

It's Good Business to Invest in Young Children

Irving B. Harris
In his own words

“Private-public partnerships provide one model for early childhood development programs. Businesses realize that by investing in these programs, they are investing in the quality of their labor supply. I can speak from personal experience about one such partnership, the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

In 1982 I realized that if we could place a family support program near a factory site, a corporation’s self-interest would warrant a substantial investment and might create a replicable model. The logical company to ask was Pittway Corporation, a manufacturer of First-Alert Smoke detectors in Aurora, Illinois, because I was then serving as its chairman. Aurora has a large pocket of poor families, many of whom worked at Pittway.

The initial plan was for a three-year experiment with the idea of trying to influence other Aurora employers to become supporters. Greg Coler, Director of Illinois’s Department of Children and Family Services, agreed to commit \$400,000 to the center if Pittway would match it. This private-public partnership became the Ounce of Prevention Fund.”

“Starting Small, Thinking Big.” The American Prospect vol.7, no.28, September 1, 1996-October 1, 1996.

“My argument is simple. Until we recognize where the problem is—long before age six, we will continue to see schools fail. The problem is in school readiness—the quality of children entering the system. To be ready for school, the children have to be healthy with appropriate language development, ready for the social experience of school, cooperative with other children, respectful of the teacher, and they must understand the importance of doing well in school.

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“Irving’s vision for early childhood was profound, but very difficult to implement. But the initial mixed results did not discourage him. He just increased and improved his initiatives until they succeeded.

His vision for early childhood development is becoming reality...”
Burt Kaplan,
Chairman of the Board
National Bedding/Serta Mattress

“When Irving Harris talked about creating the Ounce of Prevention Fund in 1982, he stressed that experimental programs related to early childhood intervention were not going to produce immediate results. Patience, perseverance

and a willingness to take entrepreneurial risks would be required. He was, though, confident that the Ounce would ultimately succeed in showing the world a better way to correct the social and economic problems of the day.

Irving’s approach to the Ounce, therefore, matched his overall approach to business. He was not afraid to take a risk, especially when he saw an opportunity that others had overlooked. Ultimately, his

success in the early childhood area, with the Ounce, Zero to Three and the Erikson Institute matched his success in business.”
King Harris, *Chairman*
Harris Holdings Inc.

When you are in manufacturing and are responsible for quality control, it's suicide to wait until the product is manufactured and shipped and in the customer's hands to find out that you have a problem of poor quality. Of course, you have to be sure that everything that you have done to process the parts and raw material is of high quality. But, over and above that, it's essential that you carefully inspect the purchased components at the time they come into your warehouse to make sure

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"Irving's success in the philanthropic world—in the Ounce of Prevention Fund in particular—reflected a unique understanding that efforts to make a difference require a philosophical underpinning in order to achieve success as well as perpetuate those

efforts. The concept of a public and a private partnership, so well implemented by Irving, is not only a testimonial to his creativity but is a model that others can follow with hopefully significantly similar success. Watching it work is a basis of optimism for all of us."

that the components you are putting into your product are 100% free of defect. I realize children are not inanimate components, but the analogy does apply. If a child appears in school at age six, apathetic, unable to learn to read with the rest of the class, and/or disruptive, or prone to violence, or suffering from a severe learning disability, the teacher cannot be expected to perform miracles."

"Education—Does It Make Any Difference When You Start?" Address to the Forum of the City Club of Cleveland, December 15, 1989.

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Helen Zell, *Executive Director*
Zell Family Foundation

Sam Zell, *Chairman*
Equity Group Investments, L.L.C.

"I'm frequently asked the question, 'Why are you, a businessman, concerned about child development and about the cycle of poverty?' Sub-question, 'What are you—some kind of a freak?' Many people believe that it's foolhardy to address this awesome problem. Nonetheless, we can all agree that confronting poverty is important, particularly because it affects so many children.

"One of Irving's great legacies is what he taught all of us about investment in human capital. There are enormous connections between business world wisdom and what needs to happen to correct the shortcomings of current social policy as it

relates to infants and toddlers at risk of school failure in the richest society on earth. No one articulated those connections—or made them—better than Irving. It's up to the rest of us now to go and do likewise."

Its ramifications are alarming, and I would argue that it is foolhardy for us to ignore the cycle of poverty and to go blithely about our lives thinking it will solve itself."

"What can we do to prevent the cycle of poverty?" 1987 Clifford Beers Lecture, Child Study Center, Yale University, March 24, 1987.

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Susie Buffett, *Chairman*
Susan A. Buffett Foundation

“Band-aids will not solve the problems of poverty and family dysfunction. Somewhere in the cycle we must intervene to prevent its repetition. Scientists and researchers have shown that the best place to begin is at the beginning: from conception. This is not to say that intervention cannot or will not work at any other point in the cycle. It is to say that focusing efforts on the earliest years of life will be the most effective and the least costly in both human and economic terms.”

Children in Jeopardy: Can We Break The Cycle of Poverty? 1996.

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“Among the many ways Irving shaped my thinking, one in particular stands out: a principal role of private philanthropy should be to help shape public policy by demonstrating effective solutions to societal problems.

The crucial seed dollars to experiment, to innovate, and to establish new approaches could well be private; but the impact can be magnified many-fold and sustained only through public funding.

“It seems absolutely clear to me that in order to accomplish the goal of having all our children ready for school at age 5, we must change the circumstances under which pregnancies occur and children in utero are cared for. If we are to get all children, age 5, ready for school, we must pay much more attention to the high-risk babies. We must radically change the prospects for nurturing and loving, for appropriate stimulation and care each baby must receive in the first two

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Thus, the private-public partnership was, in my view, a marvelous model.”

Harrison Steans, *Chairman*
Financial Investments
Corporation

years when the brain architecture is being developed. Of course, fortunately, most babies are wanted, and most are well-nurtured, and most are ready for school by age 5. And the suburban schools, many of them, do quite well. But our big-city public schools and many of our suburban schools are plagued by the children who are not ready.”

Address to the students of the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago: “Should Public Policy be Concerned with Early Childhood Development?” May 3, 1994.

“Irving gave his entire existence to our field. At a time when families are even more stressed, at a time when our children are even more needy for the basic requirements of self-esteem and their future ‘emotional intelligence,’ at a time when our nation is the

least family and child oriented society in the civilized world, Irving’s leadership was like a precious beacon to all of us who wanted to save our future generations. He studied to become a sophisticated advocate for 0-3 year old children and

“We have a huge task ahead: we must radically improve the early development of all our youngsters to be sure our public and private educational systems improve their results. Only in this way can we radically improve our educational standards.”

Children in Jeopardy: Can We Break The Cycle of Poverty? 1996.

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their stressed families for he knew that was our nation’s future. He joined all of us who care about children and their parents in fostering programs and advocacy for the respect and backing that they need today. What a hero he has been to all of us!”

T. Berry Brazelton, M.D.,
Clinical Professor of Pediatrics, Emeritus
Harvard Medical School
Brazelton Touchpoints Center

“It seems to be a difficult concept to grasp, but science unequivocally informs us that a person’s competence, at age 21, is vitally related to the child’s developing competence at 3 weeks of age, 6 weeks of age, 6 months of age, 6 years of age, and so forth. Adults do not just happen, they are the outcomes of the developments of young children. We must do a very good job of training our younger people or we are going to end up in a great mess.

The signs of that mess, the violence and the homicides and the shootings, the number of people in prisons, the number of people taking drugs, are graphic illustrations of how bad things have become. And they can get much worse if we do not change our ways.”

“Good Early Child Development” February 12, 1997.

“Most scientists who know a great deal about early childhood development believe that the first days of life, first weeks, and the first few months are absolutely critical to optimal brain development. That is when the brain pathways that eventually lead to curiosity and empathy and trust begin to develop. That is when, in loving interaction with nurturing caregivers, babies learn that they can trust and feel loved and respected. That is when they begin to become *human* human beings.

If those weeks and months are lost, it is very difficult to recover the natural opportunities for motivation to learn and to develop self-esteem and empathy that characterize *human* human beings. We must remember. The first few months of life are not a rehearsal. This is the real show. Children do not really have an opportunity to try to get it right later.”

Address to the students of the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies, University of Chicago: “Should Public Policy be Concerned with Early Childhood Development?” May 3, 1994.

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“There are a few people that I have met in my life that elicited such universal warmth and respect. It was not just his towering intellect, business acumen or insatiable curiosity that made him so remarkable; it was also his unfailing graciousness, good humor and generosity.

Like many others, I benefited from Irving’s guidance throughout the years that I knew him, and it is the way in which all of us aspire to live up to his example that will prove to be his lasting legacy.”

Barack Obama,
United States Senator

“I believe Irving hit the poverty problem on the head. Good programs and policies can greatly reduce poverty, and bad ones will severely increase poverty. Among the several ingredients of good programs, I give high priority

to investments in the education and health of children, especially young children. Without these investments, all subsequent efforts to alleviate poverty are doomed to fail. Irving appreciated this, and helped start and support

organizations and programs that contributed directly and indirectly to investments in children. For this everyone who knew him, or benefited from what he did, will be eternally grateful!”

Gary S. Becker, Ph.D.,
*1992 Nobel Laureate,
Economic Sciences
University Professor of
Economics, Graduate School
of Business and Sociology
The University of Chicago*

Irving B. Harris

1910–2004

A native of St. Paul, Minnesota, Irving B. Harris graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Yale University in 1931. Mr. Harris and his brother Neison founded the Toni Home Permanent Company which they sold to Gillette in 1948 for \$20 million. Mr. Harris served as Chairman of the Executive Committee and Director of the Pittway Corporation which was later sold to Honeywell Corporation in 2000 for \$2 billion. Mr. Harris served as Chairman of William Harris Investors and as Chairman of the Board of The Irving Harris Foundation. A supporter of the arts, Mr. Harris and his wife, Joan, gave generously to the city of Chicago, creating the Joan W. and Irving B. Harris Theatre for Music and Dance in Chicago's Millennium Park. In addition to his remarkable business successes and his philanthropic legacy, Mr. Harris was deeply

committed to early childhood development and to promoting the idea that all children must receive good care and nurturing from their earliest days if they are to succeed in school and throughout life. Mr. Harris authored a book and countless articles, served on numerous boards and delivered many speeches on the topic. He was both a financial and a philosophical catalyst in launching related initiatives. He created the Beethoven Project—which served as a model for Early Head Start. He also helped to create and to fund the Erikson Institute for Advanced Studies in Child Development, the Yale Child Study Center, the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago, Zero to Three: The National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families and the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

“Toward the end of his life, Irving was able to take much pride and comfort in the knowledge that a growing number of thoughtful people had come to understand the importance of the first three years of life. He often said that it took

twenty-five years for a new idea to win acceptance. He lived long enough to see his strong advocacy for early childhood making a difference.”

Joan Harris, *Chairman*
The Irving Harris Foundation

Ounce of Prevention Fund
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