



# Harvard Model Congress Boston 2024

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: HEAD START

*By Delaney Lyons*

### INTRODUCTION

**Early Childhood Education** – Educational programming or activities provided to children before they begin kindergarten.

**Early Childhood Education**, which refers to programs or activities provided to children before they begin kindergarten, is a crucial aspect of healthy childhood development. Enrollment in proper early childhood education programs can have positive effects on children for the rest of their lives: children enrolled in these programs have shown to be less likely to repeat a grade, more likely to graduate from high school, as well as be higher earners in the workforce (UMass). Early childhood education programs cultivate important emotional, social, and cognitive skills that become the building blocks for lifelong success.

While early childhood education has been shown to provide positive outcomes for students, current data on enrollment in such programs in the United States proves worrisome. According to ongoing research by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), out of a compilation of thirty-eight OECD and Group of 20 (G20) countries, the United States was ranked twenty-eighth for the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education (OECD, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of three to four-year-olds enrolled in an educational program in 2012 was 54%, and the most recent observation shows an even lower enrollment rate of 50% in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics). It is important to note that some of this drop in enrollment rates could be due to the pandemic and its lasting effects on work-life balance. However, other developed countries still boast much higher enrollment rates with the average rate of enrollment for three-year-olds being 70%, and most developed countries have enrollment rates for four-year-olds upwards of 90% (Camera, 2017).

While early childhood education enrollment numbers are concerningly low across the nation, enrollment rates are most worrisome amongst low-income families. Research conducted by the National Center for Education

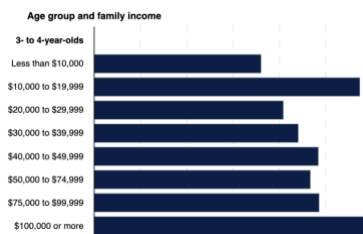


Chart showing ECE enrollment rates by family income.  
National Center for Education Statistics

Statistics shows that in 2021 the enrollment rate of three to four-year-olds from households that make less than \$10,000 was 36%, while the enrollment rate for children from families that make \$100,000 or more was 59% (National Center for Education Statistics). As stated previously, studies have shown that early childhood education programs are an essential building block for success in a child's future, meaning this disparity may be a cause for concern in regard to **achievement gaps** and social mobility for children from low-income households.

**Achievement Gap**  
–The disparity in  
academic  
performance  
between groups of  
students.

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## EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

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### *Historical Development*

Daycare programs have evolved alongside many social changes in America. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, childcare was primarily for poorer families. This was because both parents would often have to work to afford living expenses, creating a need for external childcare support. These childcare services were mainly “organized by philanthropic institutions, private individuals, community service organizations, or settlement houses and were supported by modest parent fees, private contributions, and in some instances, state funds” (Tootris). These centers were mainly focused on child supervision and, as informal programs, did not come with an educational mandate.

Early childhood education and daycare programs became more popular during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when women began to enter the workforce at higher rates. Due to the traditional social norms of women being the primary homemakers and childcare providers, when women started to join the workforce during and after WWII, the demand for childcare programming increased (Tootris).

To address the sudden increase in demand due to the war efforts, Congress passed the Defense Housing and Community Facilities and Services Act of 1940, which provided government-funded childcare for up to six days a week. This government-funded program was discontinued 3 years later, but many childcare centers lived on thanks to the Lanham Act. The act, which passed in 1946, allowed centers to operate for another three years and hosted children from all ranges of family income and ages (Tootris). Studies showed that not only did these daycare programs increase employment for women, but they also found it benefitted these children in adulthood, especially those from low-income families (Samuels, 2014).

### Post-WWII

After WWII, as war efforts ended, the federal government cut funding for the Lanham Act, leaving childcare to once again be mainly privately run. This fundamentally changed childcare eligibility. The sudden termination of the federally provided program allowed researchers to

*Roughly 6.7 million  
additional women  
went to work  
during World War  
II, increasing the  
female labor force  
by almost 50% in a  
few short years.*

***New Deal*** – A series of programs, public works projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939.

compare the effects on children and families who were able to utilize the program and those who could not. In a study conducted by Professor Chris M. Herbst from Arizona State University, when comparing children from similar age cohorts who were provided the childcare service and those who were not provided the childcare service, those who did were shown to have higher rates of graduation, marriage, and employment (Samuels, 2014).

## Cash Assistance Programs

While government-sponsored programs were no longer provided for families after the war, Congress continued to build upon the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program. The ADC program was created as a part of the **New Deal** in 1935 and began as a state-administered cash assistance program supporting single mothers. Over time, it expanded to become a broader welfare program for low-income families and was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019). While these cash and tax assistance programs were helpful in funding daycare for low-income families, it was not as robust as the previously established daycare centers. Many of these families used the assistance to afford many other necessities to help raise children in addition to just childcare. After the Aid to Families with Dependent Children expanded to a broader welfare program, it was restructured in 1996 by the Clinton Administration to become more restrictive and was renamed the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (ASPE).

## Head Start

To further combat disparities in education and to address the achievement gap that was growing between children from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, President Lyndon B. Johnson created **Head Start**, a government-funded early childhood educational program. One of his many “War on Poverty” initiatives, the 1965 initiative originally began as an eight-week summer program to provide education, health, and nutrition services to disadvantaged youth. The program served approximately 560,000 children from low-income families during its first year (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019). Head Start has evolved since its original conception through several policy changes to not only provide childcare but also support pregnant women and families outside the classroom.

## *Scope of the Problem*

While childcare started off as just a way to supervise children, it has grown substantially to include educational and developmental resources. In the decades since the advent of early childcare, every state has developed early childhood education standards that all licensed daycare and childcare facilities must meet. These standards usually include regulations for **Social and Emotional Learning**, playtime approaches,

***Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*** – A strength-based, developmental process through which children, adolescents, and adults learn skills to support healthy development and relationships.

**Head Start** –  
Government-funded  
early childhood  
education program  
that promotes school  
readiness of children  
under age five  
through  
comprehensive  
education, health, and  
social services.

traditional education curriculums, and standards for technology integration (Mass.gov). High-quality childcare centers that follow the curriculum and provide proper support for children have proven success rates, but only for a select few — many of these private facilities have become out of reach for low-income families.

## Affordability

Childcare has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar industry with a market size valued at \$33.5 billion in 2021 (Children’s Lighthouse Franchise, 2023). In the state of Massachusetts, the average annual cost of daycare for a single four-year-old is \$16,781, which is just \$576 less than in-state tuition for the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the highest-rated public university in Massachusetts (World Population Review). Washington, DC has the highest costs for daycare in the country with the average annual cost for enrolling a four-year-old child being \$19,214 (World Population Review). These skyrocketing costs have made it very difficult for many families to afford private childcare services and provide their children with the valuable developmental resources that come with the programs.

## Quality of Programs

Just like many educational institutions across America, Head Start encounters several issues that affect its overall quality. One notable concern involves the inconsistent quality levels found across care providers, leading to unequal educational experiences and outcomes for enrolled children. Head Start programs, while federally funded, are overseen on a state level. And just like public schools across America differ in quality, so do Head Start programs.

Another concern regarding the quality of Head Start programs stems from staffing, including qualifications and turnover rates, which disrupt the continuity of care and hinder the establishment of strong relationships between children and caregivers. Additionally, many centers are facing a staffing crisis because they cannot offer a competitive salary, making the vocation less desirable. This teacher shortage has been detrimental to some Head Start centers, such as the ones in California that face such high demand for Head Start programs but also have high costs of living and wage standards (Iokimedes, 2022).

One of the most obvious constraints that contribute to the quality of Head Start programs is its limited funding. Because it is a publicly funded program, strict limitations to its budget impose limitations on available resources, professional development opportunities, and program enhancements. This limited funding contributes to restrictions on access and enrollment. Because many of the programs cannot meet the demand of the area, they must deny some eligible children the chance to benefit from the program, which is supposed to be a guaranteed opportunity for all young learners (Strauss, 2016).

At least 300,000  
public-school  
teachers and other  
staff left the field  
between February  
2020 and May  
2022.

## Achievement Gap

The achievement gap refers to the differences in academic performance and educational outcomes among various student groups, often associated with socioeconomic factors and systemic disparities. While Head Start aims to reduce this gap through early interventions and comprehensive services, concerns have been raised about the long-term effectiveness of such early childcare programs. Critics argue that despite initial improvements in school readiness, the achievement gap tends to widen as students progress through their educational journey. Disparities in standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment persist, even among Head Start participants (Bauer, 2019). These examples highlight the ongoing challenges in addressing the achievement gap and underscore the importance of sustained support and interventions beyond children's early years to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all.

***Build Back Better Act*** – Bill introduced in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress to fulfill aspects of President Joe Biden's Build Back Better Plan.

## *Congressional Action*

Throughout the history of federally funded early childhood education in the United States, several legislative measures have been implemented to enhance accessibility and improve program quality. For example, The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (H.R.1429) aimed to reauthorize and improve Head Start programming. The act improved the qualifications and skills of Head Start staff through increased professional development. It also extended the duration of services provided to children, emphasizing the importance of consistent and comprehensive early childhood education. Additionally, the legislation implemented stronger accountability measures and encouraged more parental engagement in Head Start programs. The Act also promoted collaboration with other community services to offer holistic support to children and families. Ultimately, Head Start was set apart from other legislative educational programs because of the community services it offered beyond education (Congress.gov, 2007).

Not all legislation specifically targeted Head Start programs, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (S.1177). This bill authorized preschool development grants, facilitating the expansion of high-quality preschool programs of all kinds and fostering collaboration between early learning and elementary schools for students to have a more cohesive educational experience. Additionally, it gave more control to states to create curricula for educational equity and innovation unique to their state programs and standards (Congress.gov, 2015).

Recently, in response to the drastic negative effects the pandemic has had on childcare and education programming, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (H.R.1319). This bill allocated significant funding for early childhood education, which included Head Start programs and facilities, with special attention paid to addressing



pandemic-related challenges such as the safe reopening of educational programs and combating learning loss (Congress.gov, 2021).

Moreover, the proposed **Build Back Better Act**, advocated by the Biden administration, included many early childcare reform proposals. The act sought to establish nationwide universal Pre-K for three and four-year-olds, increase affordable childcare accessibility, and invest in the early childhood workforce. While the Build Back Better Act was not passed, the initiative informed the public of the directives that the current Biden Administration supports and advocates for surrounding early education (The White House).

## *Other Policy Action*

Several states and local governments in the United States have made headway in increasing access to early childhood education. One notable example is Georgia's Pre-K Program, which provides free, high-quality education for all four-year-olds in the state, regardless of family income. Georgia was the first state to provide free universal Pre-K in 1995, and in its first year, it provided early education for 44,000 children. The program's funding is derived from a combination of state appropriations and proceeds from a popular lottery. However, due to fluctuating funds from the lottery, and therefore limited resources, it can be difficult for children to access the program (Stanford, 2023).

Other states and cities have implemented similar “universal” pre-k programs. Similar to Georgia, Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program ensures universal access to pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds, with funding derived from a mix of state resources and a portion of lottery revenue. While these universal programs like Head Start have helped support early childhood education, funding is limited and enrollment caps are enforced. These limits leave many families who were not selected via lottery enrollment without affordable options for their young children. So, while these state initiatives are making strides, there are still many improvements to be made (Stanford, 2023).

Many other states and cities use other funding and program mechanisms to support accessible early childhood education. For example, Denver's Preschool Program (DPP), which provides tuition assistance for low-income families, is sustained by a dedicated sales tax. This program is different from universal Pre-K as it is directly targeted at low-income families, as opposed to providing Pre-K for everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, who wishes to enroll (Denver Preschool Program). This targeted-funded structure allows states to use the limited funds towards families who show the most need, and therefore, may have a greater effect on the achievement gap.

**Free Market** –  
*Voluntary exchange  
and the laws of  
supply and demand  
provide the sole  
basis for the  
economic system,  
without government  
intervention.*

*While many states  
have implemented  
universal pre-k  
programs, not all  
of them are as  
universal as they  
seem. Only DC,  
Florida, Oklahoma,  
Vermont, and  
Wisconsin met the  
benchmark for a  
universal status of  
70% of four-year-  
olds.*

## IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

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### *Conservative View*

Different viewpoints exist within conservative circles regarding federally funded early childhood education programs. Conservatives emphasize the importance of limited government involvement and instead believe in individual responsibility. Therefore, they tend to be against publicly funded programs like Head Start. Concerns are often raised about potential inefficiencies within the programs, such as teacher quality and curriculum standards, leading conservatives to believe that such programs are a misuse of funds.

Conservatives would also be concerned with government overreach and the loss of parental choice when the federal government intervenes in early childhood education. Instead, conservatives tend to support local control and market-driven solutions. They highlight the importance of limited government intervention, proposing alternatives like tax credits or vouchers to empower parents to make educational decisions for themselves. However, even these tax programs are unpopular amongst some conservatives as they are still tax-funded. Some conservatives oppose universal Pre-K programs and favor targeted assistance for low-income families to increase program options, and in turn, increase parent choice.

### *Liberal View*

It is important to note that both conservatives and liberals agree on the importance of high-quality early childhood education. Those with liberal viewpoints, however, emphasize the importance of providing equitable access to high-quality early education, especially with the help of government funding. Many left-leaning individuals emphasize not only the importance of the programs themselves but also the outcomes these programs provide. They argue early childhood education is a greater societal issue and that it is a vital tool for promoting equal opportunities, addressing achievement disparities and laying a strong foundation for future success. They contend that federally funded programs play a crucial role in ensuring equal access, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Supporters highlight the long-term benefits of investing in early education, including improved educational outcomes, reduced social inequalities, and increased economic productivity. In addition to support for early childhood education programs, liberals also advocate for community and parental programs that help support child development.



*Head Start programs in New York receive extra federal funding.*

*Andrew Kane, WENY News*

## AREAS OF DEBATE

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### *Improving Head Start Programs*

Head Start has gone through many legislative updates to become the program that it is today. In 2021 the program was funded to serve 8,391,119 children and pregnant people at centers all around the country. Head Start programs range from independent centers to home-based training to partnerships with other established childcare centers. The total budget for 2021 was just shy of \$11 billion dollars, funding all programming, staffing, research, and training (Office of Head Start).

As explained in a previous section, some Head Start programs have trouble upkeeping quality services, especially in terms of retaining high-quality teaching staff due to uncompetitive salaries. One possible solution to this would be to increase the budget allocated to Head Start to increase teacher salaries. This increased budget could also go towards improving curricula and programming. Both options would hopefully improve Head Start's overall quality, addressing some Congresspeople's concerns regarding the effectiveness and quality level of Head Start programs.

However, implementing an increased budget may be difficult because, while Head Start is a federally funded program, each state oversees its own programs and facilities. The budget increase may be spent differently from state to state, leading to inconsistent outcomes across states.

While there are no proposed bills to directly increase the budget for Head Start teacher salaries, there are many efforts to improve all early childhood education programs through the support of the early childhood workforce. While this is not a proposal exclusive to Head Start, it could address the current problem of staffing shortages. One of these proposals is the Early Educators Apprenticeship Act (S.236), which aims to invest in teacher training and professional development. This act would provide grants to childcare centers to provide on-the-job learning opportunities for future teachers and encourage early childhood educators to enter and advance in this field (Congress.gov, 2023).

Another piece of proposed legislation that aims to increase the childcare workforce is the Head Start for Our Future Act (H.R. 1108). This bill would add early childhood development programs to the list of community services in which undergraduate, graduate, and professional students may participate in under a federal work-study program. Both bills aim to address the teacher shortage that affects Head Start and the many other childcare centers struggling to pay their teachers a competitive salary (Congress.gov, 2021).

### Political Perspectives on this Solution

As there is no current proposed legislation on specific improvements for Head Start programs, it seems as though both parties believe in moving in a different direction regarding supporting early childhood education. It



is universally agreed that Head Start has some proven flaws, so both parties tend to push other initiatives.

Conservatives would tend to favor programs to stimulate the workforce. The Early Educators Apprenticeship Act (S.236) was introduced by Senator Todd Young, a Republican from Indiana, and is co-sponsored by two Democrats and an additional Republican. This government-funded initiative would not only aim to improve early childhood education but also create more opportunities for more jobs. Additionally, this intervention does not increase government oversight or reduce parent choice, making it a favorable choice for conservatives. Liberals would also approve of workforce initiatives, such as those described in the bill, but may favor more hands-on and ground-up improvement approaches as well.

## *Universal Pre-K*

While Head Start is a program that specifically targets low-income families, many have also proposed universal pre-kindergarten programs, which would provide free Pre-K for all students regardless of income. The main goals of a universal Pre-K program would not only be to increase access to early education but to also level the playing field among children by providing more students with a similar quality of education, which would help close the achievement gap.

One example of a proposed federal initiative for universal Pre-K is the Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act (H.R.2886), which seeks to establish a universally accessible Pre-K program in all states. The proposal aims to provide free, high-quality early education to all three and four-year-old children nationwide, regardless of family income. It envisions a partnership between the federal government and states, using Head Start and other government childcare services as an example. The funding would be sourced from a combination of federal appropriations, grants, and private collaborations. The objective of this bill is to ensure equitable access to early childhood education and promote positive educational and developmental outcomes for all children, irrespective of their socioeconomic circumstances (Congress.gov, 2021).

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives would be less favorable to universal Pre-K programs because of the elimination of parent choice. Additionally, conservatives may believe the money would be better spent elsewhere, such as direct aid for low-income families. Conservatives may prefer this alternative because providing free education to all families, even those who do not need assistance, may be seen as a misuse of funds. Additionally, because conservatives already disapprove of the quality of the current Head Start program, they may be concerned that the money spent on a project such as this would not yield positive results.

Liberals, on the other hand, would be most favorable to universal Pre-K because of its emphasis on equality. Liberals are very favorable to socially funded educational programs, as they not only increase access to quality education, but they provide more students with an even playing field. Liberals believe that providing universal Pre-K with similar quality standards could help address the socioeconomic educational achievement gap.

### *Providing targeted relief for low-income families*

Many recent legislative proposals have been aiming to move away from improving the Head Start program and to instead provide privately established childcare facilities with grants to fund the enrollment of low-income students. Throughout the years, numerous bills have been proposed with this goal in mind. One notable example is the Child Care for Working Families Act (S.1360), which intends to establish a system of income-based subsidies to make childcare more affordable for low-income families. This legislation also includes provisions to enhance the quality of childcare services and increase the salaries of early childhood educators (Congress.gov, 2021).

Similarly, the Early Learning and Child Care Act (S.388) seeks to expand access to affordable early learning services for families of low to moderate income by increasing federal funding and supporting the creation of high-quality childcare centers. This bill states that families must pay a subsidized fee, based on their income, for childcare services. The fees are waived for children from families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line and fees are capped at 7% of a family's income regardless of the family's income level. (Congress.gov, 2023).

The Strong Start for America's Children Act (S.1380) concentrates on broadening access to high-quality early education programs, especially for socioeconomically disadvantaged families, through federal grants. Grants are allotted to states based on each state's proportion of children who are age four and who are from families with incomes at or below 200% of the poverty level. States may apply to use up to 15% of their grant to fund high-quality early childhood education and care programs for infants and toddlers whose family income is below the poverty level. Additionally, the bill works towards combining operating Head Start centers with high-quality private childcare centers to improve quality. (Congress.gov, 2015).

Another proposed bill, the Affordable Child Care for Economic Success Act (H.R.7683), strives to enhance the availability and affordability of childcare by expanding subsidies, enhancing program quality, and facilitating workforce training for childcare providers. These proposals collectively aim to alleviate financial burdens and enhance the accessibility and quality of early childhood education for low-income families (Congress.gov, 2019).

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Many of the bills presented above have been cosponsored and supported by Democrats and Republicans. However, in general, conservatives have shown a preference for options that limit government spending and give the most agency to states and local education agencies. Conservatives may support the same sentiments behind Democrat-introduced bills but may think they need less funding. Many of these proposed bipartisan bills include support for educators in the workforce, improving educational quality, and maximizing parent choice by increasing private childcare access, all ideals that conservatives support. However, some may think the qualifications are too broad, leading to money being spent on children and families who may not need financial support.

All these bills listed were introduced by Democrats, and all of these ideals are supported by liberals across the board. So, while some liberals support universal Pre-K and others do not, there is greater agreement for the need for early educational resources.

## BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

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There are many different budget avenues a bill of this nature can take on. Many states have used a variety of creative funding sources such as state lotteries and specialized taxes. While the Biden Administration currently supports federally funded early childhood education, this is not a widespread belief. Federally funded programs are funded through the collection of taxes. Therefore, implementing a new program would come at the cost of higher taxes, which may cause some backlash, especially among conservatives. Additionally, the likelihood of these programs securing funding and succeeding may be challenged by the effects of the pandemic, recent recession, and rising inflation.

## CONCLUSION

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It is crucial to recognize the significance of early childhood education programs and the multitude of advantages they bring. Extensive research consistently confirms that high-quality early education experiences yield profound effects on a child's development, acting as a building block for lifelong learning and accomplishment. By channeling resources into early childhood education, we can provide children with a solid educational and developmental footing, equipping them with essential skills and competencies that will positively shape their future. Furthermore, investing in early childhood education programs can play a pivotal role in narrowing achievement gaps. Additionally, by supporting early childhood education initiatives, we empower parents to actively participate in the

workforce, contributing to economic growth and stability. Ultimately, the commitment to investing in early childhood education is a commitment in our collective future, promoting personal and societal well-being, cultivating educational equity, and paving the way for a flourishing and inclusive society.

## GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

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If you would like to dive deeper into the bills mentioned in this briefing, they can all be found on [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov), where you will find more information about the bill and its progress. Because this topic is so nuanced, it is recommended that you investigate topics surrounding government-funded childcare, such as women in the workplace and the trade-off of dual-earning households, and how this affects the overall workforce. Additionally, to understand more about how this affects real people, look for testimonials and documentaries – these will help you get more of a feel for how everyday Americans feel about childcare costs and the availability of support.

## GLOSSARY

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**Achievement Gap** –The disparity in academic performance between groups of students

**Build Back Better Act** –Bill introduced in the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress to fulfill aspects of President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better Plan

**Early Childhood Education** – Educational programming or activities provided to children before they begin Kindergarten

**Free Market** – Voluntary exchange and the laws of supply and demand provide the sole basis for the economic system, without government intervention

**Head Start** – Government-funded early childhood education program that promotes school readiness of children under age five through comprehensive education, health, and social services

**New Deal** – A series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939s

**Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** –A strength-based, developmental process through which children, adolescents, and adults learn skills to support healthy development and relationships

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