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## Report: Eight Years to Get Montana Kids on Track



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**PHOTO: An Annie E. Casey Foundation report released today explains that Montana should invest more in children's early years and high-quality preschool is key. Photo credit: Deborah C. Smith.**

MISSOULA, Mont. - The window is open for eight years when it comes to making sure Montana's children are on the path to success in school and in life. An Annie E. Casey Foundation report released today explains that the state should invest more in children's early years, and high-quality preschool is vital.

According to Thale Dillon, director of Montana Kids Count, even when parents have the time, and financial ability, to seek quality early education, it's tough in Montana.

"We only have a few facilities in the state that are nationally accredited, and the state rating system is still being developed," she pointed out.

The report's statistics show that 51 percent of Montana's children age eight and younger live in low-income households, and lower-income children are less likely to be on track educationally, socially and emotionally by age eight.

The Casey Foundation's associate director for policy reform and advocacy, Laura Speer, said the good news is that decades of research show how to set children on the path to success. Parents need support and connections to programs that can help them and their families.

"We know that by third grade, if children are reading-proficient, that can really give them a leg up," she said. "It makes them more likely to graduate high school and more likely to go on to college, and really they use reading to learn everything else."

Speer said that even if children enter kindergarten with below-average language and cognitive skills, they can catch up, but only if they are physically healthy and have strong social and emotional skills.

The report, "The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success," is at [AECF.org](http://www.aecf.org).

Deborah Courson Smith/Deb Courson Smith, Public News Service - MT

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