

Too Small to Fail: Lessons from the First Decade



Contents

<i>About Too Small to Fail</i>	3
A Leader in Data-Driven Innovation	4
Proven Impact	10
A Decade+ of Learnings	13
Sustained Leadership and Impact	15
A New Program Focus: The Changing Climate	17
Vision for the Future	19
Funders	21
Advisory Council Members	22
Endnotes	23



About *Too Small to Fail*

In 2013, Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, recognizing the ever-growing body of research on young children's early brain development, was concerned that the science was not making its way into the hands of parents and caregivers in actionable, easy-to-use ways. Building on her lifelong commitment to promoting young children's healthy development, Secretary Clinton spearheaded the launch of *Too Small to Fail* as a joint initiative of the Clinton Foundation and Next Generation, a California-based non-profit organization.

When Secretary Clinton started *Too Small to Fail*, she challenged her team to think outside the box, to be innovative, and to test a variety of new approaches to meet parents and caregivers where they are. Grounded in cutting-edge research, ***Too Small to Fail* is a public awareness and action campaign that provides parents and caregivers with information and tools to support early brain and language development.** Under the leadership of Secretary Clinton and Dr. Chelsea Clinton, Vice Chair of the Clinton Foundation and Chair of the Advisory Council, *Too Small to Fail* has piloted and scaled a range of national and local initiatives. Bolstered by unlikely partnerships across sectors, *Too Small to Fail* reaches and engages parents in new and unconventional ways to encourage talking, reading, and singing with young children starting at birth.

Through its work, *Too Small to Fail* has cultivated a broad coalition of early literacy champions among leaders from corporations, non-profit organizations, and professional associations and has built a robust, innovative network of community and state-level campaigns focused on early literacy. With clear evidence of scale, *Too Small to Fail's* approach has been validated by more than 20 evaluations demonstrating its effectiveness. **After engaging with *Too Small to Fail* programs, parents and caregivers report more frequent talking, reading, and singing with their children. Further, children engage in significantly more literacy-related activities.**

A Leader in Data-Driven Innovation

Too Small to Fail has focused its efforts in four primary areas:

1. **Unleashing innovation in communities;**
2. **Scaling what works through state governments and philanthropic support;**
3. **Piloting innovative collaborations with popular media; and**
4. **Leveraging the convening power of the Clinton Foundation to elevate issues, explore national partnerships, and catalyze solutions.**

Unleashing Innovation in Communities

In its second year, *Too Small to Fail* launched its first local “Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing” community campaigns in two flagship communities — Tulsa, OK, and Oakland, CA. The campaigns were designed to support parents with the knowledge and tools to boost their child’s early brain development. There were three primary campaign strategies:

- **People:** Engaging trusted messengers, such as pediatricians, early educators, librarians, and faith-based leaders, to share early learning messages with caregivers;
- **Places:** Transforming everyday spaces into learning-rich environments; and
- **Resources:** Distributing high-quality tools to support early literacy.



These strategies were paired with engaging creative materials developed by the renowned advertising agency Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, known for the iconic “Got Milk?” campaign. Materials were strategically placed throughout communities: on buses and billboards; in grocery stores, hospitals, Head Start centers, and more. The goal was to create a “surround sound” effect, reinforcing the messages parents were hearing from trusted messengers in everyday spaces.

After strong evaluation findings in Tulsa and Oakland that demonstrated that parents were engaging more with their children, *Too Small to Fail* created a community campaign guide to support other cities to launch similar efforts. A pivotal early decision was to make all campaign resources – including strategies, research, and creative assets – open-source, allowing for easy replication, scale, and adaptation based on local context.

Over the last decade, 39 communities across the country have launched and sustained local campaigns using *Too Small to Fail*’s frameworks, resources, and support — with more joining every year. This organic growth has been driven by word of mouth, without any investment in marketing or outreach.

To support communities, *Too Small to Fail* provided free consultation through one-on-one technical assistance, monthly office hours, and a robust online library of open-source materials and resources, accelerating scale and spread.

TALKING IS TEACHING COMMUNITIES

Too Small to Fail has partnered with communities across the country to launch local campaigns.



As demand from communities continued to grow, *Too Small to Fail* evolved its approach and strengthened its support for local communities in two key ways:

- **Launched the *Talking is Teaching* Peer Learning Collaborative**, a network that connects local campaigns to one another to share resources, exchange lessons learned, and collaborate; and
- **Redesigned the [Talking is Teaching website](#)** to improve usability and expand access to hundreds of open-source resources developed over the past decade.

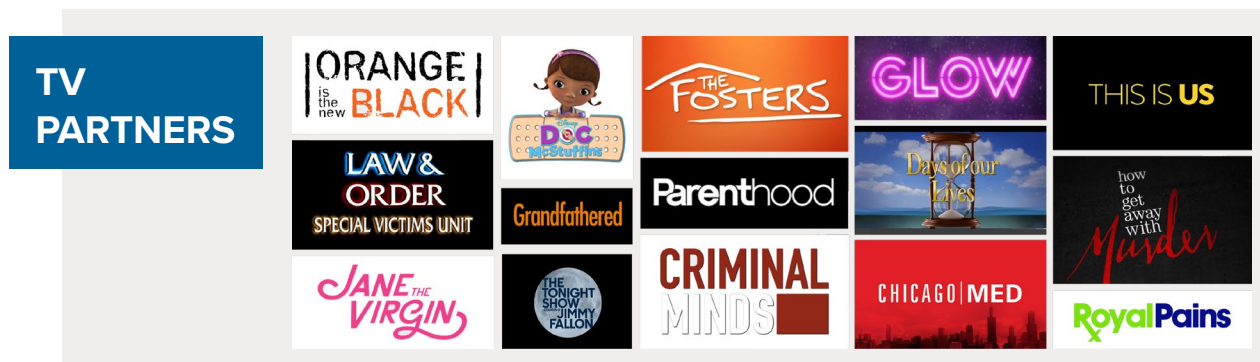
Scaling What Works through State Governments and Philanthropic Support

As more communities launched campaigns, state governments and private philanthropy began to take notice. *Too Small to Fail* has catalyzed the creation of three statewide campaigns in Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania, with a promising pilot in California. Funding for these campaigns includes public dollars in Michigan (from the state Department of Education) and New York (from the New York Council on Children and Families), and philanthropic support in Pennsylvania provided by a coalition of foundations. Initial funding for California has been provided through both the state Department of Social Services and philanthropy.

Piloting Innovative Collaborations with Popular Media

To effectively reach parents, *Too Small to Fail* turned to popular media — a powerful force in shaping public understanding and behavior around social issues.

Engaging Hollywood: In *Too Small to Fail*'s first year, Secretary Clinton and Dr. Clinton convened leading television executives, writers, and producers to explore how entertainment media could spotlight early brain and language development. Over the next five years, 15 television shows — including *Orange Is the New Black*, *Law & Order: SVU*, and *This Is Us* — integrated content and messages about early brain development and the importance of talking, reading, and singing with young children into their storylines, reaching an estimated 71 million viewers.



Partnering with Univision: To connect with Spanish-speaking families, *Too Small to Fail* collaborated with Univision — a media company widely recognized as a trusted source of educational information. Together, they launched a multi-platform campaign on early brain development, spanning news, public affairs, radio, online content, and reality programming. The campaign generated 800 million viewer impressions. The partnership also produced a two-part primetime telenovela, *La Fuerza de Creer*, which wove messages about brain and language development into a popular, dramatic storyline. All content included a call-to-action encouraging parents and caregivers to sign up for a text messaging program delivering bi-weekly tips to support early learning during simple, everyday moments.

Parents who subscribed to the *Too Small to Fail*/Univision text message program read to their children significantly more each day compared to parents who were not part of the program.¹

Leveraging the Convening Power of the Clinton Foundation

As an initiative of the Clinton Foundation, *Too Small to Fail* has leveraged the influence and convening power of the Clinton Foundation to launch innovative, cross-sector partnerships that reach and engage parents of young children at scale. These include:

Wash Time is Talk Time: Talking, Reading and Singing in Laundromats: Approximately 20 million U.S. households rely on coin laundromats, especially in urban and under-resourced communities. For families with young children, laundry visits often involve long periods of idle “dwell” time, presenting an untapped opportunity for learning. In its third year, *Too Small to Fail* partnered with the Coin Laundry Association, the nation’s leading laundromat membership organization, to launch a Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) Commitment to Action to distribute “Wash Time is Talk Time” early literacy tools and resources to 5,000 laundromats across the country — bringing tipsheets, posters, and conversation prompts into these everyday spaces.



To amplify impact, *Too Small to Fail* and the LaundryCares Foundation, the charitable arm of the Coin Laundry Association, co-created “Family Read, Play and Learn” spaces, environments where parents and caregivers and their children could engage in literacy activities together, featuring child-friendly furniture and educational toys from Lakeshore Learning, and children’s books from Scholastic. In addition, the LaundryCares Foundation and *Too Small to Fail* regularly host Free Laundry & Literacy Days in under-resourced communities across the country, enabling families to wash their clothes for free and children to engage in learning-rich activities and receive free books for building home libraries.

The partnership with the Coin Laundry Association has continued for more than a decade, with more than 350 laundromats transformed into family-friendly literacy spaces. Children in these spaces are 30 times more likely to engage in literacy-related activities compared to children in laundromats without these spaces.

Creating Joyful, Inclusive “Talking is Teaching”

Playgrounds: In 2015, *Too Small to Fail* also announced a CGI Commitment to Action in partnership with Landscape Structures Inc. (LSI), a leading U.S. playground manufacturer, and Inclusion Matters by Shane’s Inspiration, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating accessible playgrounds and supporting inclusive play for children with disabilities.

Too Small to Fail’s early learning panels and prompts have been incorporated into 1,500 playgrounds across the country.



Together, they announced the creation and launch of 20 literacy-themed playgrounds featuring “Let’s Talk About” panels with prompts designed to spark conversations and support early language development during play. Over time, the initiative expanded to include early STEM-focused panels, further enriching play spaces with opportunities for children and caregivers to explore science, technology, engineering, and math concepts.

Pediatricians Promote Reading with Children from Day One: In 2014, *Too Small to Fail* launched a CGI Commitment to Action in partnership with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) following the AAP’s groundbreaking policy statement recommending that pediatricians promote early literacy during primary care visits starting in infancy.

To support this recommendation, *Too Small to Fail* brought together the AAP, the non-profit organization Reach Out and Read, and Scholastic to equip pediatricians with tools to engage families. Together, the AAP and *Too Small to Fail* developed an online toolkit for pediatricians with tips and information on sharing early literacy messages with parents and caregivers of children ages 0-5. This toolkit was distributed to the AAP’s 62,000 pediatricians nationwide.

As part of the Commitment, Scholastic donated 500,000 children’s books which were distributed through Reach Out and Read to pediatric clinics, helping pediatricians reinforce the importance of daily reading and ensuring that families, particularly those in low-income and under-resourced communities, had access to critical educational resources.



Proven Impact

Parents and caregivers who engage with *Too Small to Fail* programs report talking, reading, and singing more with their children. Children are also engaging in significantly more literacy-related activities because of *Too Small to Fail* interventions.

Since its founding, *Too Small to Fail* has prioritized investments in research and evaluation to assess impact and continually strengthen its program models. The initiative has commissioned researchers from respected academic institutions, including Northwestern University, American University, University of California San Francisco, and New York University, as well as research firms such as SRI and Public Profit, to conduct independent studies. To date, 20 independent, third-party evaluations have demonstrated that *Too Small to Fail*'s strategies deliver meaningful and measurable impact.

Unprecedented Reach



5,000 laundromats



7,500+ trained trusted messengers



1,500 playgrounds



1,433,077 children's books



39 community campaigns



3 statewide campaigns



170+ million radio PSA
impressions



150+ million social media
impressions



800 million Univision viewer
impressions

Engaging Trusted Messengers

- **Pediatricians:** After a visit with a *Too Small to Fail*-trained pediatrician, 79% of parents reported talking, reading, and singing more often with their children.²
 - 61% of parents who met with a *Too Small to Fail*-trained pediatrician about the importance of talking, reading, and singing with their baby said they had learned something new about the importance of early literacy. About two-thirds of parents reported that they were planning to change how they interact with their baby.³
- **Librarians:** In laundromats featuring literacy spaces, librarians boosted engagement with both children and parents.
 - When librarians were present, children spent an average of 47 minutes in the literacy space compared to 29 minutes when children were there without a librarian.⁴

Transforming Spaces into Learning-Rich Environments

- **Laundromats:** Children engaged in 30 times more literacy-related activities in laundromats with transformed spaces compared to laundromats without them.⁵
- **Social service agency waiting rooms:** The percentage of children reading rose from 8% to 25% after the waiting rooms were transformed into learning-rich environments.⁶
- **Playgrounds:** Parents and caregivers were significantly more likely to engage in language interactions with their children on playgrounds with *Too Small to Fail* conversational prompts and signs compared to those without them.⁷

Distributing High-Quality Tools and Resources

- 84% of parents reported noticeable changes in their child's behavior — such as increased talking and reading — after receiving a *Too Small to Fail* toolkit from their pediatrician. 89% of Spanish-speaking parents were even more likely to notice changes compared to 81% of English-speaking parents.⁸
- After receiving *Too Small to Fail* materials from pediatricians, 96% of parents reported using the resources with their children up to twelve weeks later.⁹

Harnessing the Power of Media

- Subscribers of *Too Small to Fail*'s text messaging program with Univision were more than twice as likely to talk, read, sing, and engage in simple math activities with their children compared to the national average for Hispanic parents.¹⁰
- Parents enrolled in the text message program also reported reading with their children significantly more each day than parents who did not subscribe.¹¹
- Watching television shows with embedded messages about early brain and language development positively influenced parents' views about the importance of reading with their children starting in infancy, as well as the importance of singing with their children.¹²



A Decade+ of Learnings

Through 20 independent, third-party evaluations, *Too Small to Fail* has uncovered powerful insights about what drives meaningful change in early literacy. These findings not only validate *Too Small to Fail*'s multifaceted approach but also offer valuable lessons that can be used to inform the broader early childhood field. Key learnings include:

- **A multifaceted approach magnifies impact.** Each of *Too Small to Fail*'s strategies has proven effective on its own — but together they are even more powerful. Laundromats serve as a strong example of this integrated model. In transformed laundromats, children engage in significantly more literacy-related activities, interacting with children's books and other high-quality educational resources.¹³ The presence of librarians further amplified impact by modeling developmentally appropriate practices and encouraging caregiver involvement.
- **Trusted messengers are the “secret sauce.”** While high-quality resources and transformed environments are important, trusted messengers consistently drive deeper engagement. In Tulsa, parents who received both text messages about their baby's development and a visit from a nurse educator were more likely to engage regularly in early literacy behaviors compared to those who only received texts.¹⁴
- **Context matters!** How families respond to *Too Small to Fail*'s transformed spaces depends on key factors — why they are there, the amount of “dwell” time they have, and their state of mind. *Too Small to Fail* found that parents and caregivers engaged most with their children when visiting the playground — potentially because they visited that space for recreation, play, and downtime. Parents and caregivers were least likely to engage at the grocery store, as they were often trying to get in and out as quickly as possible.
 - Children engaged in a significant number of literacy-related activities in spaces where there was a lot of “dwell” time such as the laundromat, the social services agency waiting room, and the health clinic. However, there was not significant parent-child engagement in these spaces — likely because parents had tasks to complete while they were there such as doing laundry and filling out paperwork, or they were just eager to take a moment for themselves.
 - Parents and children did not actively engage in early literacy activities in homeless shelters, likely due to caregivers' level of stress, occupation with other tasks, and a lack of trusted messengers to prompt engagement.

- ***Too Small to Fail*'s strategies also equip caregivers to support early math skills.** *Too Small to Fail*'s early math pilots in clinics in Oakland and San Francisco, and at Head Start Centers in Tulsa, proved that the strategies are also effective for early math. At Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, 97% of caregivers who participated in an early math initiative reported using the provided math materials 8-12 weeks after receiving them.¹⁵ In Oakland, 55% of caregivers reported the same;¹⁶ and in Tulsa, 70% reported an increase in their child's interest in math since receiving the materials.¹⁷



- **Local innovation drives scalable solutions.** Community partners have adapted *Too Small to Fail*'s core strategies to meet local needs — often leading to broader adoption. In Muskegon, MI, a campaign partner worked with Goodwill — a location frequented by local families — to transform three stores into playful learning environments with signage, staff training, and book giveaways. 25% of shoppers who were surveyed said they had not connected talking, reading, and singing to brain development until encountering the campaign. 68% of respondents said their shopping experience inspired them to engage in more early brain activities with their children.¹⁸ The success led to expansion in two additional counties, resulting in ten transformed Goodwill stores, and inspired a similar initiative in Pittsburgh.
- **Engaging Hollywood is an effective strategy in reaching and engaging parents at scale, but messages must be carefully crafted.** A remarkable portion of parents — at least one in five — were reached by *Too Small to Fail* messages embedded in popular TV shows. This is a testament to the incredible power of a Hollywood strategy, through which large numbers of parents can be reached at once. Yet, to be used effectively to raise awareness and impact behavior, understanding baseline awareness is essential. For example, the vast majority of parents said they already knew that talking and reading to children was very important to the development of language skills. Thus, *Too Small to Fail*'s general messages did not change their knowledge or views. Yet parents did not know that singing to children or reading to them starting in infancy was important for language development, resulting in significant shifts in knowledge after viewing the show (14% and 11% respectively).¹⁹
- **Univision proves the potential of a powerful and trusted media brand.** *Too Small to Fail*'s eight-year partnership with Univision yielded particularly strong results among Spanish-speaking families. The network, a trusted source for parenting and education, helped deliver a multi-platform campaign that reached hundreds of thousands of parents. Two-thirds of parents in the text messaging program reported acting on the tips and activities — twice the rate reported by Hispanic families nationally.²⁰

Sustained Leadership and Impact

Too Small to Fail has done more than deliver effective programs. It has helped organizations build capacity, sustain leadership, create new market opportunities, and spark “aha” moments and meaningful shifts in thinking and behaviors.

In addition to focusing on programmatic outcomes, *Too Small to Fail* has recognized that engaging with partners and leveraging the Clinton Foundation’s unique assets can drive long term growth, sustainability, and scale. Key ways that *Too Small to Fail* has driven lasting impact include:

- **Elevating Brand Equity and Informing Social Impact Priorities.** *Too Small to Fail*’s longstanding partnership with the Coin Laundry Association (CLA) has helped establish early childhood development as the core social impact priority for the organization. This collaboration has strengthened the CLA’s brand and brought national recognition to its leadership. In 2020, the CLA received the American Society of Association Executives’ “Power of A” Summit Award for its early literacy convenings — and, in 2024, CLA and its charitable arm, the LaundryCares Foundation, received the Library of Congress Literacy Award, the nation’s highest honor for literacy leadership.
- **Catalyzing New Market Opportunities.** Through its collaboration with Landscape Structures Inc., *Too Small to Fail* helped create an entirely new product category: early literacy panels for playgrounds to prompt parent and caregiver-child conversations. These co-created elements have become a valuable part of the company’s product offerings, positioning LSI as both a leader in play and an advocate for early learning.
- **Helping State Partners Achieve Broader Goals.** *Too Small to Fail* has supported state partners in achieving broader outcomes beyond early literacy.
 - In New York, *Too Small to Fail* partnered with the Council on Children and Families (CCFNY) to launch a statewide media campaign. While the campaign promoted early learning messages, it also drove parents of young children to the state’s parent portal app — a resource for finding childcare, health services, secure vaccine information, and parenting support — and website. CCFNY used *Too Small to Fail*’s creative materials over several years in high-traffic public spaces, including on billboards, in subways, buses, malls, convenience stores, laundromats, salons, and health centers. Materials were translated into 150 languages, and in 2023, the campaign’s online media strategy resulted in more than 1 billion viewer impressions.

- In California, *Too Small to Fail* partnered with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to transform waiting rooms in social service agencies into learning-rich environments. In addition to promoting early literacy, the transformation was designed to make families feel more welcome and comfortable in the spaces, to prompt return visits and use of public services. An evaluation found that more than two-thirds of parents and caregivers reported feeling “very comfortable” and found the new spaces welcoming.²¹ The initiative is now expanding to additional counties across the state.



A New Program Focus:

The Changing Climate

As *Too Small to Fail* continues to scale its work and sharpen its focus on early brain development, emerging science continues to shape and inform the program's approach. One of the most urgent and evolving areas of concern is the impacts of climate change on the developing child and maternal health, including before and after pregnancy.

At the CGI 2022 Annual Meeting, climate resilience and sustainability was a key priority. Encouraged by CGI, *Too Small to Fail* reviewed the latest research, which revealed a clear and alarming connection between the changing climate and negative outcomes for maternal and child health, as well as early brain and developmental outcomes. This realization marked a turning point for the team, recognizing that supporting young children's healthy development must now include addressing environmental threats like prolonged and excessive heat, air pollution, and extreme weather events.

In response, *Too Small to Fail*, in partnership with CGI, has hosted five convenings since 2022 to better understand and advance solutions at the nexus of climate change, early childhood development, and maternal birth equity. These convenings brought together leaders from philanthropy, early childhood, climate science, public health, media, business, and government to discuss the research, highlight promising solutions, and identify opportunities for cross-sector partnerships.

"We can't effectively work on early childhood education without addressing the impact of climate change on pregnant women and children."

– Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, May 2024



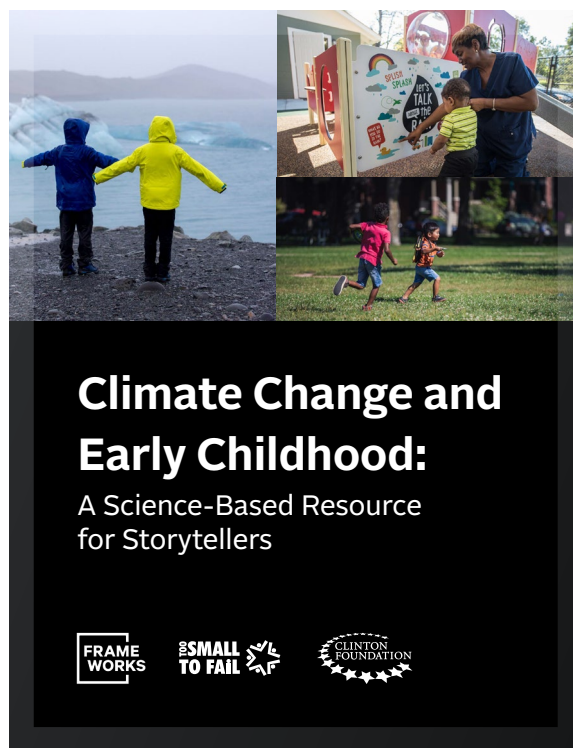
One key opportunity identified through these convenings is the need for a compelling, widely shared narrative to raise awareness and urgency among policymakers, business leaders, and the general public.

Building on its past success engaging Hollywood executives, writers, and producers, *Too Small to Fail* is now focused on leveraging popular media to elevate a positive and unified narrative about the impact of climate change on young children's brain and healthy development and maternal-child health.

In 2023, *Too Small to Fail* commissioned the FrameWorks Institute — a leading communications strategies think tank — to develop a new science-based storytelling guide: [Climate Change and Early Childhood: A Science-Based Resource for Storytellers](#).

The playbook launched in 2024 at a *Too Small to Fail* convening. Secretary Clinton then introduced it to more than 150 television executives, writers, and producers in Hollywood, urging them to incorporate content about young children and climate change into their storylines and to use *Too Small to Fail* as a trusted resource on the issue. The response was overwhelmingly positive, generating multiple press stories and interest from the Hollywood community.

Building on this momentum, *Too Small to Fail* is now implementing a targeted outreach strategy to engage not only the entertainment industry, but also leaders in publishing, journalism, and social media to expand public understanding and urgency around this critical issue.



Too Small to Fail's Vision for the Future

Since its founding, *Too Small to Fail* has played a critical role in catalyzing a national conversation about early brain development. By translating scientific research into practical, everyday actions for parents, piloting and scaling innovative cross-sector partnerships, and equipping partners to create impactful programs, the program has leveraged the influence of the Clinton Foundation to drive meaningful change.

Looking ahead, *Too Small to Fail* remains deeply committed to its mission: to pilot, scale, and sustain effective approaches that support young children's early brain and language development.

Yet over the past decade, new and significant vulnerabilities and challenges continue to emerge, threatening children's brain and healthy development. These include the impact of the changing climate on maternal and child health, widespread economic hardship, the exponential rise of digital technology, which is reshaping how children learn and grow, and the unmet need for quality childcare.



Additionally, following the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents have continued to struggle with mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness — and children’s educational outcomes are at their lowest point in decades. Exacerbating these issues is political and cultural polarization and the deep concern about the potential dismantling of established policies and systems that are essential to ensuring children have the supports and resources they need to flourish.

To meet this moment, *Too Small to Fail* is expanding its efforts to create and elevate a powerful, unifying narrative — one that calls attention to the issues facing caregivers and young children today, combining the emerging science and the real-life experiences of families, and centers hope and resiliency. These strategies build on *Too Small to Fail*’s deep expertise and relationships, and the lessons learned since its founding.

In the decade ahead, *Too Small to Fail* will continue to harness the unique assets of the Clinton Foundation — its convening power, strength in catalyzing cross-sector partnerships, and ability to elevate issues through popular media — to advance the healthy development of children. The initiative will keep sparking “aha” moments, building meaningful sustained collaborations, and elevating awareness about the challenges that children and families face today.



“Hopefully this is just the beginning of a lot of urgent and accountable and activating and inclusive work together.”

– Chelsea Clinton, May 2024

Both strategies build on *Too Small to Fail*’s deep expertise, relationships, and lessons learned since its founding that have been summarized throughout this report. Over the next decade, *Too Small to Fail* will continue to leverage its unique assets as an initiative of the Clinton Foundation — its convening power, partnerships with multi-sector stakeholders, ability to elevate issues through popular media, and engaging with communities — ensuring that all of this work is anchored through the voices, expertise, and lived experiences of the diverse families we serve.

Our Sincere Appreciation and Thanks

Carrying out this work requires resources, expertise, and capacity across program design, implementation, measurement, strategy, and fundraising. None of it would be possible without the support of *Too Small to Fail*'s funders. *Too Small to Fail* especially appreciates their commitment to thought partnership and philanthropic risk-taking — investing in pilot approaches, evaluations, and the learning required to scale what works.

Too Small to Fail is also grateful to its Advisory Council, a dedicated group of cross-sector leaders who have guided and championed this work since day one.

Finally, the Clinton Foundation is deeply appreciative of two incredible organizations, without whom *Too Small to Fail* would not have been possible. We are grateful to Next Generation, the founding partner of *Too Small to Fail*, and the Opportunity Institute, the partner which co-led *Too Small to Fail* for several years, for their vision, leadership, and commitment to children and families' well-being.

Too Small to Fail Funders

Adirondack Foundation	Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation	Scott Foundation
A.L. Mailman Family Foundation	Innovate Family Foundation	Sherwood Foundation
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