMMUNITY: A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY SAFETY AND HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT** was a national partnership project of Prevention Institute and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. With the UNITY City Network and Early Childhood LINC, the project identified strategic policy, practice, systems, and

norms change levers to make communities safer so that all children have the opportunity to develop optimally. The project also identified policies and practices to strengthen early childhood development as a strategy to foster safer communities in the long-term. Activities included convenings, a learning lab, peer learning forums, technical assistance, and the development of briefs, fact sheets, and profiles to support practice. The 18 month planning grant laid the foundation for critical work at the intersection of healthy child development and community safety, all in service to a Culture of Health.

**PREVENTION INSTITUTE** is a focal point for primary prevention, dedicated to fostering health, safety, and equity by taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems in the first place. A national nonprofit with offices in Oakland, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., we advance strategies, provide training and technical assistance, transform research into practice, and support collaboration across sectors to embed prevention and equity in all practices and policies. Since its founding in 1997, Prevention Institute has focused on transforming communities by advancing community prevention, health equity, injury and violence prevention, healthy eating and active living environments, health system transformation, and mental health and wellbeing.

**UNITY**, a [Prevention Institute](#) initiative, builds community safety in cities through comprehensive, multi-sector strategies that prevent violence and support community resilience. By supporting practice and innovation, UNITY has been collectively advancing the field and shifting the paradigm on community violence and what cities can do about it since 2005.

**THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY (CSSP)** is a national, nonprofit organization recognized for its leadership in shaping policy, reforming public systems and building the capacity of communities. CSSP's mission is to secure equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families. The organization works to ensure that children and youth are born healthy; enter school ready to learn and succeed; and grow up in safe, supported, and economically successful families and communities. CSSP especially focuses on those who face the most significant barriers to opportunity, including racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees, families in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and families in contact with intervening public systems.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING AND INNOVATION NETWORK FOR COMMUNITIES (EC-LINC)**, an initiative of the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#), was developed by and for local communities across the country, and works to support families and improve results for young children through accelerating the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems.

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## Endnotes

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**CRADLE TO COMMUNITY: A FOCUS ON COMMUNITY SAFETY AND HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT** was a national partnership project of Prevention Institute and the Center for the Study of Social Policy, supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. With the UNITY City Network (Urban Networks Increase Thriving Youth) and Early Childhood LINC, the

project identified strategic policy, practice, systems, and norms change levers to make communities safer so that all children have the opportunity to develop optimally.

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