

“It’s About Our Kids” Presidential Candidate Questionnaire
Unedited Response Received from Senator Barack Obama

As President what role should the federal government play ...

1. High Quality Child Care: to ensure that every child, regardless of income or background, has access to high-quality child care?

Millions of American families are struggling to juggle job and family responsibilities. Many low-income parents struggle to maintain employment and afford child care. With 70% of families now either households with a single parent or two working parents, we have an obligation to assure working parents that their kids are safe while they are on the job.

We need to make high-quality and affordable child care available for every family that needs it. This will allow parents to put their minds at ease during the workday, and benefit employers through reduced absenteeism and a more productive workforce.

Additionally, I will work to give family child care providers and center-based workers the right to form a union and to be treated as the public servants they are. That includes ensuring timely and correct payments, proper retirement benefits, regulations and contracts for subsidized care, and improved working conditions.

Finally, I have co-sponsored a bill in the U.S. Senate to make all child care facilities lead-safe within five years, to combat this critical threat to cognitive and physical growth.

2. Preschool: in expanding preschool programming, both specifically for low-income and disadvantaged children and more generally to provide opportunities for all children?

Experts agree that funding early childhood education is one of the best investments our nation can make. Children who participate in high-quality preschool programs perform better in school and are more likely to find good work and stay out of jail than those who do not. We know that if we put a dollar into early childhood education, we get seven dollars back in reduced dropout rates, reduced delinquency, reduced prison rates, increased college attendance, and more successful employment opportunities.

Yet while we know what works, we have not answered the call to expand critical early childhood programs so that they are available to all children. Half of low-income children start school up to two years behind their peers. Only 45% of 3-year old black children are enrolled in early-childhood education programs and 70% of 4-year old black children. We need to do more to close this opportunity gap. That’s why I support increasing funding for Head Start, Early Head Start and other high-quality early childhood programs to make sure all children enter school ready to learn.

I have a long record of support for early childhood education programs. In the Illinois Senate, I was the chief co-sponsor of the pioneering Illinois Early Learning Council, which guided the improvement, expansion and coordination of early childhood education (including Head Start and Early Head Start) programs and services.

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3. After-School: to promote after-school programs and services that provide learning activities and connect children and teens with caring adults?

On any given day, more than 14 million children remain unsupervised in the hours after school. These children are three times more likely to get into trouble with the law.

Afterschool programs play an important role in alleviating the burden on working parents. They keep kids safe, help working families and improve academic achievement. They help build safer, stronger and smarter children and communities. I believe we need to increase federal support for after-school programs with proven records of success at helping children avoid crime and drugs.

4. Child Health Care: to assure that all children receive and have access to primary and preventive health services inclusive of mental health care and oral health care?

I am committed to making sure every child has health insurance. Forty-seven million Americans lack health coverage, including nine million children. I have a plan to sign legislation providing quality, affordable health care to all Americans by the end of my first term. My health plan will mandate coverage of children.

My plan will expand eligibility for the Medicaid and State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) programs and ensure that these programs continue to serve their critical safety net function. Under SCHIP, states can opt to provide dental care and nearly all have selected to do so. Therefore, expanding SCHIP eligibility – part of my health care plan – will also expand dental coverage to kids. My plan to provide universal health coverage by the end of my first term as president also includes mental health parity.

Finally, I will invest in public health and prevention efforts to encourage healthy lifestyles and habits among our kids in coordination with their school districts and local communities.

I have a history of working to expanding health care to children. As a state senator, I sponsored and helped pass legislation to expand Illinois’ KidCare program, providing coverage to 70,000 uninsured Illinois children and 84,000 adults.

5. Children with Disabilities: to support children with disabilities and ensure their quality of life?

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (“IDEA”), the federal government is supposed to shoulder 40 percent of each state’s “excess cost” of educating children with disabilities, but Congress has never lived up to this obligation. Schools should not be forced to choose between salaries for effective teachers and

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special education for students who need that support. Properly funding and implementing IDEA is a top priority for me as president.

In addition, recent court decisions have restricted the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”). I believe we must restore the original legislative intent of the ADA and move to strengthen the law and enforce it more vigorously.

I have a history of fighting for these causes. After Hurricane Katrina revealed that many states and cities do not have adequate plans in place to care for special-needs populations, I passed legislation to require states to properly plan the evacuation of special needs individuals. I also fought for \$1 billion in increased federal funding for research on autism, which now affects more than 1 million Americans.

6. Child Abuse and Neglect: *in reducing child abuse and neglect and making improvements in the child welfare system to assure that children receive quality services?*

As president, I will combat child neglect and abuse by supporting programs that increase the quantity of foster homes, improve training for foster parents, and increase coordination between law enforcement and child welfare officials.

One study found that for a sample of foster care graduates only 54% finished high school in two to four years, less than 50% were employed, and 25% had experienced homelessness. We must help this transition by investing in innovative new job training and workforce development programs that will provide those in foster care with the skills necessary to compete in the modern American workforce.

I have also introduced legislation to combat domestic violence by providing \$25 million a year for partnerships between domestic violence prevention organizations and fatherhood or marriage programs to train staff in domestic violence services, provide services to families affected by domestic violence, and to develop best practices in domestic violence prevention. As president, I will sign that legislation into law.

Finally, children of methamphetamine users who live in or visit methamphetamine labs are at a heightened risk for abuse, neglect, and continued social and developmental problems. I cosponsored legislation providing assistance to the children of methamphetamine abusers in the U.S. Senate, and will continue to support meth’s youngest victims as president.

7. Family Economic Security and Success: *in reducing child poverty and ensuring that working families have sufficient resources to care for their children and invest in their future success?*

It’s a moral outrage that in the richest nation on earth, 37 million Americans – nearly 13 million of them children – are living in poverty.

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I will increase federal funding for anti-poverty programs. In addition to passing my universal health care plan, which mandates health care coverage for every child in America, I will fully fund the Community Development Block Grant program and create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. I will increase funding for transitional jobs and career pathways programs and I’ll provide greater supports for ex-offenders and their families. I will ensure that minimum wage is indexed for inflation. And I will expand eligibility and increase the Earned Income Tax Credit to benefit 12 million Americans.

Additionally, I have called for the creation of a new program that replicates the success of the Harlem Children’s Zone – an all-encompassing, all-hands-on-deck anti-poverty effort that is literally saving a generation of children in a neighborhood where they were never supposed to have a chance. As president, an important part of my plan to combat poverty will be to replicate the Harlem Children’s Zone in twenty cities across the country. These “Promise Neighborhoods” will focus on addressing concentrated, intergenerational poverty in our cities. We’ll train staff, we’ll have them draw up detailed plans with attainable goals, and the federal government will provide half of the funding for each city, with the rest coming from philanthropies and businesses. I will also create a White House Office of Urban Policy and have the Director of that Office report directly to me.

Finally, I will provide families the support they need to raise their children. I’ll sign the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act, which will provide more financial support to fathers who make the responsible choice to help raise their children and crack down on the fathers who don’t. And I’ll help new mothers with their new responsibilities by expanding a pioneering program known as the Nurse-Family Partnership that offers home visits by trained registered nurses to low-income mothers and mothers-to-be. My plan will assist approximately 570,000 first-time mothers each year. And, as discussed above, I will ensure that working families have access to affordable childcare for their children.

In this country – of all countries – no child’s destiny should be determined before he takes his first step. No single mother should have to work two jobs and still be unable to afford child care or the rent. Our government cannot guarantee success and happiness in life, but what we can do as a nation is to ensure that every American who wants to work is able to find a job, able to afford health care, and able to stay out of poverty. What we can do is retire the phrase “working poor” in our time. That’s what we can do, and that’s what we will do together when I am President of the United States.

8. Immigration Policy: regarding immigration policy and providing for immigrant children and their health, education, and other needs?

As we continue our work toward comprehensive immigration reform, we must respect the humanity of those who come to America in search of a better life. America has always been a nation of immigrants. Policies that hurt the health, education, and safety of immigrant children demonstrate the cost of relegating our immigrants to living in the shadows.

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I will make sure any child who comes here, studies here, and excels at school gets the same chance to attend a public college as everyone else. I helped pass the DREAM Act in Illinois, and I will do the same as President. And I support providing legal immigrant women and children with health care coverage.

I believe that we can serve the needs of immigrant children most effectively by keeping them united with their families. The immigration bill we recently debated in the Senate did not recognize the fundamental morality of uniting Americans with their families. It contained a point system which did not give preference to immigrants with a family member who is a United States citizen unless the immigrant met some minimum and arbitrary threshold of education and skills. I introduced amendments to restore the importance of family ties to the immigration system to help prevent children and parents from being kept apart.

9. Ensuring Equal Opportunity: *in assuring equal opportunity and closing current gaps in child outcomes by race, ethnicity, language, and culture?*

To start, there should be no doubt that fighting discrimination and promoting equality and inclusion will be a firm commitment of my Administration. I will select an Attorney General who understands his or her duty to uphold the Constitution. For me, these issues are not simply the causes of a campaign; they have been the causes of my life. After law school, I worked as a civil rights lawyer – on cases ranging from voting rights to housing and employment discrimination – and a constitutional law professor. As a State Senator, I passed legislation on racial profiling and laws extending the protection of hate crime laws to lesbian and gay citizens. As a U.S. Senator, I have been a champion of voting rights for minorities and ensuring equal pay for women. As president, I will continue to stand up for civil rights.

And I know that regardless of how far we’ve come, there is still more work to do – particularly in closing disparities that exist in education and health care. My “STEP UP” education plan supports summer learning opportunities – to close the achievement gap – for disadvantaged children through partnerships between schools and community organizations. My education plan would also allow exceptional students who do not have access to college-level courses at their high schools to seek college credit elsewhere with need-based grants.

My health care plan emphasizes disparity research by collecting and reporting health care data by race and ethnicity, as well as geographic and socioeconomic status and level of health literacy. I will also improve the language and cultural skills of hospitals to better care for the growing Latino community, and increase the number of minority medical professionals.