

AN OVERVIEW OF PUERTO RICO'S EARLY CHILDHOOD PUBLIC POLICY

Introduction

Whether as individuals or as members of a society, we must acknowledge that children are our society's most precious asset. By investing in their early care, we are investing in their future and contributing to our improvement as humankind. Therefore, it is essential that we improve living conditions for children by providing proper care, positive experiences, and the best opportunities to help them reach their potential. These investments must be made in the earliest years of a child's life to establish the basis for lifelong success and healthy development within society.

Our responsibility is to encourage children to reach their maximum potential by implementing the best intervention practices while also offering them adequate and effective alternatives to help them reach their goals. Four decades of program evaluation and data collection have provided the basis for government officials, executives, community leaders, and professionals to design effective public policies for children in their first years of life.

Embracing the fact that our children constitute an important part of Puerto Rico's future, the Law for the Implementation of the Public Policy for Early Childhood, Number 93 of June 18, 2008 can serve as a vehicle for the development and implementation of myriad programs focused on elevating children and rooted in the highest democratic principles.

The National Center for Children in Poverty affirms that there are very strong reasons to support the implementation of a public policy centered on early childhood. In terms of human capital investment, a thorough public policy that focuses on early childhood represents a positive and cost-effective return, given the long-term social

and financial benefits to the community. These benefits include higher levels of intellectual achievement, better academic success, improved employment rates, less dependency on government funds, higher income, and less public spending, among others.

The Law

The Law for the Implementation of the Public Policy for Early Childhood establishes the fundamental principles by which an adequate public policy in Puerto Rico can be developed to facilitate coordination among organizations that offer services to children.

The law contains a synergic philosophy: besides establishing responsibilities for the central and *municipio* governments, it seeks to unite nonprofit, community, and faith-based organizations within the public and private sectors. By collaborating with the government, these groups can develop an assertive public policy by offering quality services with the common purpose of ensuring the well-being of our children.

The law also provides for the creation of an advisory committee for the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's executive branch on matters regarding the implementation of early childhood programs. This committee will be composed of representatives from government agencies, professional organizations, service providers, academia, and other institutions that offer early childhood development services. They will contribute to design, evaluation, and implementation programs.

Acknowledging that every child is an individual with distinctive characteristics and needs is a fundamental premise of the law. Guided by these principles, the law

establishes policies for Puerto Rico in seven key areas:

- **Safe Birth**—Underscore the healthy development of an unborn child from pregnancy to birth, including in the first month of the child's life, by providing prenatal, birth, and breast feeding care, among other supports. A mother's right to make decisions with regard to her pregnancy shall not be interpreted as being affected by this law, as recognized by the federal and state judicial systems.
- **Health**—Prevent, detect, and, when necessary, intervene in physical and socio-emotional health issues by guaranteeing access to a medical home or institution that provides primary medical and dental services to children during the period from pregnancy until eight years of age. Providing these services to children will help guarantee their physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being. The responsibility to ensure this access lies primarily within the government, community, and health service providers.
- **Arts and Culture**—Contribute to the formation and development of a healthy childhood through projects and activities that revolve around the fields of local and international arts and cultures, which include literature, dance, music, theatre, and the plastic arts. Communities, development programs, families, schools, and the government have a responsibility to identify and develop learning experiences and opportunities that could promote a child's intellectual development and future integration into society.
- **Education**—Expand continuous child development programs in order to enhance children's capacity to live in harmony with their surroundings. This includes supporting an understanding of values, culture, family, and ecological consciousness and furthering intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development.
- **Safety**—Guarantee childhood protection to promote healthy physical and mental development by preventing physical and emotional abuse and negligence, both within and outside the home.
- **Family**—Encourage parents to serve as the impetus for improving their children's well-being by promoting responsible child upbringing. It will be the sole responsibility of all agencies, corporations, and instrumentalities of the government of Puerto Rico to develop interventions directed toward instructing families about the conditions that affect the development of children.
- **Sports and Recreation**—Stimulate children's senses by promoting voluntary physical activity, through which they can exercise the body while having fun. Individuals or entities responsible for sports and recreation must form appropriate strategies to integrate this element into curricula, plans, and programs directed at young children.

Why Is the Law Important?

- It provides principles for the implementation of a currently nonexistent public policy focused on early childhood.
- It encourages the participation of the family in the social and emotional development of the child.
- It develops a cooperative structure among institutions such as non-profit and faith-based organizations and entities from the public and private sectors.