

**Connecting the Dots:
Re-Envisioning the Intersection of Early Childhood Programs and
Neighborhood-Based Action**

**Jack P. Shonkoff
July 2024**

Twenty-five years ago, a report from the National Academy of Sciences—*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*—synthesized the leading edge of developmental and behavioral research and underscored the need to close the gap between what we know and what we do to strengthen the early foundations of human development. Today, advances in the biological sciences are setting the table for a deeper level of understanding about how early experiences are literally “built into the body” across multiple developing systems (including immune function and metabolic regulation, as well as the brain) in ways that affect lifelong health as well as early learning that were barely imaginable in the year 2000.

Over these past 2½ decades, extensive research has documented positive effects of a range of early childhood investments on the development of many young children, but the size of those effects has been inconsistent and increasing impact at scale remains elusive. The need to close this growing gap between multiple sources of knowledge and more effective action is even more urgent now—and increased attention to neighborhood influences on child well-being is long overdue.

In 2022, the Center on the Developing Child posted a [call to action](#) to re-envision early childhood policy and practice in a world of striking inequality and uncertainty. Building on more than two decades of raising public understanding about “early brain development in an environment of relationships” (what I now refer to as the science of ECD 1.0), this call to action proposed an expanded framework that focuses on “connecting the brain to the rest of the body in a broader ecological context” (which I talk about as ECD 2.0). The recognition that ECD 2.0 builds on the enduring features of ECD 1.0 is reflected in the following concepts:

- **Educational Achievement and Lifelong Health.** It’s *still* about providing rich learning experiences (ECD 1.0) *and* it’s also about protecting developing brains and other biological systems from the disruptive effects of excessive adversity on the foundations of *both* school readiness *and* a lifetime of physical and mental well-being (ECD 2.0).
- **Responsive Relationships and Healthy Communities.** It’s *still* about the importance of “serve and return” interactions (ECD 1.0) *and* it’s also about recognizing that the burdens of intergenerational poverty, systemic racism, and other structural inequities cannot be addressed *solely* by nurturing relationships, and that all children and the adults who care for them deserve to live in communities that support well-being at all ages (ECD 2.0).
- **Moving Beyond One-Size-Fits-All.** It’s *still* about investing in evidence-based programs (ECD 1.0) *but* it’s also about expecting variation in their effectiveness, planning for flexible implementation, and moving beyond asking “what works” to focus more on “what works for whom, why, and in what contexts” to achieve larger effects for all children (ECD 2.0).

Advances in science, enhanced capacity to measure stress activation in young children, and extensive knowledge from the lived experiences of service providers, community leaders, policymakers, and families raising young children in a diversity of contexts all combine to provide a powerful opportunity

for fresh thinking. Several leaders of highly respected, place-based initiatives sense this opportunity and have expressed growing enthusiasm about the potential power of aligning the science of ECD 2.0 with “on the ground” knowledge and new measures to strengthen their efforts to improve the life prospects of young children facing the hardships of structural inequities in their communities.

To devote more time to seizing this opportunity, I have stepped down after 18 years as Director of the Center on the Developing Child and am beginning a new chapter as Founding Director to pursue a connected but independent portfolio of work. My aim is to collaborate directly with motivated change agents at the intersection of early childhood services and neighborhood-based activism to catalyze fresh thinking about how to strengthen the foundations of healthy development starting in the prenatal period and the first three years after birth, when developing brains and other biological systems are most sensitive to influences that can have lifelong effects. This new agenda will be guided by three objectives designed to extend the boundaries of the early childhood ecosystem.

Objective 1: Make the science of ECD 2.0 accessible and actionable for change agents working at a community level. The core concepts of this expanded framework are now well-supported by a “trilogy” of three working papers from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child: WP 15 ([Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body, 2020](#)), WP 16 ([Place Matters, 2023](#)), and WP 17 ([A World of Differences, 2024](#)). Building on this base, I will be working with place-based initiatives and a dedicated team to create complementary products for practical application in community-centered work.

Objective 2: Partner with community-led initiatives that are motivated to integrate the science of ECD 2.0 and new measurement tools into their work. During the initial discovery phase, which has already begun, my attention is riveted on asking questions, listening carefully, and learning from those already engaged on the ground about how my colleagues and I might contribute to *their* quest for larger impacts. Together we are beginning to explore which ECD 2.0 concepts are most relevant and how enhanced capacity to measure stress activation in young children (currently being developed by the [JPB Research Network on Toxic Stress](#)) might be helpful to identify priorities for community action and assess variation in response to interventions.

Objective 3: Informed by ongoing progress on objectives 1 and 2, explore how to incorporate a strong, place-based perspective into the early childhood ecosystem. By documenting how effective community action can enhance child well-being, we will be well-positioned to encourage early childhood policymakers across sectors to think beyond direct services for children and parents *alone* and to focus increased attention on the synergistic power of place-based efforts to dismantle barriers to healthy development.

My overarching goal is urgent and simple—to help support a new generation of change agents who are well-positioned to achieve far greater impacts on child health and development than either direct services for children and families or community-focused initiatives have been able to achieve by themselves. Without underestimating the challenges that lie ahead, I’m eager to work with kindred spirits who view current best practices as a starting point, not a destination, in the quest for greater impacts at scale.

Looking back over the past 18 years, I have cherished the experience of building and guiding the Center on the Developing Child to where it is today—and sharing that adventure with remarkably skilled and deeply committed colleagues has been a gift. While looking forward to seeing where this highly talented group (and yet-to-be-selected new faculty director) take the Center in its next phase, I’m embracing the opportunity to dedicate myself full-time to my new chapter. Please stay tuned to this space for more developments as the work progresses.