



## Kara Johnson: Pre-k protects vulnerable children

Child abuse and neglect is a wide-spread problem in Texas communities. Last year, 83,000 children were victims of child abuse and neglect and 213 children died. The Texas Legislature and the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) have been working hard to improve the state response and have had encouraging results. However, legislators and advocates should take another look at programs that can support DFPS in protecting children from abuse. High-quality early education is one creative method that has been proven to reduce the rates of child abuse and neglect.

The early care and education landscape in Texas has three components: child care, public pre-k and Head Start. Research shows that high-quality early care and education, when done right, can and does reduce the rate of child abuse and neglect. High-quality programs do this through parent involvement, which includes parent education classes, home visits, or even just encouraging parents to volunteer in the classroom.

Even better, these programs have been proven to help all parents improve their parenting skills and interact more positively with their children. Children don't come with instruction manuals, and all parents can benefit from the support and information. Parent education and involvement teach parents how to be involved with their child, how to respond to their child's behavior, what is normal for their child's age, and new educational games to play with their children. High-quality early care and education helps to build stronger families before a problem ever appears.

Texas should use the early care and education infrastructure that already exists to bolster its efforts to combat child abuse and neglect. It just makes good sense to expand on a resource that parents and children use and love. Parents and teachers already know one another and already communicate about the child. The simple fact is that child deaths due to child abuse and neglect are much less likely to occur when there are more adults involved with that child.

High-quality early care and education not only gives children a leg-up on education that will last their whole life, but it can actually keep children safe. Imagine the impact this could have on Texas' most vulnerable children if more families had access to high-quality early care and education. When people consider how to prevent child abuse and neglect, early care and education is not always on the list. Maybe it should be.

More information on high-quality early care and education is available at [www.tecec.org](http://www.tecec.org).

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*Author photo: <http://s449.photobucket.com/albums/qq215/TECEC/>*

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