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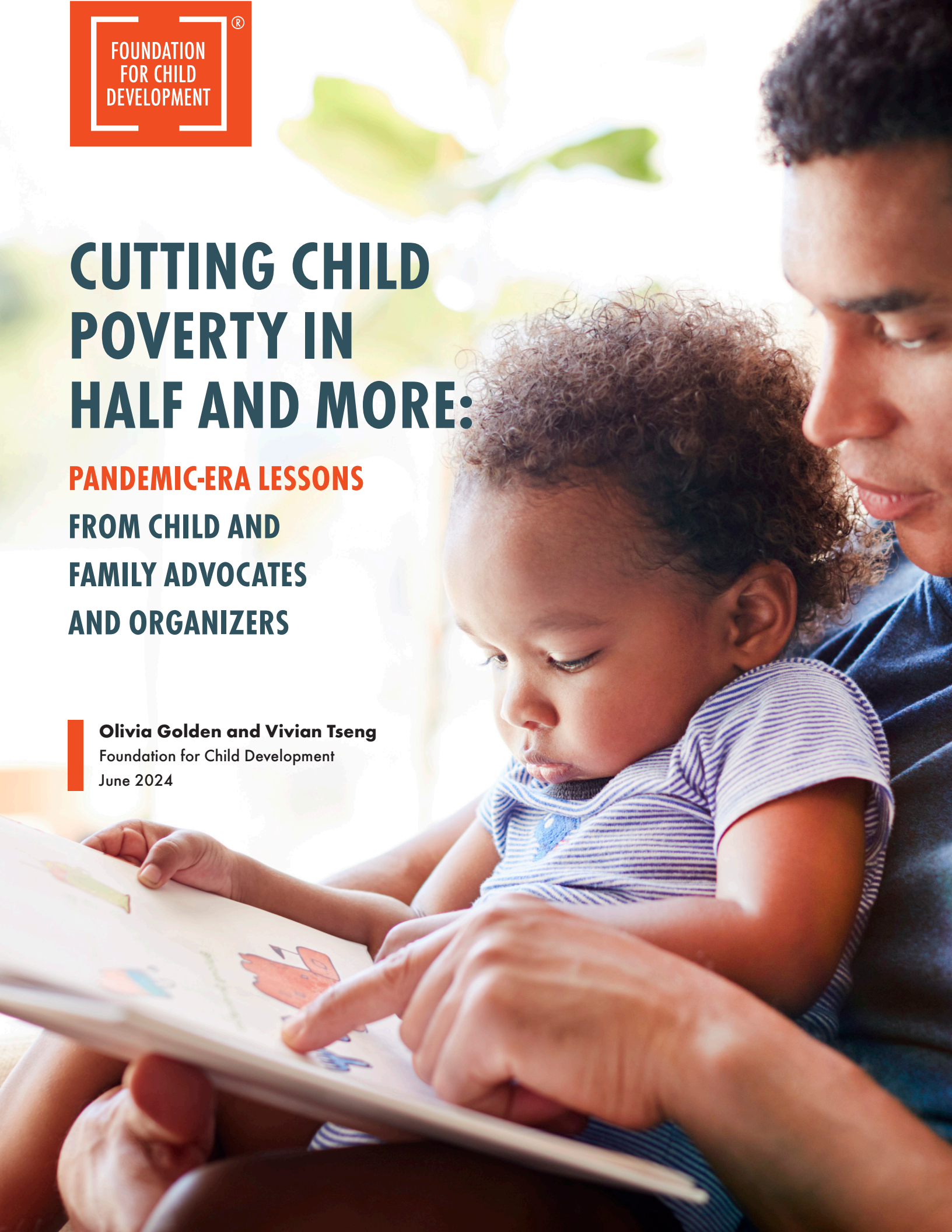
# CUTTING CHILD POVERTY IN HALF AND MORE:

**PANDEMIC-ERA LESSONS  
FROM CHILD AND  
FAMILY ADVOCATES  
AND ORGANIZERS**

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## AUTHOR NOTE

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


The United States accomplished an impressive feat in 2020–21: enacting federal policy reforms that halved child poverty and uplifted low-income families amidst a global pandemic. Many of the reforms, though temporary, were unprecedented in U.S. history, representing a sea change in U.S. policy toward young children. What enabled this to happen? And what can we learn about making those child and family supports permanent in the future?

This paper first discusses the country’s chronic underinvestment in children and resulting outcomes, including new data on poverty rates among young children; the need to recognize that parental well-being (as supported by living wages, affordable housing, child care, and other infrastructure) is inextricable from the prospects of young children; and the remarkably comprehensive pandemic-era response policies, including which changes contributed most to reducing child poverty.

The authors then offer five lessons, drawn from interviews with more than 30 of the extraordinary advocates and leaders who made this change happen, in the hope that they can inform future efforts to transform federal and state policy to tackle inequities across family income, race, and immigration backgrounds. The lessons:

**Center families with lived experience.** Centering families of color and immigrant families improved both policy design and implementation on the ground. Stimulus payments initially left out millions of children in immigrant and mixed-status families, for example; advocates working on behalf of the families pushed for them to increasingly gain eligibility. One state used federal funds to eliminate families’ fees for subsidized child care because organizers, having already asked, knew what families wanted most from policymakers. (Organizers then persuaded state legislators to keep the change after federal funds ended.) A groundswell of parent organizing, the scale of which is not yet entirely realized, is building collective power especially around child care and family policies.

**Expand coalitions to engage families, care workers, and allies.** In previous childcare advocacy, the conversation often started with children’s developmental needs or parents’ economic needs, but less often both and even less often with the third leg of the tripod, care workers. Including both parents and care workers in coalitions served to unite families with labor organizers and provide greater on-the-ground strength. Leading with workers also tied childcare policies directly to economic, racial, and gender justice movements.



**Build federal–state strategies to achieve equity.** Federal and state advocacy both matter greatly. Federal policy is critical to achieving equity and scale across the nation, particularly given the growing concentration of young children in Southern states with the least supportive family policies. Federal programs cut child poverty in half through the Child Tax Credit, stimulus checks, unemployment assistance, and more. At the same time, implementing most of these programs required deep engagement by state and local advocates and organizers. State and local advocacy and organizing also spur federal policy change, build greater impact onto the federal foundation, and create momentum and power for the future. As one example of this virtuous cycle, the success of the federal Child Tax Credit motivated many states to expand their own tax credits, and the failure to renew the federal expansion galvanized some states to make up for the shortfall.

**Strengthen coalition infrastructure.** The most powerful coalitions bring together many different roles, perspectives, and contexts. Coalition leaders noted that building skills, governance structures, trusted relationships, and capacity are indispensable to success—including the ability to collectively learn from successes and failures and strategize forward. This work is often underfunded, despite its centrality to social change.

**Sustain long-term efforts.** The 2020–21 policy successes were enabled by many years of advocacy and organizing work: documenting the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies, writing legislation, developing new policy ideas, organizing communities and workers, creating and sustaining movements, defending past wins, building coalitions, enacting child- and family-friendly policies at the state level, and supporting congressional allies. Among the examples shared is the story of the \$50 billion emergency infusion of funds to save the childcare system—the largest federal investment in child care since World War II. Part of sustaining long-term effort is recognizing that wins are built upon losses. Funders and others must frame success in ways beyond policy victory or loss in the moment.

Success in meeting these challenges on behalf of young children is not optional. It is neither moral nor practical to settle for a future where only White children, or only children whose parents are wealthy, have necessary supports. These five approaches shine a light on the next steps for moving the country ever closer to one where all young children and their families can thrive.

## PREFACE

This paper stemmed from a conversation between the two authors. As Vivian entered her new position leading the Foundation for Child Development, she was concerned about our country's chronic underinvestment in children, particularly amidst a backlash against racial progress, virulent xenophobia, and stubborn economic inequality. She was exploring ways that philanthropy might encourage stronger public investments in children, particularly those marginalized by our society's longstanding isms.

Olivia, having worked on children's policy and advocacy for decades, pointed out that in fact the federal government had just passed a comprehensive set of temporary policies to support children and families as part of COVID-19 relief and recovery, and that package of policies had cut child poverty in half. She was particularly struck by the dramatic departure these policies represented from the country's history of failure to adequately invest in and enact supports for families—a history that has left the nation lagging its peers in international rankings of child well-being (Thévenon, 2018).

That conversation launched the two authors on a collaboration to identify the lessons learned from that historic moment of federal investment and to explore what those lessons suggest for the future of young child and family policy, advocacy, and organizing. The lessons discussed in this paper reflect Olivia's interviews, sometimes joined by Vivian, with more than 30 national, state, and community activists involved in one or more of the relevant policies, our review of relevant data and research, and our own observations and experiences.

We are immensely grateful to the interviewees who shared their wisdom and experience with us, as well as to the experts who read the paper and provided their feedback and insights. A special thanks to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities for their analyses using the Supplemental Poverty Measure. We take responsibility for our interpretations of the many rich and varied conversations and comments, and we look forward to deeper and additional learnings from future engagement with readers.

# INTRODUCTION

The United States accomplished an impressive feat in 2020–21: enacting federal policy reforms that halved child poverty and uplifted low-income families amidst a global crisis. Many of the reforms were unprecedented in U.S. history, representing a sea change in U.S. policy toward young children, including those in low-income families, racially marginalized families, and eventually immigrant families. What enabled this to happen? And what can we learn about making those child and family supports permanent in the future?

This paper offers five lessons from the highly successful, though temporary, national policy response to children and families during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Much analysis and press coverage has focused on the failure to make those policies permanent and the harm thus inflicted on millions of children and families. Those realities deserve public attention. Here, we add to the public debate by drawing lessons from a different angle, seeking to understand how advocates pushed through such a powerful set of policies to support young children, their families, and the workers who support and educate them. Certainly the pandemic created an extraordinary context, but the advocacy and organizing that led to the policy responses are also a vital part of the story.

**We discuss these five lessons**, drawn from the experiences of the extraordinary advocates and leaders who made this change happen, in the hope that they can inform future efforts to transform federal policy to tackle inequities across family income, race, and immigration backgrounds:



**Center families with lived experience.**



**Expand coalitions to engage families, care workers, and allies.**



**Build federal–state strategies to achieve equity.**



**Strengthen coalition infrastructure.**



**Sustain long-term efforts.**

## A DEPARTURE FROM HISTORY

To fully appreciate the significance of the COVID-19 response policies, it is important to put them in the context of the United States government's longstanding failure to invest in young children. For many decades, young children were more likely than any other age group in the United States to live in poverty. Policy improvements beginning in the early 1990s, such as the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the enactment of the Child Tax Credit (CTC), narrowed the poverty rates between young children and all Americans, but the disparity remained stubbornly persistent until the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the overall child poverty rate in the United States is one of the worst among high-income—and even middle-income—countries. A comparison of 40 countries by the OECD ranked the United States in the worst group, with a level of child poverty almost ten times that of Denmark (Thévenon, 2018).

Decades of research demonstrate what many of us know intuitively: that young children's well-being is intimately tied to that of their parents and caregivers (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000)—from parents' mental health to care workers' employment conditions to parents' and care workers' experiences of racial stressors and xenophobia. Thus, many of the policy failures that affect young children are those that fail to support their parents and caregivers, including inadequate investment in child care, the absence of national paid leave requirements, and the absence of national health care coverage for parents living in poverty. Also troubling are deficit narratives that blame low-income parents of color for their poverty, undercutting their ability to care for their children.

For example, UNICEF's recent review of 41 high-income countries found that the United States ranked 35th on childcare access and 38th on childcare affordability. A pre-pandemic analysis of childcare data found that low-income working families with a child under age five spent one-third of their income on child care (Malik, 2019). At the same time, the analysis found, childcare workers (disproportionately women of color) averaged \$11 per hour in wages—wholly inadequate to support their own families. The United States also is the only well-off country (and one of very few countries at any income level) without a national entitlement to paid family leave (UNICEF, 2020), a policy choice that puts a particular burden on mothers. One survey found that one in five low-wage working mothers reported that they had lost a job—not merely lost pay—because of illness or the need to care for a family member (Oxfam, 2013).

Policy failures fall hardest on Black, Latino/a, Native, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander children, who are two to three times more likely than White children to live in poverty (see sidebar "Unequal Poverty Among Children"). Racism and xenophobia in labor markets suppress the earnings of their parents, whose work is too often exploited in unstable and transient jobs with minimal benefits. Gaps in labor laws, and underfunded enforcement of those laws, fail to protect immigrant workers and

<sup>1</sup> These figures were provided to the authors by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. They use the Supplemental Poverty Measure and 2022 poverty line adjusted for inflation (Trisi, 2023).

workers of color. And while public programs aim to ameliorate these inequalities through access to health care, nutrition, economic support, and stable housing, their reach is limited by the long history of underinvestment described earlier, along with ongoing structural racism and anti-immigrant bias built into policy design and implementation (Hahn & Simms, 2021). These policies rest on the narrative that only some children and families are worthy of support, and others must prove that they are deserving. For example, structural racism underlies the excess documentation requirements that deter people eligible for services because their jobs don't allow them to take time off to handle the bureaucracy—jobs disproportionately held by Black and brown workers. Anti-immigrant bias is reflected in the statutory requirements that limit the access of children in immigrant families, even citizen children, to certain benefits.

## UNEQUAL POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN

- **For many decades, children under age five were the poorest group of Americans.** Policy improvements shrank the differences among age groups over time, yet the number of young children living in poverty remains high. One in five (22%) lived in poverty during the previous recession in 2010, alongside 18% of older children and 17% of all Americans (see Footnote 1).
- **Among Black children under age five, 37% lived in poverty** during the depth of the 2010 recession, compared to 12% of White children. That figure was almost one quarter (24%) in 2019, right before the pandemic, compared to 8% for White children (see Footnote 1).
- **Among young Latino/a children, 35% lived in poverty** in 2010 and 22% in 2019 (see Footnote 1).
- **Young Native American children have experienced poverty rates of about three or four children in ten** for the past several decades (Koball & Jiang, 2018; Akee, 2019).
- **Among Asian American and Pacific Islander children, the level of poverty varies greatly across ethnic groups.** Rates of child poverty among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, Hmong, Bangladeshi, Cambodian, and Burmese children are one and a half to three times that of White children (Cid-Martinez & Marvin, 2023; Ishimatsu, 2013).
- **For children under age 18 in immigrant families, poverty rates during the last recession (2009) were about four in ten** for children with noncitizen parents—about three times the 14% rate for children with two U.S.-born parents (Batalova & Fix, 2023). In 2019, 25% to 30% of children with noncitizen parents lived in poverty, compared to 10% of children with two U.S.-born parents (Batalova & Fix, 2023).
- **Adults in all these families have high levels of work** despite also caring for young children, **but the work is too often at low wages** and in jobs that offer irregular hours and minimal or no benefits (Matthews, 2020; Pandey et al., 2022).



Today, this history of policy failure, disparities, and underinvestment is not only a moral issue—as it has always been—but also a major risk to the nation’s future. Early childhood is a critical stage of development, and today’s child poverty and the public policies sustaining it have large effects on the long-term outcomes of tomorrow’s adults. Research indicates that the effect of poverty on children’s health, earnings, and well-being over a lifetime costs the United States 5% of its economy (GDP)—more than a trillion dollars per year (McLaughlin & Rank, 2018). That fact is alarming in an aging country with a growing population of seniors needing support from the declining population of children who will become the workforce that supports the nation’s economy. The cost to each child is immeasurable.

Equity in policy design, implementation, and impact is a matter of justice and of national success. The majority of today’s children are children of color, and one in four children live in immigrant families (Frey, 2021). The consequences of ignoring their well-being will become only more impactful to our nation. It is neither moral nor practical to settle for a future where only White children, or only children whose parents are wealthy, have the supports necessary to thrive.



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# THE SUCCESS OF THE COVID-19 RESPONSE POLICIES

The national response to the COVID-19 pandemic showed what our country is capable of accomplishing to support young children and their families in ways that are equitable to our diverse racial, ethnic, and immigrant communities. The early months of the pandemic, in spring 2020, caused extreme economic distress as people lost jobs or experienced cutbacks in hours and were unable to pay rent, keep up with bills, and feed their families (Coker et al., 2023, p. 178). The effects of COVID-19 exacerbated existing racial inequity, particularly hard-hitting for workers of color in low-wage, unstable jobs such as service, retail, and health care. Hunger and food insecurity skyrocketed, with the greatest impacts for families with children. One study found that “young children [were] experiencing food insecurity to an extent unprecedented in modern times” (Bauer, 2020). The lives of young children, their parents, and their care workers were also disrupted by the devastation of the already-fragile childcare system, as providers were forced to let go of staff and, in some cases, close permanently (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). When childcare programs stayed open to serve essential workers, they faced extra costs for safety measures (ventilation, reconfiguration of space, and personal protective equipment), leading to an unacceptable choice between failing to support essential workers on the one hand or endangering children, families, and childcare workers on the other.

In response to this widespread crisis, Congress enacted a series of response packages, beginning in the spring of 2020 and culminating in the spring of 2021 with ARPA, the American Rescue Plan Act (Coker et al., 2023). Among the elements most crucial to young children and their families were the economic stimulus payments, a greatly expanded and refundable Child Tax Credit, increases in nutrition assistance, help with housing (an eviction moratorium, emergency rental assistance, and homelessness services provided through state programs), a moratorium on closing Medicaid cases, expanded unemployment assistance, and \$50 billion in childcare investments to support families, childcare programs, and workers. The early response also included a temporary and limited paid leave program, focused on covering workers unable to work because of their own or a family member’s COVID-19 illness or quarantine.

The package of programs had an extraordinarily positive effect on families’ economic stability, cutting young child poverty by more than half over two years, reaching a low never seen since the data have been tracked. Using the Census Bureau’s Supplemental Poverty Measure, poverty among children under age 5 decreased to 6% in 2021, compared to 10% in 2020 and 15% in 2019, before the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The policy changes that contributed most to reducing child poverty in 2021 were the economic stimulus payments and the expansion of the Child Tax Credit (Burns et al., 2022).

<sup>2</sup> The Supplemental Poverty Measure is needed for this analysis because the official poverty measure does not include the benefits of non-cash public programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and rental assistance and tax benefits such as the Child Tax Credit (CTC), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and economic impact payments. These figures were provided to the authors by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities using the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey.

These policy responses had positive effects across racial and ethnic groups but did not close racial and ethnic disparities. For Black, Latino/a, and White young children, poverty rates were cut at least in half in just two years from 2019 to 2021. Yet racial disparities in young child poverty persisted, as rates fell in that same time frame from 8% to 3% for young non-Hispanic White children, 24% to 11% for young Black children, and 22% to 9% for young Latino/a children (see Footnote 1). Children of immigrants under age 18 also saw sharp poverty declines yet remaining disparity: among U.S. citizen children with two immigrant parents, the poverty rate declined from almost 30% in 2019 to 12% in 2021, compared to a decline from 10% to 4% among citizen children with two citizen parents (Batalova & Fix, 2023).

As the new policies kicked in during late 2020 and 2021, they alleviated not only child poverty but also other dimensions of family distress. The RAPID survey, launched in April 2020 to track the pandemic's effects, found that the share of parents experiencing one or more material hardships (such as inability to buy sufficient food or pay the rent) tracked closely with the availability of the major public supports. Almost 40% of parents reported hardship in September 2020, and this figure dropped to less than 25% between May and October 2021 (RAPID, 2023).

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Families speaking to the RAPID researchers highlighted the importance of specific public supports, such as increased unemployment insurance payments, the Child Tax Credit, the stimulus payments, and free school breakfast and lunch. Families in several surveys also highlighted the role of the benefits in reducing parents' stress—key to young children's well-being—particularly among Black and Hispanic families and families with low incomes (The Center for Law and Social Policy, 2022; Coker et al., 2022, pp. 194-195).

Housing hardship showed a similar pattern, increasing at the beginning of the pandemic and then declining for families with children (and all renters) after January 2021, which coincided with emergency rental assistance becoming available, according to the Census Bureau's Pulse Survey (Gartland, 2022). Nonetheless, the pre-pandemic pattern continued where households with children were more likely to report being behind on rent compared to other renters, consistent with the longstanding research finding that families with children are more likely to be at risk of eviction compared to renters without children in their household (Graetz et al., 2023).

The immediate funding included in the response legislation also kept the childcare system afloat in the short term. The resources enabled states to prevent some programs from closing, allow more parents access to affordable care, and supplement provider wages (Wilensky, 2022). Preventing the collapse of child care in turn supported women's return to the labor force after participation plummeted in the early months of the pandemic.

Several features of the policy responses contributed to their unprecedented effects. The policy responses were large-scale, providing enough families with enough income to cut poverty in half. They supported entire service systems, like child care, that were in danger of collapse. They were multi-dimensional, addressing a range of critical policy areas including income, nutrition, health, child care, and housing. They centered families' real-life needs: for example, sending monthly checks rather than annual tax refunds. And they targeted young children's well-being—both directly, such as through the expanded Child Tax Credit, and indirectly, by stabilizing the lives of parents and care workers. Because young children's development is fundamentally linked to their relationships with parents and care workers, both the direct and indirect policy mechanisms are crucial to countering the harmful effects of poverty and instability on children.



## WHERE WE ARE TODAY AND THE LESSONS FOR TOMORROW

Today, federal COVID-era investments in young children and their families are ending or have ended. As a result, extensive evidence across multiple surveys shows that families are once again experiencing high levels of hardship, including difficulty paying bills and high levels of stress (Burnside et al., 2023; RAPID, 2023). The pattern seen in many graphs of child and family hardships is V-shaped: a rapid decline in distress as temporary policies were implemented, followed by a rapid increase after they ended. After the temporary pandemic expansions of the CTC expired, the young child poverty rate more than doubled from 6% in 2021 to 13% in 2022 (see Footnote 1)—distressing, and at the same time lower than in any pre-pandemic year.

What gives us hope is the extraordinary period of public investment showing that the nation can overturn the weight of past choices to disinvest in children and families through large-scale federal policy improvements. The brief success driven by these federal policy choices in 2020–21 is a crucial source for inspiration and lessons—for the future but also in the present, in states and communities that are building on these ideas and investing in continued progress. Child poverty is not inevitable. It is a choice made by policymakers and the public who elect them, and we can choose a different future.

To that future, we have sought to identify the advocacy and organizing lessons from the past few years. We interviewed more than 30 national, state, and community activists involved in one or more of the efforts that helped halve child poverty and support child and family well-being during the pandemic response. We supplemented their observations by reviewing relevant data and research and contributing our own observations and experiences. Out of these perspectives emerged five lessons: center families with lived experience; expand coalitions to engage families, care workers, and allies; build federal–state strategies to achieve equity; strengthen coalition infrastructure; and sustain long-term efforts.



## 1. CENTER FAMILIES WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

**Families are critical to young children’s well-being.** As noted earlier, that’s one of the most central research findings in all of child development literature, yet it has not always been front of mind in research, policy, or advocacy on behalf of young children. For families of color, the neglect of a family perspective is even more pernicious, rooted in narratives that evoke stereotypes blaming parents of color for their families’ hardships despite plentiful evidence

that racism blocks income growth and wealth accumulation (Perry et al., 2024). What we heard over and over in our conversations is that families—specifically families of color and immigrant families—should be at the center of policy design and implementation. Their lived experiences are crucial to building power to challenge inequality, designing effective policies, and implementing those policies in ways that benefit all young children.

Centering families in advocacy and policy work takes various forms. Organizers focus on building collective power among the people most directly affected by injustice, so that they shape policy. Policy advocates work on behalf of families to ensure that policy design and implementation are more inclusive and better meet the realities of families’ lives.

We heard powerful examples of both approaches during the COVID-era response. One story about collective power came from the way the \$50 billion in federal childcare funding played out in California. Organizers were not caught flat-footed by the unexpected opportunity. They knew the big win to go after because they’d already asked parents what they wanted most. Parent Voices California—an organization led by women of color and a base of predominantly Black and immigrant mothers—regularly bases its agenda on parent input and had asked, “If you had a magic wand, how would you change child care to make it work better for your family?” No more family fees—the co-payments required from families who receive public childcare assistance—was the radical answer. A win seemed unlikely at the time, but in a campaign spanning several years, organizers built a groundswell of parent power. When the pandemic hit and California needed to effectively deploy federal assistance, Parent Voices was able to successfully push the state to eliminate the family fees. Parent Voices then tracked the outcome, collecting data and stories that showed families used the money to pay for overdue bills, food, and other necessities. When federal funding expired, Parent Voices leveraged the power of parents of color to persuade the state legislature to dedicate state funds to make the change permanent.

Many interviewees highlighted the expansion of on-the-ground parent organizing over the past decade, particularly organizing parents of color, parents with low incomes, and immigrant parents. They told us about the redoubled energy behind parent organizing, especially for child care, to build parents’ collective power to ensure that family policies and early childhood systems meet

their families' needs, challenging centuries of racism in child care. At the leading edge of parent organizing are groups such as United Parent Leaders Action Network, Parent Voices, Mothering Justice, Community Change, and MomsRising/MamásConPoder. The expanded strength and reach of these groups and others like them, and the scale at which they are now operating, are not yet fully understood outside the child and family advocacy community, according to several leaders.

We saw the second approach, in which advocates press for policy change that reflects parents' and their children's lived experiences, in the way that the COVID-response policies increasingly included immigrant families. Policies too rarely account for immigrant families' diverse households, in which spouses and children often have different citizenship and residency statuses. The first round of stimulus payments (under the CARES Act) was the most restrictive, requiring that every parent in a household have a Social Security number. This excluded millions of U.S. citizen and legal permanent resident children who were living with an undocumented parent, as well as spouses (Gelatt et al., 2021). The next round benefited children in families where at least one parent had a Social Security number. The final round (under the American Rescue Plan Act) included all children who were U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents, even if all parents in the household were undocumented, so long as the parents were filing taxes using an alternative to the Social Security number (IRS, 2021 a). As one advocate pointed out to us, this was a relatively rare example of policy changing substantially during a short period. She saw these significant improvements as directly attributable to effective advocacy on behalf of parents in immigrant families. Nonetheless, as many as one million children without a Social Security number still were left out in the third version.

Clear understanding of families' lived experiences and advocating for policy design that meets their needs was key to another COVID-era success: improving access to food for families with young and school-aged children. Children's hunger and food insecurity increased sharply during the early days of the pandemic for two reasons: families had difficulty paying for food when parents lost jobs or hours, and children simultaneously lost school meals when schools and early childhood programs shut down. The response legislation included improvements both in SNAP, the nation's largest food assistance program to help families buy food, and in meal programs delivered through schools and childcare centers, including more flexible rules and a new program called Pandemic EBT (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; USDA, 2021). We heard from interviewees that the focus on school and childcare food programs was especially



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meaningful for immigrant families, both because Pandemic EBT did not have restrictions on immigrant eligibility and because families felt more comfortable receiving support from schools than welfare agencies. The reduction in bureaucratic rules also made it easier for families—immigrant or not—to access food assistance.

Beyond policy design, centering families' experiences improved policy implementation on the ground. When the Child Tax Credit was expanded, improvements in implementation were necessary for policymakers to reach families who were newly eligible but had not historically benefited. The problem was that most families received the CTC automatically based on their previous tax returns (IRS, 2021 b), which left out the lowest-income households, who did not earn enough to file tax returns. Organizations working with families on the ground pushed successfully for a simpler online form so that families who were not required to file taxes could provide the IRS with the information required to receive the CTC. These steps, along with targeted outreach and information, increased access during the short period that the benefit was in place. For example, the share of low- and moderate-income Hispanic families reporting that they had claimed the Child Tax Credit increased from 64% to 75% over a nine-month period, according to a nationally representative survey (Burnside et al., 2023).

Doing even more to center families who are the furthest from economic opportunity would magnify the CTC's future impact. One person we interviewed noted that despite overall improved access to CTC, a smaller share of the lowest-income families benefited compared to those with somewhat higher incomes whose information was already on file with the IRS—a gap that IRS officials, advocates, and community organizers could address under a permanently expanded CTC.





## 2. EXPAND COALITIONS TO ENGAGE FAMILIES, CARE WORKERS, AND ALLIES

**Many people we spoke with highlighted the importance of expanding early childhood coalitions to include both parents and care workers.** The breadth of organizing in 2020–21 was greater than ever before, and the intensive coalition-building and shared advocacy meant that more people knew about child and family issues than ever before, more were engaged in

advocacy, and more saw the connection of child and family policy to the economy rather than sidelining it as a special interest, unrealistic, or women’s issues alone. The advocacy work also engaged new members of Congress, often parents themselves, who have lived experience with and a deep commitment to the range of young child issues.

Building on previous efforts, the Care Can’t Wait coalition brought together families and workers to advocate for three policy areas: child care, home- and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities, and paid family and medical leave. Their coalition approach positioned childcare (and other care) workers front and center in the policy conversation. In previous childcare advocacy, the conversation often started with children’s developmental needs or parents’ economic needs, but less often both and even less often with the third leg of the tripod, care workers.

Expanding coalitions to include both parents and care workers united families with labor organizers to provide greater on-the-ground strength. Moreover, leading with workers tied childcare policies directly to economic, racial, and gender justice movements, enabling advocates to tell a powerful story about the historic racism and xenophobia behind low wages, inadequate benefits, and lack of job security for the women of color, many of them immigrant women, who make up the work force.

Bringing parents and childcare workers together has led to much more effective thinking about change, one organizer highlighted. It moved everyone toward understanding child care as a system, rather than focusing efforts on one dimension of policy improvement, such as access, in isolation from the other key elements, such as wages and working conditions. The pandemic accelerated this shift, she noted: families could see that it didn’t help to have affordable childcare slots in theory if local programs were closing.

Going forward, interviewees said, coalition builders have an opportunity to connect child and family advocacy even more powerfully to racial and immigrant justice movements. They identified partners like the Protecting Immigrant Families coalition, Children Thrive Action Network, and Children’s Defense Fund, which center families likely to be marginalized because of their immigration status, race, and ethnicity.

More connections between parent organizers, traditional child and family advocates, and social and economic justice movements could build greater power to influence federal policy change. For example, given how many workers are also parents, labor organizers could seek to broaden campaigns beyond economic needs and working conditions to advocacy for access to child care, children’s health care, or other child and family issues. Making connections in the other direction, parent-organizing groups that we spoke with are engaging parents on issues beyond direct child-focused policies, such as civic engagement, democracy reform, and criminal-justice reform or abolition. Also worth exploring is the connection between parent organizing and youth organizing, as many youth will become or already are parents, or are caretakers for their parents or younger siblings. With parents representing only about 30% of voters—far fewer than in the past—these broad coalitions are more important than ever (Frey, 2022).



### 3. BUILD FEDERAL-STATE STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE EQUITY

**Effective strategies to improve the lives of young children must include both federal and state advocacy, along with organizing that targets both levels of government.**

Countering voices who say that “Washington is broken” and everything can be fixed at the state level, the pandemic response demonstrated that federal policies are critical for reducing poverty and distress at scale and in equitable ways. At the same time, advocating and organizing at state and community levels is crucial too: state and local advocacy and organizing spur federal policy change, build greater impact onto the federal foundation, and create momentum and power for the future—all central components of effective, equitable, and large-scale change.

First, federal policies are critical because only the federal government has the resources and universal reach to drive change at a very large scale. The policies that made the largest contribution to reducing child poverty during the pandemic were the Child Tax Credit changes, the stimulus checks, and the expansion of unemployment assistance (Trisi, 2023). The increase in SNAP nutrition assistance benefits also dramatically reduced child poverty (Wheaton, 2022). Benefits paid to families through these policies were fully federally funded, and they did not require state action to be enacted (though as explained below, state and community leaders, advocates, and organizers were crucial to ensuring their broad impact on the ground).

Second, the energy of the federal debate generated further wins in states with sufficient resources, commitment, and on-the-ground organization, even after the federal policies ended. The scale of these wins was substantial by the end of 2023, affecting large numbers of children and families.

For example, the success of the federal CTC expansion motivated many states to expand refundable state tax credits—and the failure to renew the federal expansion galvanized some states to make up for the shortfall. In 2022, three states—New Jersey, New Mexico, and Vermont—created new child tax credits and one—California—expanded its existing credit (Hinh & Waxman, 2022). In 2023, 19 states established or improved either a child tax credit or an earned income tax credit. (Waxman & Minkin, 2023). As described earlier, California also committed its own resources to sustaining improvements in child care, with a large impact on families.

Third, federal policy is essential to promoting equity. A focus on state flexibility and “states’ rights” in U.S. policymaking has often served to embed racism into policy (Nolen et al., 2020). But with the huge and growing divergence in state policies toward families with young children and the growing concentration of young children in the states with the least supportive policies, leaving choices to the states endangers equity more than ever. (See “The South” sidebar.) To take just one example of many, one analysis of the sharp uptick in food insecurity in 2022—which hit people of color especially hard and had an unprecedented impact on children—notes that some states chose to end the extra SNAP nutrition benefits earlier than required by the federal government (Hall, 2023).

State advocacy and organizing also play a crucial role in large-scale success. First, implementation of almost all the pandemic-era response programs required deep engagement by state and local advocates and organizers, often in coordination with national advocates. Even for the Child Tax

## THE SOUTH

A large and growing share of children live in a subset of Southern states that have historically failed to invest in children and families, especially children and families of color. In 2020, the U.S. Census found that almost 40% of all children in the United States lived in the Census Bureau’s Southern region, with about half of that share (one in five) living in just three states: Florida, Texas, and Georgia. The large majority are children of color: about 70% of children in Texas and about 60% in Florida and Georgia, compared to 53% nationally (Frey, 2021).

The United States has no path to a successful, let alone thriving, future without investing in children of color in Texas, Florida, Georgia, and the rest of the South. Yet we heard in our conversations that advocates in these states are battling a series of policy choices that often fail young children and their families. For example, none of these three (and few other Southern) states has chosen to take federal money to expand state Medicaid programs, a crucial means to support maternal health and stabilize family income. (North Carolina’s implementation of Medicaid expansion in December 2023, just as we were completing this paper, is a welcome addition to the list.)

Texas, Florida, and Georgia rank in the bottom half of states in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2023 Kids Count® report on child well-being. Texas falls in the worst quarter of ranked states.

Credit, which did not require state government implementation, state and local advocates and organizers were crucial in both reaching parents and serving as trusted sources of information. Most of the other high-impact programs (SNAP, Pandemic EBT, child care, emergency rental assistance, unemployment assistance, and continuous Medicaid coverage) required substantial engagement by state officials—and, in the case of housing, local officials. In all these cases, national and state (and sometimes local) advocates worked in partnership to support public officials while holding them accountable.

Two examples we heard the most about were child care and nutrition assistance. National and state childcare advocates worked together through individual relationships and ongoing coalitions (such as the Child Care for Every Family Network) to share information about federal policies, influence the design of state approaches, track the delivery of childcare resources, and loop back to federal policymakers as well as other states with practical, evidence-based strategies. For example, national advocates interviewed state advocates and policymakers, as well as parents, in four states to compile strategies for stabilizing the childcare workforce, making the system work better for families, and building the relationships and capacity necessary for future success (Wilensky et al., 2023). Similarly, with the nutrition provisions, national advocates shared the latest on what states were expected to do and the flexibilities newly available, while state advocates provided critical insight into what was and wasn't working and where more federal guidance was needed. This partnership was critical in implementing SNAP changes and getting P-EBT off the ground, as just two examples.

A second crucial role that state advocates and organizers play in large-scale national change is driving innovation at the state level. Paid family and medical leave was enacted in eight states and the District of Columbia by early 2020, before the national discussion really began to move—and five more states have since followed suit (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2023).

Organizers such as Family Values @ Work had been working for years to enact state legislation, leading to a decade's worth of experience at the state level. Several people we talked with highlighted that the Paid Leave for All Coalition, which includes state and national organizers and advocates, was very effective at drawing lessons from this experience to inform the congressional debate about paid leave as part of the COVID response conversation. The coalition's analysis of state laws provided evidence of the leave's value for families and the economy, as well as knowledge about what provisions matter most for families with low incomes and families of color—valuable information when trade-offs were required during congressional negotiations (Gupta & Goldman, 2020). Because of that shared analysis, the full group was ready with detailed policy design as well as principles to follow during the twists and turns of congressional negotiation about a permanent policy.



**A second crucial role that state advocates and organizers play in large-scale national change is driving innovation at the state level.**

Guidance included, for example, that paid-leave benefits needed to replace a very high share of earnings for the lowest-income recipients because state evidence showed that they could not afford to participate otherwise. Successful state campaigns also provided credibility to the core policy ideas—making paid leave appear feasible, not radical.

As a result, the work of the coalition guided the Paid Family and Medical Leave proposal passed by the House of Representatives. The proposal did not in the end become law, but it advanced further than ever before and now lays the foundation for future policy advocacy. The foundation for federal action can also benefit from the organizing work that led to policy enactment in 13 states plus the District of Columbia by building grassroots power and broader public appeal for paid leave.

Finally, state organizing and advocacy can push the envelope on national policy change by driving advances beyond current federal policy. For example, a number of states enacted Excluded Worker Funds to provide support to immigrant workers who were left out of federal COVID relief (Figueroa, 2022). Another example, described earlier, is the many states that were spurred by the federal debate to pass or expand their child tax credits—and which may now provide evidence, power, and credibility behind permanent enactment of a federal expansion sometime in the future. What became clear in our interviews, along with related data and follow-up conversations, is that the relationship of state organizing, state advocacy, and national advocacy travels less in a one-way direction and more in a series of cycles, where each component influences and is influenced by the others.

Finally, as advocates and organizers seek to refine their approach to bringing all these pieces together to drive change, we heard from people at both national and state levels about the need to update and refresh strategies in response to the fact that more children than ever live in the states with the most punishing political and policy climates (see “The South” sidebar). Advocates and organizers working in different state contexts face diverging opportunities and challenges—with those in the most unfriendly states forced to spend more time defending against harsh new restrictions than advancing positive policies. Based on this, coalitions are rethinking their previous expectations about the lessons that members in one state can learn from members of another, and considering the strategies that organizers and advocates in more politically conservative states can learn from one another.

Creating a federal–state strategy in this difficult context requires funders as well as advocates to double down. Funders seeking policy wins sometimes shy away from supporting defensive strategy, which leads to a disproportionate flow of resources to states where positive outcomes are likely in the short-term. But protecting children and families is also important amidst a backlash against racial progress and immigrants that isn’t likely to abate in the near future. A well-funded defense has value. As discussed more fully below, advocates expressed the need for more funders to take the long view necessary for building the momentum and power for policy change, as well as to redefine what is considered a “win.”



## 4. STRENGTHEN COALITION INFRASTRUCTURE

**Coalitions are a powerful part of the COVID-response success story, as we’ve already seen.** But we also heard

a great deal about the significant behind-the-scenes work and investment that it takes to sustain them—especially the most powerful coalitions that bring together many different roles, perspectives, and contexts. We heard about efforts to address the challenges of effective coalition-building across roles (such as policy or legislative

advocates and organizers), levels of government (such as federal and state), political climates (for example, state advocates in California connecting to those in Florida or Texas), and issues (such as immigration and child/family advocacy).

Several thoughtful people talked about addressing the challenge of mismatched time horizons, especially across federal and state advocacy. Federal advocates are acutely sensitive to the unpredictable moments when major change can pass Congress, requiring very quick action. State and local advocates sometimes say short-turnaround demands can feel “transactional,” whether because the time frame for response seems unreasonable or they don’t see a reciprocal responsiveness to their own needs and perspectives. They may also feel betrayed if they are not part of conversations when compromises are made, though they may also be too swamped to participate in discussions that are not scheduled consistent with their own deadlines. Some coalition leaders are experimenting with approaches to address these challenges, for example by seeking to use the coming months—in advance of any large-scale congressional action—for preparation work that is co-designed with state advocates, organizers, and parent leaders, including direct conversations about what knowledge and other supports they need to fully engage in the next round of short-turnaround national discussions.

Coalition leaders noted that building skills, governance structures, and capacity are indispensable to success no matter how much good will, persistence, or energy coalition members bring. Some coalitions explicitly encourage members to take on different roles in a campaign (e.g., “inside” vs. “outside”) as a way to address members’ different missions, history, and approaches while advancing a shared agenda. Some coalitions are building their experience in creating meetings that center parents in discussions of national advocacy priorities. We heard appreciation for a diverse convening that modeled cross-sector relationship-building. We heard about strategy conversations focused on the best way to respond to state differences (and federal–state differences) in advocacy climates. We heard about training experiences that showcased groups that had successfully built respectful relationships over time across all these differences, so that others could pick up practical tips that work despite everyone’s stress and overcommitment.

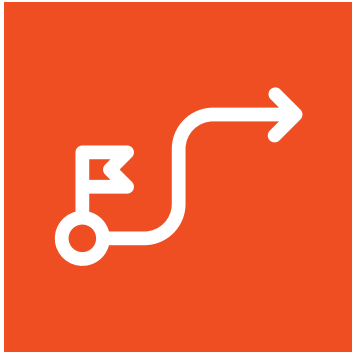
What all of these coalition-building approaches have in common is that they take time, resources, and—as we discuss in the next section—the sustained commitment and flexible funding of philanthropy. The work of building a broad coalition—one that is effective at integrating its highly divergent members’ perspectives and strengths—is not finished when partners join up. It requires ongoing, intensive work to build skills and knowledge, create and sustain respectful relationships over time (rather than letting them erode when the immediate crisis or opportunity is past), and develop ground rules and governance structures that allow differences of opinion to be a strength rather than a weakness. With stronger infrastructure, coalitions gain greater capacity for one more critical aspect of their work: collectively learning from successes and failures and strategizing forward.

What all of these coalition-building approaches have in common is that **they take time, resources, and—as we discuss in the next section—the sustained commitment and flexible funding of philanthropy.**

This work is often unfunded, despite its centrality to social change. We heard about the need for resources to support dedicated coalition staff and coalition members (particularly those operating on shoestring budgets) so they can participate fully. Parents and caregivers—those whose lived experiences we hope to center—need support in the form of stipends, child care, and transportation to be able to actively engage in coalitions.







## 5. SUSTAIN LONG-TERM EFFORTS

**Coalitions aiming for major change must play a long game, building strength over time, in order to seize unpredictable opportunities when they arise.** The

2020–21 policy successes were enabled by many years of work, including documenting the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies, writing legislation, developing new policy ideas, organizing communities and workers, creating and sustaining movements,

defending past wins, building coalitions, enacting good ideas at the state level, and supporting congressional advocates for these ideas.

In 2020–21, we saw the intersection of the long game and unpredictable moments of opportunity play out in two different ways. For the hugely successful policies discussed in much of this paper—the expanded Child Tax Credit, the \$50 billion investment in child care, the pandemic-era improvements to child health and nutrition—the moment of opportunity led to enactment, temporary though it was.

For two other ambitious and extremely important pro-child policies proposed by the Biden administration, the moment of opportunity led to passage by the House of Representatives—much further in the process than ever before—but not to enactment. These were a childcare guarantee for virtually all families with young children and paid family and medical leave. The childcare guarantee went far beyond the scope of the temporary response interventions; had it become law, it would have ensured affordable care (no cost for low-income families; limited cost-sharing to 7% of income for moderate- and middle-income families), raised pay for childcare workers, and improved the quality of services nationwide (Hardy & Schmit, 2022). National paid family and medical leave—which has “a plethora” of positive evidence at the state level, as noted by the National Academies report “Addressing the Long-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Families” (Coker et. al, 2023, p. 195)—would have guaranteed all workers paid time off to care for themselves or a family member. These policies in Biden’s so-called “Build Back Better” plan in the end missed enactment by a hair: one vote in the Senate. While the near-miss is deeply disappointing, it still represents a critical step along the road to passage.

The unprecedented level of acceptance achieved by these ideas creates a new jumping-off point for the next opportunity, a new level of familiarity by legislators and the public. Indeed, an important precursor to the COVID response was the response to the Great Recession of 2007–2009. In the years since, the reflections of advocates and policy makers about where that response worked and where it fell short, particularly for people with low incomes, helped create a strong set of options for the next crisis. The policy refinement, the legislative outreach, and the collective power built through organizing and coalition work required to get that far in the process, are important wins and building blocks in the long game.

Looking at policies both temporarily enacted and not yet enacted, the long game is a common denominator. Key congressional members had been pushing for the fully refundable Child Tax Credit for a decade and proposing a version of the childcare guarantee legislation for several years. Enactment of paid family and medical leave policies in eight states and the District of Columbia before 2020 created knowledge and experience that was essential in writing national legislation and persuading legislators of its feasibility. The Care Can't Wait Coalition had for several years brought together key groups to plan a coordinated strategy and raise funds for organizing, messaging, and lobbying to implement that strategy. While the moment of opportunity to move these ideas forward in Congress was sudden and unpredictable, the underlying policy work, movement-building, and coalition structures had been in development for years. Advocates were ready when the moment came.

Years of advocacy, collaboration, and organizing also led to the \$50 billion emergency infusion of funds to save the childcare system—the largest federal investment in child care since World War II (Golden, 2023). In 2020—as the pandemic hit, childcare centers closed, staff left the field, and the whole system faced collapse—the Center for Law and Social Policy (where the first author was executive director at the time) and the National Women's Law Center co-authored a research analysis of what would be needed for childcare centers to survive the pandemic. The analysis estimated \$50 billion, which then was provided across several pieces of response legislation. Organizers representing hundreds of thousands of providers and parents, from Community Change's Changemakers to MomsRising's national network and more, rallied around the number. They pushed national advocates to make such a large ask, and then they built the national infrastructure to gain enactment. Without sustained effort (a years-long partnership between the two lead organizations, organizing and movement efforts coming to fruition, new investment in political organizing through a c4 fund focused on child care, relationships built more broadly across the childcare field, and close collaboration with key congressional supporters), neither the research nor the relatively quick acceptance of this astonishingly high level of need would have been possible. And the impact of all of this work didn't end with enactment of the full amount. The \$50 billion "was a catalyst," one organizer said, "and the movement has had bigger, bolder demands ever since."

We've had the chance to watch early next steps unfold over the time we have been working on this paper. Even in the short time (in national policy terms) since 2021, we have already seen redoubled organizing and coalition-building, many newly enacted state policies (as discussed above), and national policy expansions. In December 2022, Congress enacted two permanent wins for children that built on the pandemic response: the Summer EBT nutrition program, which will be implemented in more than 35 states this summer (USDA, 2024), and continuous eligibility for children under the Medicaid health insurance program—meaning that children stay eligible for Medicaid and CHIP for a year even if family income fluctuates, allowing them to receive preventive care and treatment without interruption (Alker, 2024).

Funders can draw lessons from the COVID-19 policy successes as well as the temporary and partial nature of those successes. Advocates and organizers need long-term, sustained funding commitments. They also need the flexibility and additional funding to pivot their work in order to seize opportunities. Grassroots organizing takes time—sometimes a decade or more—to build sufficient power that can be exercised to bring about policy change. Policy development and advocacy also take time, as each fight builds on the last—both what was enacted and what didn't quite make it—and state wins contribute to and build off of national wins. Sustained, predictable funding commitments matter especially for parent, family, and care worker organizing, for which organizational infrastructure still needs to be built, and to create the conditions that enable people with lived experience to participate fully and lead at the advocacy table.

Philanthropy as a whole has not enjoyed a strong reputation for playing the long game. After George Floyd's murder and the mass protests that followed it, philanthropy poured money into racial justice work. Only three years after his death, and with movements still gaining strength, nonprofits have already observed steep declines in funder interest (Daniels et al., 2023). As much as coalition work is a test of patience for advocates and organizers, sustained commitment and flexible funding is a test for philanthropy.

Funders need far more ways to frame success than policy victory or loss in the moment. Campaigns may be lost along the way, but power built over the course of a campaign, relationships strengthened that shape the next stage, and new ideas brought into the mainstream are among the many other ways a policy loss can become a movement win.



## CONCLUSION

We began our interviews with curiosity about the lessons from COVID-era policy, including the unprecedented success of the provisions to support young children that were included in the American Rescue Plan Act and other response legislation. We ended the conversations inspired by the skill, passion, creativity, and commitment that so many people brought to this effort and by the results achieved for a brief span of time for young children, their families, and their communities.

Years of work positioned the field to seize a moment of opportunity to cut child poverty in half, save the childcare system, improve the lives of millions of children, and energize a national conversation around broad family supports like a refundable child tax credit, childcare guarantee, and national paid family and medical leave. The success was not final nor complete. Yet, for a brief period, it moved the country closer than ever before to one where all young children and their families can thrive.

The five approaches that helped make this possible shine a light on the next steps: center families with lived experience to improve policy design and implementation; expand coalitions to unite labor, families, advocates, and policymakers within justice movements; build strategy across federal, state, and community levels; strengthen the capacity of coalitions through skill-building, governance, and other practical strategies; and sustain effort by taking the long view.

The successful pandemic response offers hope by demonstrating that the nation can overcome failures of the past, moving beyond policies grounded in myths, racism, and xenophobia. And the lessons that produced that success provide a foundation, perhaps even a springboard, for moving to the next level in organizing, coalition-building, and the creation of powerful and effective policies. Most of all, we believe that success in meeting these challenges on behalf of young children is not optional. Rather, it is the only pathway to a just and successful future for the United States.

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