

SYNOPSIS - EPISODE 1

THE RAISING OF AMERICA

The Signature Hour



The U.S. is a can-do nation. So why has child wellbeing in the U.S. fallen to 26th out of 29 nations, according to a United Nations report? How does what Paul Kershaw calls the “growing squeeze” on parents and caregivers for time, money and resources alter the architecture of the developing brain of our infants? What are the potential consequences for individual learning, earning and mental and physical health? For the future health, prosperity and equity of the nation? And how might we do better?

These are some of the questions explored in the signature episode of the five-part documentary series, *The Raising of America*. This opening hour interweaves discoveries from neuroscience with the stories of parents, caregivers and communities under siege as they struggle to provide the nurturing environments all babies and young children need to thrive. It doesn't have to be this way. If the nation aspires to a healthier, safer, better educated, more prosperous and equitable future, it must find a way to enable all our children the opportunity for a strong start. But how?

The film joins Dr. Renee Boynton-Jarrett, a trusted pediatrician and researcher at Boston Medical Center, Dr. Jack Shonkoff, director of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman and former multi-billion dollar hedge fund manager Robert Dugger. Each brings a very different perspective to the importance the early childhood experience and yet each tells us the same thing: for children to do better in school and in life, we can't wait until they enter kindergarten. Crucial brain development occurs during the very first years of life.

They take us inside ground-breaking scientific research. We learn that infants are born with most of their 80-plus billion brain cells, but those neurons are only weakly wired together into circuits at birth. Animations demonstrate how 700 synapses, or neural connections, are formed every single second during the first years of life, building the basic brain circuits which serve as the foundation for future learning as well as emotional and social health. The pattern, or architecture, of those circuits is shaped not so much by genes but by the young child's interactions with her environment, especially her primary caregivers.

“Parents are working really hard to care for their children, to support their families, to be engaged and productive citizens,” Dr. Boynton-Jarrett observes. “At the same time it can be like the dice are loaded against them.”

Parents and caregivers feel increasingly under siege, many working long hours for low and stagnant wages, and lacking access to resources like high-quality childcare or even affordable housing, all of which make it even harder to provide the nurturing environments critical to the developing brain. Might public policies be rigging the game against them? Former investment banker Robert Dugger thinks so. “Our policies actually discourage parents from being able to take care of their children when they’re very young,” he says.

We meet Ann Waterman Roy who is dropping off baby Sylvie, three months old, at childcare for the first time. Ann joins the 40% of mothers who return to work by the time their babies are three months old, some because they want to, most because they have to. The U.S. is the only rich or middle-income country not to guarantee paid parental leave. Quebec offers nine months, Germany 14 months, Hungary two years paid leave. Many parents and babies are not ready for the separation.

Then they’re slapped by a second challenge: where do they find affordable, high-quality childcare?

That’s the question facing David and Yaminette, who are searching for a spot for four-month old Nikha. At \$10,000 a year or more, not only is most high-quality childcare beyond their reach, only 10% of U.S. childcare centers are even accredited. Or meet Erica and Leroy, parents of three-year old DeNaya, who work 100 hours a week between them to make ends meet. They depend on friends and relatives to care for DeNaya. Americans now work more hours annually than most of our peer nations and the U.S. is the sole rich nation not to guarantee by federal law a single paid vacation or holiday – or even sick days.

Scientific studies reveal that the stressors disrupting parent and caregiver lives can drip down and get “under the skin” of their babies and young children. A 20-year Wisconsin study of mostly white, middle class families found that infants and toddlers whose parents reported the seemingly implacable stressors of a time-bind, financial worries, and role over-load were more likely to grow up with a hyper-reactive ‘fight-or-flight’ stress response of their own. That in turn increased their risk for emotional, behavior, substance abuse and learning problems later in life.

But those most at risk are the one in four American babies born into poverty. Ashley Walker is a loving mother of two in rural Maine who left a physically abusive husband. Now, like so many other single mothers, she struggles to raise her

two girls while juggling bills and debts. She is gripped by anxiety about whether she can provide what her young daughters, Amelia and London, need to feel secure and happy.

Dr. Boynton-Jarrett asks, “Is that what we’ve decided as society, that this degree of tension, these complex trade-offs, are the norm, to be expected, just a part of raising a child?”

But there is hope. In the early ‘80s, for example, childcare centers on U.S. Military bases were wracked by scandal, provoking headlines, lawsuits and Congressional hearings. Now the Armed Forces are a model, providing the highest quality childcare in the nation, all of it affordable, thanks to a law Congress passed in 1989. That was 18 years after an 11th hour veto by President Nixon of Congressional legislation which would have provided universal, quality childcare and other services for any family that wanted it. Imagine how life today might have been different had that bill been signed into law.

Dr. Boynton-Jarrett argues that if we can create safe and reliable social environments, “the capacity of the brain and human spirit to thrive and develop is beyond what any of us could predict.” These are not utopian dreams. Prof. Heckman cites his studies demonstrating that quality investments in early childhood pay for themselves, even financially, many times over.

But perhaps preschool teacher Aiyana Terry puts the challenge best while embracing her young students – tomorrow’s neighbors, workers and leaders: “This is the future right here. Invest in them. Invest in their parents. If you want America to get back on top, invest in these children now. They’re not going to fail you, but we can’t fail them now.” The fate of the nation may hang in the balance.

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