



Matthew Melmed: Nonprofit Executive

From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, published in 2000, was the “right report at the right time,” said Matthew Melmed, executive director of ZERO TO THREE. “*Neurons* for the first time pulled all the science together and propelled it into the larger world. It helped make the case to the broader public that there *was* a science of early childhood development.”

In terms of its place among the scholarly works of the early childhood development field, Melmed sees *Neurons* as an important compendium. “It compiled and synthesized the knowledge base and gave it the seal of approval of the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council,” he said. “That was its unique contribution.”

In fact, Melmed said, the report “helped all of us better appreciate the state of the research and pointed to new directions in terms of our look at future research and policy.”

For ZERO TO THREE, *Neurons* helped the organization better make its the case that children’s earliest years matter. For its target audience--the public, parents, professionals and policy makers—this included “some who were not aware or who were even skeptical.”

Neurons was a major factor in raising awareness outside of scientific circles. “We know from our polling that people now understand that the early years are important,” Melmed said. “They may not know exactly why, but they get that these years are important and that they need to pay attention to them.”

Beyond raising awareness, *Neurons* encouraged people to talk about what was needed in social policy in health, education, law enforcement, the court systems and more. “*Neurons* helped to create one of the many bridges that were needed to policy makers; to affirm what they needed to be doing for at-risk kids. It helped advance the policy agenda,” Melmed said.



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Matthew Melmed is executive director of ZERO TO THREE, the national nonprofit organization that informs, trains, and supports professionals, policy makers and parents to improve the health and development of infants, toddlers, and their families.

“Policy makers are looking for the answer to what they should do,” Melmed said. “I don’t think *Neurons* tells them what they should do, but *Neurons* creates the environment in which a policy maker will ask: ‘What should I do?’ It moved them from lack of interest and, possibly, disbelief, to a place where [early childhood development] is a legitimate discussion.” When research from the neurosciences was added to clinical and experiential findings, the arguments for policy considerations could no longer be ignored.

“The nature of the policy process is messy and fragmented,” said Melmed, who also is the first elected chair of the Children’s Leadership Council, a coalition of 57 leading national policy and advocacy organizations working together to improve the health, education and well-being of children and youth. “What *Neurons* did was help create a more common understanding of why we need to pay attention and why we need to invest [in programs for babies and toddlers]. It didn’t change the nature of the policy process, but it raised awareness of the possible roles of policy, and it created more

champions. It helped lead to investments and policy changes in ways that were important but the policy landscape remains very much uneven today. “

As for building even more awareness of the fact that early experiences matter, Melmed is practical. It may be among ZERO TO THREE’s mission, but he said human development is complex and doesn’t lend itself to mass media campaigns that advance a simple idea.

Instead, Melman said, “What we need is a transformational awareness: yes, the early years are important; yes, we need to have programs in place that support parents to do the best that they can by their babies. And, particularly for those babies that don’t get what they need, we need — as a society — to be able to supplement what their parents can’t provide. Whether that lends itself to one big public awareness campaign, I’m not sure. My fear is it’s not so simple. “

For More Information

Copies of the report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (888) 624-8373 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free pdf copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu.

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