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Democrats sketch childhood agenda

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Democrats will "set a new direction" by expanding health care for children, bolstering early childhood initiatives and investing in the young because this will reap great rewards in the future, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said yesterday at a national summit on children.

The California Democrat convened a daylong gathering of doctors, academics and other early childhood specialists, who shared scientific data on early learning and generally echoed Democrats' assertions about the rewards of investing in early childhood programs.

"We know that these investments in our children today pay off manyfold in later years. It makes good economic sense. It is also the right thing to do," said Mrs. Pelosi, adding that she wanted the advocates for children at the summit to be fully "armed" with scientific data.

Nobel laureate James Heckman, a University of Chicago economics professor and keynote speaker, said data show proof that "it's costly to wait" to educate children because the government will end up spending more money on adult literacy programs, job training and other efforts.

He said the long-term High/Scope Perry Preschool study shows that at-risk children enrolled in a high-quality preschool program eventually earned more money, owned homes in greater numbers and avoided welfare and jail more than their at-risk peers who never attended preschool.

Democratic presidential hopeful Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York has cited Mr. Heckman's work on the racial achievement gap as she proposed \$10 billion for a universal pre-kindergarten program.

Jack Shonkoff, a doctor and director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, said a greater focus should be placed on children's mental and emotional needs. He said professionals know how to treat mental and emotional problems in the very young, but "we're not channeling that knowledge."

He said a stable, nurturing environment is key. He also advocated more standards for early child care and investment in the earliest stages of child development.

Pat Levitt, a neuroscientist at Vanderbilt University, said brain development is so sensitive in infants and toddlers that experiences both positive and negative can have a permanent effect on emotional health and learning. Early interventions that use sound

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science can permanently improve a child's life, he said.

The summit also emphasized health care information as well as public-private partnerships. Several private-sector leaders explained how their companies help children in their communities.

Democrats circulated a list of legislative priorities that included increased investment in preschool initiatives and food stamps, expansion of health care and dental care for impoverished children, and a reversal of some Republican actions, such as a reduction in funds to help authorities enforce child support payments.

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