



**United Way of Dane County**

# **Childcare & Early Childhood Development 2024 Impact Plan**

Updated Strategies Recommended by the Early Childhood Delegation



The Power of Caring. **Working for All.**



United Way of Dane County is a change catalyst with a **strategic priority** to lead collective impact to advance family well-being in Dane County. Through our Plan for Community Well-Being, we work to change systems in order to improve the health of our community.

**The Plan for Community Well-Being's goal strives** to measurably increase individual and family well-being so that every person in Dane County leads a healthy, thriving and secure life that meets their own defined goals, and that is not impacted by experiences of systemic racism, discrimination and poverty.

To do this as an organization, we:

1. **Engage** in sustainable, long-term work on systems change with a clear focus on Youth Opportunity, Financial Security, Healthy Community, and Community Resiliency **in a multi-generational approach.**
2. **Model** equitable, anti-racist practices through all of our work: investments, partnerships, innovation, public policy advocacy, data and research and connection to resources.
3. **Cultivate** a stronger nonprofit ecosystem through trust-based collaborations to create positive community change.

Our approach to Impact is multigenerational, holistic and supports the varying layers of a family's needs while understanding the systemic root causes – working to address those institutional and structural causes. Research consistently tells us that supporting the early childhood, education, income and health needs of family members will help them meet their self-determined goals and lead healthy, secure and thriving lives.

## Youth Opportunity

**Our Vision:** Helping Young People Realize Their Full Potential

### Why it Matters:

Recognizing that a child's journey to success starts at birth, United Way of Dane County prioritizes investments in childcare and early childhood development. High-quality experiences in these formative years (from birth to age 5) lay the foundation for future academic achievement and lifelong success. Research and community input underscore the importance of holistic programs that meet the needs of both children and caregivers, fostering a stable and nurturing environment that promotes positive development, increases family stability and breaks the cycle of poverty across generations. By investing in early childhood development, we're equipping children with the tools they need to thrive and ensuring a brighter future for families in Dane County.

Strong bonds with loved ones, safe places to explore and plenty of chances to learn are the building blocks for a child's healthy development. These early experiences shape their growing brains, impacting how they learn, connect with others and navigate life in all aspects – at home, work and everywhere in between.

Dane County's children need our collective support, and our communities need them to thrive. Early exposure to quality learning and nurturing relationships lays a foundation for a lifetime of well-being – including social-emotional, physical and cognitive domains. These skills become the cornerstones not just for children's success but also for the strength of their families, neighborhoods and the entire



community. Not only does United Way convene and invest in local organizations and programs that expand access to childcare and early childhood development programs, we also prioritize high-quality home visiting programs that strengthen Family Resource Centers and Parent-Child Community Groups. We know that parents are our children's first teachers, and we can help them succeed through comprehensive programming that helps meet children's and caregiver's goals simultaneously.

## The Importance of Early Intervention and Family Support Systems

Kindergarten is far too late to address the crucial learning gaps formed in a child's early years. However, the current early childhood care and education (ECE) system is unsustainable. This section dives into the challenges faced by both families and early childhood educators, highlighting the importance of early intervention and family support systems. We conclude by emphasizing the long-term benefits of investing in early childhood development (ECD) for children, families and our community.

### Challenges and Consequences:

- **ECE System Unsustainable:** Low wages for early childhood educators create a revolving door, impacting the quality of care and hindering program affordability for families. (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019)
- **Financial Burden on Families:** The high cost of childcare, especially for Black and African American families, forces difficult choices and can hinder workforce participation. (Race to Equity 10-year Report: Dane County (2023), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
- **Limited Access to Care:** Shortages in childcare availability leave thousands of children without access to safe, regulated care. (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019)
- **Disparities in Culturally Relevant Care:** Black and African American families seeking culturally relevant care in smaller settings face an even greater shortage of options. (Race to Equity 10-year Report: Dane County (2023))
- **Importance of Early Intervention:** Early intervention programs are crucial for identifying and addressing developmental delays to ensure all children thrive. (Hilgendorf et al., 2020; The Hunt Institute, 2023)
- **Impact of Housing Instability:** Frequent moves caused by housing insecurity disrupt children's lives, impacting their learning, social-emotional development and mental health. (Gaylord et. al., 2018; Keen et. al., 2023; Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, 2022)

### The Critical Early Years:

Research highlights the significant impact of a child's early years (birth to age five) on their brain development, cognitive function, social-emotional skills and future health. Investing in ECD provides a strong foundation for children to succeed in school, their careers and life overall.

### Benefits of Investing in Early Childhood Development:

- **Improved Academic Performance:** Children who participate in high-quality early childhood education programs demonstrate better learning outcomes throughout their schooling. (The Hunt Institute, 2023)



- **Stronger Social-Emotional Development:** Early experiences shape a child's ability to self-regulate, empathize and form healthy relationships. (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017)
- **Enhanced Physical Health:** Positive early experiences can reduce the risk of chronic diseases later in life. (The Hunt Institute, 2023)
- **Increased Economic Security:** Studies show that children who receive high-quality ECD are more likely to graduate high school, hold stable jobs and contribute positively to their communities. (Heckman, 2023)
- **Reduced Crime Rates:** By addressing early needs, ECD programs can help prevent involvement in the criminal legal system. (Heckman, 2023)

## Investing in Our Future - Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers:

Early intervention, home visiting programs and family support services are essential for ensuring all children have the opportunity to thrive. United Way of Dane County is committed to supporting families experiencing housing instability and providing a safety net of resources. Investing in ECD programs not only benefits children, but also fosters a stronger, healthier community for generations to come.

Having community supports to remove barriers to opportunities is essential for children's well-being. When families don't have access to safe and affordable childcare, nutritious food, secure housing or quality healthcare, it creates a ripple effect that impacts their children. United Way is committed to building bridges, not walls. We work alongside community partners to connect families with the resources they need to thrive. This could mean providing home visits to parents in need of additional services to care for their young children, offering affordable childcare options or organizing educational workshops on early childhood development. By removing barriers and empowering families, we equip children with the resources to reach their full potential. **By investing in early care and education programs and resources, we are investing in the future of Dane County.** We are building a stronger, healthier and more equitable community, one child at a time. Find out more about how we are investing across the lifespan holistically at [A Plan for Community Well-Being | United Way of Dane County \(unitedwaydanecounty.org\)](https://unitedwaydanecounty.org).

It will take great investment to change. What United Way of Dane County and our community can do together is support programs that can help fill gaps in the system while the system is changing.

- We can support care providers to provide quality environments for children's early education.
- We can support community programs that support parents and other caregivers in their roles as their child's first teachers – in their homes or other trusted places in the community.
- We can continue to support programs that help parents and caregivers work toward financial security and remain stably housed.



## Updating Our Strategies to Support Early Childhood Development:

United Way of Dane County is committed to supporting early childhood development (ECD) in Dane County. This section outlines our updated strategies for improving ECD outcomes, with a particular focus on families experiencing poverty and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color) families.

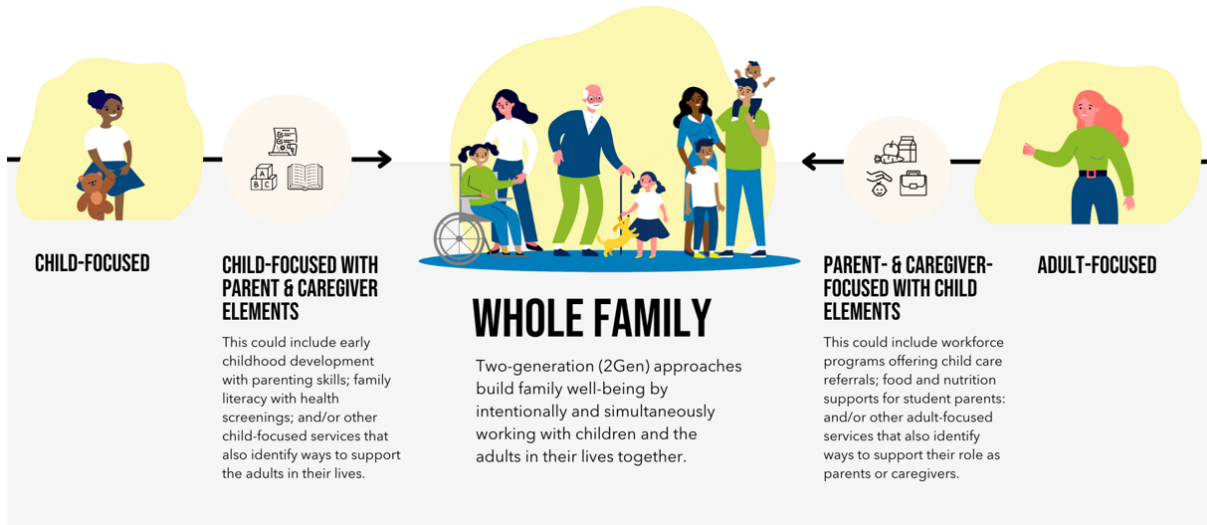
**Why We Update Our Strategies:** We regularly review our strategies to ensure they address the most pressing needs in Dane County. In 2023, our Early Childhood Advisory Committee evaluated family well-being and ECD strategies for families with young children experiencing poverty.

**Guiding Principles:** Our updated ECD strategies are built on the following principles:

- **Equity:** All families deserve access to resources that support their children's development. We prioritize removing barriers and ensuring culturally-relevant services for BIPOC families.
- **Holistic Approach:** ECD is influenced by multiple factors, including family well-being, financial security and health. Our strategies address these interconnected needs.
- **Data-Driven Decisions:** We use data to track progress and identify areas for improvement.
- **Multigenerational Impact:** Supporting parents and caregivers promotes positive outcomes for both them and their children. This is called a 2Gen Approach ([Aspen Institute, 2Gen Approach - Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#)).



# TWO-GENERATION (#2GEN) APPROACHES CENTER WHOLE FAMILIES



## Challenges and Needs:

- **Inequities:** Families with young children experiencing poverty face significant challenges in financial security, health and education. BIPOC children are disproportionately affected.
- **Childcare Access:** The complex and struggling childcare system limits access to high-quality care, hindering parental employment, early learning experiences for children and Dane County's future workforce.
- **Measuring Outcomes:** Identifying a single metric for early childhood success is difficult. We will utilize a combination of data sources, including Third-Grade Reading scores and high school graduation rates.

## The United Way of Dane County Early Childhood Delegation Recommends Four Key Strategies:

### Strategy 1: Expanding Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education

- Increase the availability of childcare options, including group centers, in-home care and family/friend/neighbor models.
- Prioritize high-quality home visiting programs and strengthen Family Resource Centers and Parent-Child Community Groups.
- Ensure all early care and education experiences are culturally relevant and meet the specific needs of BIPOC families.

### Strategy 2: Building Caregiver Capacity for Healthy Development

- Extend caregiver development opportunities beyond childcare settings, focusing on family and community outreach programs.
- Implement comprehensive developmental screenings, including social-emotional assessments, to identify children's needs and connect them to services.
- Invest in best-practice training for childcare professionals to enhance their knowledge of child development.
- Provide educational resources and tools to equip parents with the knowledge and skills to support their children's development effectively.

### Strategy 3: Removing Barriers to Family Support Services

- Develop a collaborative, team-based approach to deliver integrated services that address financial security, housing stability, career pathways, education, mental health needs (for both parents and children) and access to other essential resources.
- Reduce the burden on families by eliminating unnecessary barriers and creating a streamlined system for accessing services.

### Strategy 4: Advocating for Policy and Investment Changes

- Educate the community about the importance of ECD and advocate for increased public and private investment in childcare systems at local, county and state levels.



- Collaborate with the United Way of Dane County Public Policy Committee to establish clear goals and metrics for supporting families with young children living in poverty.
- Support statewide efforts advocating for increased access to childcare and public funding for systemic changes in the childcare system.

## Our Call to Action: Invest in Dane County's Youngest Children

**Every child deserves a bright future.** But right now, thousands of Dane County children under five lack access to high-quality early care and education. This critical gap hinders their development and puts them at a disadvantage for future success.

**United Way of Dane County is leading the charge to change this.** We are working to expand access to affordable, high-quality childcare, support early childhood educators and empower families with the resources they need.

### Here's how you can help:

- **Donate:** Your contribution will directly support programs that nurture our youngest learners.
- **Volunteer:** Share your time and talents with a local childcare center or family support program.
- **Raise awareness:** Talk to your friends, family and elected officials about the importance of early childhood development.

**Together, we can build a stronger foundation for all Dane County children. Visit our website [www.unitedwaydanecounty.org](http://www.unitedwaydanecounty.org) to learn more and get involved.**

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