

First Years, New Frontier: Policy Principles for Children and Families in the Age of AI

Capita and ZERO TO THREE

PREAMBLE

Artificial intelligence represents a new frontier in human history. For humanity to flourish in this new era, we must put children and families at the center of our laws, institutions, and culture, rather than treat them as an afterthought.

Much of the debate over who “wins” the AI revolution has been framed as a race between the United States and China. That framing misses the central threat, as well as the opportunity, of this era. **The question isn’t just about which nation comes out ahead but whether humanity does.** The policy choices we make today about children and families, and about the jobs, schools, health care systems, and financial institutions they depend on for stability, will determine whether AI ultimately serves humanity or diminishes our collective human experience.

The foundations of human flourishing are established in the earliest years of life, as infants and toddlers engage in nurturing interactions with parents and caregivers, experience loving touch, and actively explore the world around them, guided by caring adults.¹ However, as AI increasingly shapes early experiences and environments, **children are our most vulnerable beta testers of this new and powerful technology.** The question before us is not simply how we approach the development and deployment of artificial intelligence in ways that *protect* children. It is about safeguarding the well-being and promoting the *thriving* of children and their families in the age of AI, amid all its attendant social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental transformations.

The technology may be new, but what children need has not changed.² In the first three years of life, children’s brains are developing faster than at any other point in development – over one million new neural connections are formed per second.³ To flourish, children, especially in the earliest years, need their basic needs met: safe, stable, nurturing relationships; developmentally appropriate experiences suited to their individual differences; and healthy, family-friendly, and secure communities.⁴

Therefore, our approach to policy should not be limited to answering what can keep us safe from harmful AI – though that is clearly important – but should ask for a higher standard:

How can policy ensure that AI serves children, families, and their flourishing in ways that innovation and competition, left alone, will not?

HEADLINES TO SHAPE A POLICY FRAMEWORK

We posit three broad headlines that should shape a policy framework on artificial intelligence and children:

1. Embrace the Wonder

AI is here, and we are neither rejecting it nor running from it. As with any new technology, we are both awed and humbled by its breadth and potential. When treated as infrastructure that is fairly distributed, safeguarded, aligned with shared values, and subject to robust human engagement and oversight, **AI can be a source of opportunity that improves families' lives.** It is already accelerating scientific advances⁵ and has the potential to help us cure diseases and develop new medicines for children and adults alike.⁶ It can speed eligibility determination, so benefits reach families faster. If we build institutional readiness and talent within the systems that serve young children and families, we can identify special needs and diagnoses earlier and more effectively than ever before, leading to more targeted interventions. AI can help parents understand early development more deeply and suggest when parents may wish to seek assessments for their child; it can provide teachers with important data about classroom language and learning environments and suggest data-driven changes in instruction;⁷ and it can help innovators navigate new avenues for creating businesses – if it is aligned with flourishing, care, and responsibility.

2. Address the Worry

While the possibilities are exciting, the threats are very real. When it comes to children and families, addressing the worry means ensuring real guardrails – robust regulation – are in place for how AI interacts with children, their parents, caregivers, and communities, as well as for when and how AI is used in products that impact the well-being of children and their caregivers. Given the vulnerability and rapid development in the early years, babies and toddlers should not be national guinea pigs for learning about the effects of AI exposure, whether direct or indirect. These are the broad areas of protection for children that AI should include:

- **Human relationships.** Decades of developmental and neuroscience research show that daily, real-time, responsive interactions and relationships with caregivers, educators, and peers provide the rich early experiences young children need to build brains that are ready to learn, connect, and thrive. It is the messy, “just right” human timing, the social challenges of sharing and conflict resolution, that matter, not the mechanical precision of a bot. **AI should never replace teachers or care providers, especially as a source of emotional support, comfort, and guidance. Nor should AI-enabled tools justify increased child-to-adult ratios in care settings.**
- **Quality learning.** Policy experts need to center on what AI does well when it comes to learning and what it does not. There is currently no evidence that AI-enabled screen experiences support children’s learning before age three, and limited evidence for children aged three and up. In fact, the “AI slop” videos proliferating rapidly and intentionally targeting very young viewers have the potential for harm, especially when children are exposed to them for long periods each day. **Online creators and products should also be required to meet specific learning standards to earn an “educational” tag on video-sharing or other marketing platforms.**
- **The human element in AI functions and oversight.** AI has the potential to miss important nuances in the care and well-being of young children, even as it is being increasingly considered for use in determining access to systems and services for

both children and those who care for them.⁸ We must ensure that experienced professionals, including early childhood development experts, are involved in final decisions that determine the care and benefits children receive.

- **Transparency.** When AI is incorporated into products or used to inform public decisions that affect children and families, such as child welfare risk assessments or eligibility for benefits, families should be told, in accessible language, that AI is being used. These systems should be designed to give clear, understandable explanations of how and why decisions are made, and families should have a meaningful opportunity to question or appeal decisions through a human reviewer. Likewise, **AI products designed for or used by young children should clearly disclose the involvement of AI, so that parents and caregivers can make informed choices.**
- **Safety and privacy.** AI-enabled toys and platforms are already collecting broad and detailed information about children and families; AI embedded in toys, monitors, and other child- and parent-facing products is already on the market without proper testing, research, or regulatory approval focused on protecting young children. Datasets and models that determine children's access to benefits or likelihood of being flagged for the child welfare system have not been reviewed for algorithmic bias, with potentially enormous implications for children's economic security and family stability. **AI-enabled products and infrastructure involving children must be subject to privacy and safety reviews, with sufficient checks, balances, and monitoring to track potential harms to young children and their families, and oversight systems in place to respond appropriately.** Just as we would not allow a car seat on the market without proper inspection and regulation, we should not allow AI to be marketed or sold for use by young children without an approval process to establish its benefits and the absence of harm. And as children cannot offer consent to data collection, data collected about them as infants should not be monetized without their knowledge across their lifetimes.

3. Share the Dividend

The benefits of AI are a common inheritance, not a private windfall. AI is built on humanity's accumulated knowledge, labor, data, and creativity, as well as the natural endowments and resources of the whole community. AI has the potential to generate unprecedented wealth, yet left unchecked, it could dramatically widen inequality and wreak havoc on families' economic stability. Research shows that poverty and economic stress are among the most disruptive forces in children's development and family cohesion;⁹ conversely, when parents and caregivers have stability and opportunity, their children are better off.¹⁰ To meet the demands of this moment, lawmakers must ensure that AI's dividends are shared in ways that leave families, especially those with young children, materially better off.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Public policy plays an important role in all of these areas, but it is imperative that policymakers recognize that technology is outpacing policy and regulation. Therefore, we offer these principles, which are flexible enough to inform a rapidly changing landscape and provide more specific guardrails, norms, and opportunities to which they should adhere. To these ends, we urge adoption of these principles:

1. **Broad input from parents and child and family development experts should be a legal requirement, not a courtesy.** Products that touch children (toys, content, monitors), caregivers (parenting apps or other AI-enabled tools), or systems (pediatrics, home visiting, child welfare, child care and early learning) should be required to engage parents and early childhood experts at every stage of development as a condition

of market approval, with transparent accounting of how their input was used and accountability for failure to comply. More broadly, as lawmakers and companies develop governance and economic policy around AI, parents, family professionals, and other partners must be in the room. Families with young children should be included and centered in discussions on how to share the wealth that AI generates, how to approach the future of work, and how to shape social insurance as AI continues to disrupt economic systems and job markets – disruptions that will shape the lives of children and families for years to come. In general, given how quickly AI is being developed and deployed, lawmakers must ensure that frameworks embed pauses and opportunities to mitigate harm, which requires stakeholder input.

2. Any AI governance that addresses profit motives and incentive structures must be aligned with measurable beneficial outcomes for children and families.

A seat at the table is a start, but it's not enough. AI companies engaging with young children, parents, and professionals should be required to collect and publish data on child development and family outcomes, not just monetizable engagement data. The government should fund research on the relationship between AI and child outcomes. Where the data shows harm, creators should be required to modify (or pull) their products and face liabilities. Children will be using AI long before rigorous studies can tell us how it affects them. Tracking child and family well-being now, making that data transparent, and aligning companies' self-interest with those outcomes is how we protect children in the meantime.

3. The wealth AI generates must be used to build stronger systems for human connection and flourishing, and that starts with children, families, and the communities they live in.

Families and communities are bearing the impacts of AI, such as resource impacts from data centers; they should also reap the benefits. That could mean taxing AI and investing the proceeds in public resources like libraries and community centers; building early childhood infrastructure – from caregiving to health care – that fosters human knowledge, connection, and flourishing; and importantly, direct cash payments to families. Cash dividends to families are a primary instrument for mitigating poverty, ensuring family and economic stability, and helping families build wealth. The wealth AI generates is a potential new revenue source that can fund investments in children, families, and their communities without adding to the deficit.

4. Lawmakers must modernize social insurance to address the potential harms of economic disruption, especially for families with children in the most sensitive period of development.

AI is beginning to reshape the labor market, and the workers most exposed to disruption – and least able to adapt – are disproportionately women in administrative and clerical roles, many of them parents and caregivers.¹¹ Parents of young children must be able to meet basic needs throughout this disruption. That includes policies that disincentivize automation (for example, requiring companies to continue paying payroll taxes on jobs they automate) and accounting for the presence of young children when determining public benefits. It means that for parents who must retrain or pursue further education, postsecondary institutions and workforce training programs must serve more of them by providing high-quality instruction in in-demand skills and access to child care so they can complete their training. And it means that while AI can be leveraged to speed eligibility determinations for benefits, lawmakers must prioritize safeguards against algorithms that accelerate human biases in public benefits, child welfare, criminal justice, and other systems.

5. Even as we build and enact new frameworks for AI governance, we must leverage and update laws and regulations that already exist and hire and train the workforce to enforce them.

Our government has laws on the books to protect children's online safety and privacy and to enforce workers' rights. Our government has tools, such as grants and contracts, to ensure programs serving children and families

comply with safety and quality standards. Even as new governance around AI emerges – hopefully grounded in the principles in this document – lawmakers must enforce and update our existing legal infrastructure to protect children and families and ensure their flourishing. Everything from the Federal Trade Commission’s online child protections and existing law on employment discrimination and algorithmic bias to surveillance, worker classification, and union protections should be examined and updated to ensure new technologies are accounted for. Lawmakers can attach conditions to federal and state grants and contracts, including standards for state child care and Medicaid plans, that lay out allowable and prohibited uses of AI and keep human connection paramount. And lawmakers must recognize that technologists outside government will innovate faster than regulations can keep pace with, and develop plans to train the existing civil service workforce and onboard new experts knowledgeable about AI’s threats and opportunities to ensure we have a government capable of meeting the country’s needs in this era.

- 6. Ensure parents have access to tools to help navigate the ethical education and formation, as well as the digital literacy, of their children, so they can flourish in digital worlds.** Many parents are struggling to make decisions about the role AI should play in the lives of their children, which information sources to trust, and how to navigate a rapidly changing technological and economic landscape. Parents should have the information and freedom to make thoughtful choices for their families, but they cannot be expected to make up for the absence of clear standards and fundamental safeguards on their own. They should be able to choose from a range of products or services that meet the needs of their family, knowing whether and how AI is embedded and confident that all meet safety and privacy standards. As a complement to this clear and transparent AI governance, lawmakers should invest in public education to equip parents with scientifically grounded, culturally responsive approaches that help their children flourish in a world shaped by AI.

CONCLUSION

We advocate for these principles in a world shaped not only by powerful new technologies but also by climate disruption, political realignment, demographic change, and growing debt and deficits, which make concerted policy action increasingly difficult as fiscal resources shrink. That is why the wealth AI generates must be treated as a common inheritance. It is the rare new resource that can expand what is possible for families, unlocking a stance of abundance rather than scarcity.

We are not limited to defending or growing what already exists. We can create and advance a new agenda that starts from children’s irreducible needs and the stability, predictability, and quality of life for all families, while accelerating progress in technology, industry, and science, in such a way that results in human progress available to all.

We commit to advancing these principles not only for the benefit of children and their families, but also with a broader aim in mind: the renewal of the common good and the development of a more inclusive, just, and humane society for our children to inherit.

- 
- 1 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, J. P. Shonkoff & D. A. Phillips, eds. National Academy Press, 2000.
 - 2 T. Berry Brazelton and Stanley I. Greenspan. *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish*. Perseus Publishing, 2000.
 - 3 Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *Brain Architecture*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>.
 - 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Essentials for Childhood: Creating Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments for All Children*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2019.
 - 5 The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. *The Nobel Prize in Chemistry 2024* [Press release]. NobelPrize.org, 2024.
 - 6 Zuojun Xu et al. "A Generative AI-Discovered TNIK Inhibitor for Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis: A Randomized Phase 2a Trial." *Nature Medicine*, 2025, 31(8), 2602–2610. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-025-03743-2>.
 - 7 Sam Perochon et al. "Early Detection of Autism Using Digital Behavioral Phenotyping." *Nature Medicine*, 2023, 29(10), 2489–2497. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-023-02574-3>.
 - 8 Virginia Eubanks. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. St. Martin's Press, 2018.
 - 9 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*, G. Duncan & S. Le Menestrel, eds. The National Academies Press, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25246>.
 - 10 April S. Masarik and Rand D. Conger. "Stress and Child Development: A Review of the Family Stress Model." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2017, 13, 85–90.
 - 11 Sam Manning et al. (2026, January). *Measuring US Workers' Capacity to Adapt to AI-Driven Job Displacement*. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/measuring-us-workers-capacity-to-adapt-to-ai-driven-job-displacement/>.