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## Early Childhood Development

The experiences of early childhood serve as the foundation for a child's life. Whether at home or in early childhood centers, a child's formative experiences shape a sense of self, establish a view of the world, and set the stage for a lifetime of learning. Ideally, those experiences help develop a whole person who is loving, capable, confident, inquisitive, happy, and responsible.

There is no single combination of activities, lessons, and methods best suited for all children in all circumstances. It is the responsibility and right of parents, the child's primary educators, to rely on love, instinct, values, and observation to determine the setting and style of early instruction that meets their children's needs.

Parents have the high calling and duty to decide how their children will be educated. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, whose 60th anniversary we celebrate this year, makes explicit what is known by nature: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Government should never insist that all children receive the same education in government-run institutions. Instead, public policy should support the right of parents—the people who love the child most and know the child best—to direct the child's formative years.

For those parents and guardians who seek to supplement the education they offer at home, a variety of quality early childhood settings exist, including programs that conform to a particular theory of child development, those that provide a particular pedagogy, and those rooted in a particular religious tradition. Some early childhood centers are operated by the government, and some are operated by faith-based and other independent providers. In a free society, it is essential that parents be able to choose from an array of options. Without options, there is no choice; and without choice, there is no freedom.

To uphold freedom of choice in early childhood education, the Council for American Private Education offers the following principles:

- ★ Formal early childhood education should be voluntary.
- ★ Legislation promoting early childhood education should support the right of parents to choose from a range of programs, including explicitly religious programs, without financial penalty. Faith-based providers and those reflecting a particular pedagogy should be able to retain the distinctive and essential elements of their programs.
- ★ Programs designed to assist children and teachers should provide benefits to comparably situated children and teachers, whether in independent or government-run settings.
- ★ Early childhood education regulations should not seek program uniformity; they should promote pluralism that allows institutions to fulfill their unique missions and parents to choose from a variety of truly distinctive options.

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