

Investing in Early Childhood in Pueblo

Five Things to Know

The early childhood years – typically defined as birth through age five – are the most formative of a person’s life. Quality relationships with family, peers, and caretakers during this period lay the foundation for a healthy future. These years are particularly important for developing the social and emotional skills that can help protect against substance use later in life.

Investing in the early child care workforce can help support the social and emotional health of young people and families in Pueblo today and in the future.

1. Early childhood is the most important developmental period in the lifespan.

In the first few years of life, a child’s brain makes more than one million new connections every second. These are the connections that allow a child to develop speech and take their first steps. They are also the connections that allow for social and emotional learning. They are made through responsive relationships, in which adults respond to children’s verbal cues and actions. These “serve and return” interactions between a child and adult help form critical connections in the brain that support physical and emotional health later in life.⁴

2. Skills gained in early childhood protect against drug use in adolescence.

Among the important skills developed in early childhood are self-regulation and executive functioning. These skills allow us to prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses. Self-regulation and executive functioning skills are developed by participating in activities with other children, observing adults model these skills, and practicing them in safe and stable environments. The research on executive functioning, self-regulation, and responsive relationships is clear: Children who develop these skills early in life are more likely to delay initiation of drug use and use fewer drugs when they reach adolescence.⁵

Early Childhood in Pueblo

Pueblo County is home to nearly 10,000 children under the age of five.¹ Many are part of vulnerable families as defined by three risk factors: births to single mothers, births to teen mothers, and births to women without a high school diploma or GED.² The percentage of mothers who are experiencing these three risk factors is twice as high in Pueblo as in the state as a whole: 6.6 percent compared with 3.2 percent.



Youth Substance Use in Pueblo

Substance use is a persistent problem among Pueblo’s high schoolers. The county has Colorado’s highest percentage of students who say they use marijuana (27 percent in 2017) and consistently reports among the state’s highest rates of use of other substances such as prescription medications, alcohol, and illicit drugs.³

3. A quality early childhood care system is critical for developing skills.

Children need parents and caregivers with the capacity to interact with them in a meaningful way both in the home and care outside of the home such as daycare and preschool. The Harvard Center on the Developing Child has identified three opportunities for caretakers and communities to support healthy development: time and commitment; financial, psychological, and institutional resources; and skills and knowledge.

4. This system will only work if our workforce has adequate tools, training, and support.

Quality child care matters. We can get there by equipping the early care workforce with the skills and tools they need to delivery quality care. Colorado monitors early childhood care providers on their quality using the Colorado Shines rating system. Only 10 of Pueblo's 139 early childhood providers meet quality level 3 – the standard for a quality program – on the Colorado Shines' five-level scale. One way for providers to reach this quality level is to provide advanced training for their workforce.

In August 2016, the Pueblo Department of Public Health and Environment began implementing the Communities That Care (CTC) prevention-planning system. CTC aims to reduce substance use and improve mental health among youth. Addressing early childhood mental health is one of the strategies Pueblo has chosen to achieve this goal.

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5. Investment in the early childhood care workforce is an investment in the future of Pueblo.

Pueblo's working families rely on a network of both formal and informal providers to look after their children. The early childhood workforce in Pueblo is passionate and motivated to serve families. These professionals are typically low earners – the hourly wage of family child care providers is \$12.63 an hour.⁶ Funding to equip the current workforce as well as the next generation of early childcare employees with the skills and training they need is lacking. Investments to support the early childhood workforce via increased training and more hands on help will have an impact on the development of children and their outcomes later in life, including outcomes related to substance use.



Endnotes

¹ US Census Bureau American Community Survey. 2013-2017 Five Year County Estimates.

² Colorado Children's Campaign. KidsCount Colorado 2018. <https://www.coloradokids.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/2018-KC-Low-res-4-11-18.pdf>

³ Healthy Kids Colorado Survey 2017 Estimates. Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment.

⁴ Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Key Concepts.

⁵ National Institute on Drug Abuse. Principles of Substance Abuse Prevention for Early Childhood. March 2016.

⁶ https://earlymilestones.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Brief_3_CO_EC_Workforce_Survey.pdf