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2006 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* Shows Troubling Child Well-Being Indicators, Successful Early Childhood Development Key to Improving Trend Lines

BALTIMORE – National trends in child well-being are no longer improving in the steady way they did in the late 1990s, according to a report released today. The 17th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* from the Annie E. Casey Foundation also looks at the critical role that early childhood development plays in preparing millions of American children for success in school and life, and discusses ways to support home-based child-care providers.

The annual *Data Book* shows that three out of 10 child well-being indicators have worsened since 2000. There were more than 13 million children living in poverty in 2004 – an increase of 1 million over four years. There was an increase in the percentage of low-birthweight babies between 2000 and 2003 and an increase in the number of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.

“KIDS COUNT does contain good news in four areas: the child death rate and the teen death rate have fallen, the teen birth rate has continued to go down, and the high school dropout rate has improved,” says William O’Hare, senior fellow at the Casey Foundation and author of the 2006 report. Looking across all well-being indicators, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut rank highest, and New Mexico, Louisiana, and Mississippi rank the lowest.

Each year, the *Data Book* reports on the needs and conditions of America’s most disadvantaged children and families, as well as on the statistical trends. In 2006, the Casey Foundation looks at how to improve early childhood development experiences and opportunities for young children living in low-income neighborhoods. “Strengthening early childhood development can help to assure that all children begin life on a level playing field,” says Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore. “Bolstering the quality of child care is the best way to reach our youngest children early and help them develop the capacities they need to succeed.”

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book’s* essay, “Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care: Strengthening a Critical Resource to Help Young Children Succeed,” zeroes in on a form of child care that has existed for decades, but has largely been overlooked. Within the *Data Book*, the Casey Foundation defines friend, family, and neighbor (FFN) care as a form of child care offered in a home-based or family-based setting outside of the child’s own home, by regulated or unregulated providers. The definition of home-based and family-based care differs among states, organizations, and advocates, which shows the need for greater attention and clarity in the field. Some 6.5 million kids under age 6 spend all or part of their time in a home-based or family-based setting. For these children, family, friends, and neighbors shape a significant part of their childhood experience.

“Family, friend, and neighbor care providers have made major contributions to the healthy development of young children and support the needs of parents, yet they are often undervalued and under-supported,” remarks Ruth Mayden, director of Casey’s Program for Families with Young Children. “Early childhood research tells us that when the youngest children also have opportunities to develop language and reading skills, we see better academic achievements that can provide important social benefits for children at risk of poor outcomes.”

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“The Casey Foundation recognizes the value of quality center-based care and the impact it has had on generations of kids from all economic backgrounds,” states Nelson. “However, the reality is that FFN care has and will continue to play a role in the lives of so many families. Casey is making a strong commitment to attend to the most promising strategies that can strengthen this form of care, particularly for low-income families.”

Many parents see FFN care as a positive choice for their children because it might be closer to the child’s home, offer non-standard hours of care, be more affordable, or because the provider shares their culture and values. The essay highlights several challenges to improving FFN care, including the diverse needs and experiences of caregivers. Some caregivers might prefer to receive an informational flyer from a neighbor, while others might seek out a formal training process. Families who use FFN care often do not apply for assistance, even though they might be eligible for it. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, less than one-third of all child-care vouchers are used by parents to pay for this widely used form of care.

The Casey Foundation has called for a range of steps to advance the quality of friend, family, and neighbor care and highlights several efforts around the country that provide FFN caregivers with good information. Examples of these efforts include delivering education materials through home visiting programs or resource hubs where providers can interact with child development professionals, including those working in child care centers, and connecting providers to community institutions, such as museums or libraries, where they can access new resources and share ideas with other providers. Specific recommendations to strengthen FFN care are to:

- Improve the levels of data, research, and evaluation related to family, friend, and neighbor care;
- Promote stronger local organizational integration and linkages between effective, high-quality child-care centers and the family, friend, and neighbor care providers in their communities;
- Expand technical assistance and promotion of best practices to improve family, friend, and neighbor care;
- Increase and strengthen community-wide efforts to help parents make the best child-care choices;
- Urge states to do more to encourage quality improvements in subsidized family-based care; and
- Make early care and development a higher policy and funding priority at both the state and federal levels.

“In schools around the country, too many of our poorest and most vulnerable children arrive without the developmental skills and competencies that all kids need to learn and succeed,” concludes Nelson. “As a nation, we need leaders who are willing to experiment with new ideas that can support stronger collaborations between home-based and center-based providers. At the Casey Foundation, we believe that strengthening the quality of family, friend, and neighbor care, particularly in America’s low-income communities, is a significant opportunity to improve school readiness for the millions of kids who need it most.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

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The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with state-by-state rankings, supplemental data, and the essay, “Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care: Strengthening a Critical Resource to Help Young Children Succeed,” is available online at <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/databook.jsp>. For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Marci Bransdorf (410-223-2852) or Sue Lin Chong (410-223-2836).