

Affordable, High-Quality Child Care

Affordable, High-Quality Child Care is a Primary Prevention Strategy

Access to affordable, high-quality child care *reduces parental stress and maternal depression*, both of which are known risk factors for child maltreatment and adverse childhood experiences.ⁱ

By age five, about 90% of a child's brain is developed — making the earliest years critical for healthy growth and learning.ⁱⁱ Access to quality and affordable childcare is critical for optimal early development, parental workforce participation, and economic development.ⁱⁱⁱ

Investing in Child Care Strengthens South Dakota's Workforce

- "South Dakota's economy loses \$329 million annually due to child care challenges."^{iv}
- In South Dakota, 72% (more than 50,000) of children under the age of five have all available parents in the workforce.^v Affordable, safe child care keeps parents in the workforce.
- High-quality early care and education is proven to dramatically improve a child's opportunities for a better future while offering parents greater job stability and overall economic security, helping keep South Dakota businesses open and local economies strong.^{vi}
- 68% of employers say their staff express concerns about the cost of child care either somewhat often or very often.^{vii}
- 48% of workers who quit their job and had a child younger than 18 in the household cite child care issues as a factor in their decision to leave the workforce.^{viii}
- Child care shortages restrict parent participation in the workforce, which in turn can strain family finances, decrease taxpaying ability, and increase the need to public support.^{vi}

South Dakota Families Need Both Affordable *and* Accessible Child Care

- In South Dakota, 43% of families live in a child care desert.^{ix}, rural populations make up 42% of the state population^x, and 1 in 5 children live in poverty^{xi}. South Dakota families often find it difficult to find and afford child care.
- The average cost of childcare for an infant in South Dakota is nearly \$8,000.^{xii}
- The cost of child care continues to challenge South Dakota families. In South Dakota, a married couple earning the median household income of \$109,987 would spend about 7.1% of their income on center-based care for one infant. For a single parent earning \$34,417, they would spend 22.8% of their income on childhood. It is recommended by the U.S. Dept. Of Health and Human Services that child care for families accounts for <7% of their income.^{xiii}

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Community-Based Doula Services

Community-Based Doula Services are a Primary Prevention Strategy

In *public health approaches*, primary prevention strategies aim to stop problems before they begin. Enhanced primary care helps identify and address psychological and social family problems associated with risk for child abuse and neglect, increasing the likelihood that families and children get connected to needed healthcare and community resources.ⁱ

Community-based doulas are trained professionals who provide emotional, physical and information support during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Research indicates that community-based doula services are an effective strategy to foster nurturing and responsive parenting behaviors.ⁱⁱ Integrating doulas into a larger system of support for families can increase attendance at medical appointments and improve parental behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ

Community-Based Doula Services in South Dakota

In 2025, South Dakota was one of 6 states to fully implement Medicaid coverage for doula services through state plan amendments approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.^{iv} South Dakota is now one of the 26 U.S. states that cover and reimburse community-based doula services under Medicaid.^v In order to receive payment, doulas must be enrolled with South Dakota Medicaid and credentialed through an oversight body recognized by South Dakota Medicaid.^{vi} Medicaid coverage for postpartum doula services is limited; for example, coverage for household chores or time for the new mother to sleep is specifically excluded in the manual.^{vii} Additionally, although South Dakota covers doula services as outlined in the Medicaid manual, the state does not provide financial support for doula training and workforce development.^{viii}

Doula Care in the Postpartum Period (Substance Use Disorder & Maternal Mental Health)

In addition to improved birth outcomes and parental behavior, doulas offer important prevention support during the postpartum birth:

- In a review of state data on infant deaths (2018–2022) and pregnancy-associated deaths (2018–2021), the South Dakota Department of Health identified a history of substance use treatment in 16.7% of pregnancy-associated deaths.^{ix}
- Following birth, new moms experiencing Substance Use Disorder (SUD) have a greater risk of death-related SUD in the first 90 days and an elevated risk for one year postpartum.^x Community-Based doulas can be a trusted caregiver and help identify SUD and make referrals in the postpartum period.
- In a recent needs assessment conducted by the South Dakota Department of Health, access to mental health services and providers was identified as one of the top 5 factors affecting women's health.^{xi} Doulas can educate new mothers about the emotional aspects of pregnancy and postpartum and can refer for screening when a mental health concern is identified.

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Early Childhood Investments Pay Off

Ensuring a Strong Start for All Children is a Primary Prevention Strategy

Ensuring a strong start for children and investing in early childhood supports are considered primary prevention strategies because they *prevent problems before they begin* by shaping healthy development and reducing risk factors that contribute to adverse outcomes later in life. Investing in children early may prevent future costs for social interventions like foster care, behavioral health interventions, and incarceration.ⁱ

Early Childhood Investments Reduce Risk and Strengthen Protective Factors

A central goal of primary prevention in public health is to create environments where children and families can thrive. According to the CDC, one of the key evidence-based strategies to prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is to strengthen the connections between children and caregivers and to invest in supportive environments, which reduce the likelihood of harm before it occurs.ⁱⁱ Early childhood investments can minimize adverse childhood experiences and strengthen the potential of an individual to contribute positively to their families, society and the economy.ⁱⁱⁱ

It Costs Less to Invest Early

- Research shows a \$5 to \$16 return for every dollar invested in early childhood, depending on the child's circumstances and environment. These gains come from reduced spending on special education, higher graduation and employment rates, lower incarceration costs, and healthier life outcomes.^{iv}
- Children who fall behind in school are more likely to drop out and dropouts are eight times more likely than graduates to end up in prison.^v 85% of all juveniles who interface with the juvenile court system are functionally low-literate.^{vi}
- The Perry Preschool, a high-quality program for 3–5-year-olds developed in Michigan in the 1960s, showed a return to society of between about \$7 and \$12 for each \$1 invested. This ROI comes in the form of money saved in the health care system, in special education and in prisons.^{vii}
- Everyone benefits from the investments of early childhood programs. Children are able to benefit from exposure to a wider array of learning opportunities. Parents may be able to seek employment or further their education.^{viii}
- By supporting healthy development early in a child's life, we can reduce the need for costly interventions later—like special education services, grade repetition, teen parenthood, and incarceration that are, ultimately, significant expenses for families, schools, and taxpayers.^{ix}

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Developing the Future Workforce

Supporting Young Children Strengthens South Dakota's Future Workforce

From a *public health* perspective, primary prevention refers to stopping problems before they occur. Investing into early childhood can contribute to a strong future workforce by strengthening developmental protective factors and helping children build a strong foundation for their future.

Investments in Early Childhood Reduce Developmental Risk

Policies that promote optimal conditions for early development positively contribute to the trajectory of children's school and life outcomes. ⁱ Programs that enhance early learning and social-emotional development *prevent later academic struggles, behavioral issues, and poor health outcomes*, which can affect labor market outcomes as adults. ⁱⁱ

Strong early childhood education and care create a strong future workforce. Investing in early childhood development (e.g., education, care, enrichment) *increases children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills*, which are foundational elements of human capital. These skills are directly linked to *higher educational attainment, better employment prospects, and greater lifetime earnings*, all of which contribute to a stronger, more skilled workforce later in life. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Workforce of Tomorrow Starts in Early Childhood

Investments to strengthen children's foundational skills before formal schooling begins can *increase the future supply of skilled workers*, which boosts economic productivity and growth.

- South Dakota's future workforce is being shaped today. Research shows that 90% of a child's brain development happens before age five. ^{iv}
- By 24 months, many toddlers living in poverty already shows both behavioral and cognitive delays. ^v Supporting young children early is a practical way to strengthen the future South Dakota workforce.
- Early experiences help build the foundation for the cognitive and social skills that employers value most. Children aren't born with executive functioning skills, the ability to plan, focus, and juggle tasks, but they are born with the potential to develop them. ^{vi} High quality services and care can provide that environment.
- When children are given access to high quality early learning environments, they develop the skills that translate into better school performance, higher graduation rates, and stronger participation in the workforce as adults. ^{vii}

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Household Economic Security

Increasing Household Economic Security is a Primary Prevention Strategy

In public health, primary prevention strategies aim to prevent harm before it occurs. Research consistently shows that economic instability, rather than parental intent, is one of the strongest predictors of child maltreatment.ⁱ Families facing financial hardship experience increased stress, reduced access to basic necessities, and a higher risk of involvement with child welfare systems.ⁱⁱ Strengthening household economic security through programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) reduces financial stress and stabilizes households; helping prevent the risk factors that lead to abuse and neglect.ⁱⁱⁱ

Economic Stability Reduces Stress and Prevents Child Maltreatment

Strong evidence shows that household economic security plays a critical role in preventing child abuse and neglect.^{iv} Recent national research finds that increased investment in public benefit programs is associated with significantly fewer children experiencing high levels of adversity.

- For every \$1,000 increase in state and federal spending per person living in poverty, the likelihood that a child experiences four or more adverse childhood experiences decreases by approximately 4%.^v
- These effects are especially strong for young children ages 0–6, when brain development is most sensitive to chronic stress.
- Programs such as TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, childcare assistance, and housing supports function as primary prevention strategies by stabilizing families and reducing stress.

Economic Supports Strengthen Families and Improve Long-Term Outcomes

A comprehensive review of U.S. research shows that economic supports for working parents, including TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and childcare assistance, are associated with reductions in child maltreatment, particularly neglect.^{vi} Because neglect most often results from unmet basic needs rather than intentional harm, policies that stabilize family income, reduce food insecurity, and ensure access to reliable and safe childcare play a critical role in prevention. Research consistently demonstrates that family economic stability is linked to improved child development and behavioral outcomes, which are foundational to long-term success in education and the workforce.^{vii} Targeted economic supports help families meet basic needs, stabilize during periods of crisis, and focus on caregiving rather than survival; reducing foster care placements, improving parental mental health, and strengthening family self-sufficiency.



Economic Supports Are Cost-Effective

Investing in targeted economic support is not only effective, it's fiscally responsible. Evidence shows that stabilizing families through income supports, childcare assistance, and basic-needs programs reduces the likelihood of child abuse and neglect, which in turn lowers reliance on high-cost public systems such as foster care, emergency medical services, and court involvement.^{viii} Preventing maltreatment before it occurs avoids far more expensive downstream interventions, including long-term child welfare placement, special education services, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Strategic, prevention-focused investments strengthen family self-sufficiency, reduce government dependency over time, and deliver measurable savings to taxpayers while keeping children safely with their families.



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Paid Family and Medical Leave

Family-forward workplace policies are a primary prevention resource. Family-forward policies like Paid Family and Medical Leave benefit businesses, families, and South Dakota children.

Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) helps prevent child abuse and neglect by giving parents the time they need to care for a new child or handle family health issues without risking their jobs or income. When families have this support, children are more likely to grow up safe, stable, and well-cared for.ⁱ

South Dakota's Parental Leave Policy

In 2023 the State of South Dakota expanded their benefits to include 12-weeks of 100% paid parental leave for state employees. CPCM wanted to learn more about the impact of this policy on South Dakota families, so conducted a targeted survey of state employees with support from the State Bureau of Human Resources and Administration.

Impact on South Dakota Employees and Their Families

Here are some of the things South Dakota employees told us:

- "I would not have chosen to start a family without paid family and medical leave. It allowed me to spend the time doing what mattered for our family—healing, connecting and taking care of the newest member of our family."
- "Having the ability to truly step away from the demand of work and be fully present with my baby and my family was not just valuable, it was priceless."
- "My mental health was more stable postpartum because I wasn't worried about unpaid leaving, leaving my newborn too soon, or my job not being taken care of while I was gone."
- "We appreciated the flexibility for both mom and dad to focus on bonding with baby. And for my part, it was nice to be able to take care of my wife as well."
- "Being able to be present, support my wife, and bond with my daughter has been invaluable."
- "It made me proud to work in such a family friendly environment that provided the opportunity to bond with my child without the stress of finances."
- "I can never thank the State of South Dakota enough for the time I was allowed with my baby and family stress and worry-free."

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