



## Early learning costs are worth it

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By

By Ted J. Kleisner

In my 17 years of experience with Hershey Entertainment & Resorts Co., I have heard many people begin a conversation with the simple phrase "My first job was at Hersheypark." Those are thrilling words to hear, especially because they come from people from such a diverse background who have progressed, professionally, into so many areas.



Early childhood education is critical.

Clearly, that first summer job for a company that prides itself on world-class service has a powerful, long-lasting effect. Our young employees eventually help form a component part of central Pennsylvania's employee base.

It's clear that many who've become business and community leaders learned early on that "work" is not a four-letter word, and that there's satisfaction in a day's wage. Young employees learn to deal with people and embrace the spirit of cooperation.

My company is proud to hire nearly 5,000 people every summer, but our screening process is rigorous. We match the candidates, more than one-third of them teens, to our open positions from nearly 12,000 applicants. The applicants who get these good summer jobs are those who come to us already equipped with essential skills — the abilities to smile and say thank

you, make change, show up for their shifts and communicate with co-workers.

Naturally, many young people learn these skills from their parents. However, I also agree with a number of Pennsylvania businesspeople who see quality early childhood education as a critical factor in grooming job-ready young people.

Science tells us that children undergo rapid and life-altering brain development from birth through age 5. With positive learning experiences, they build the foundation for communications, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork as well as language and math. If they lack enrichment, they will enter school trailing academically and socially. Often, those learning gaps can't be overcome, and studies show that children who fall behind by fourth grade might never catch up.

Hershey Entertainment & Resorts is in a unique position among businesses. We are owned by the Milton Hershey School Trust and are motivated by our obligation to provide support in perpetuity for Milton Hershey School, which is the world's largest school and home for children in need.

The core of our mission has always had as its focus the children of Milton Hershey School. They come from some of the most difficult environments and circumstances you can imagine. We know the impact that a nurturing, enriching environment can make in their lives. And we recognize that the same applies to all children.

Early learning costs money, but if we don't make the investment while children are young, the costs become much greater later on. The same research showing the academic benefits of quality early childhood education also shows that a lack of early learning increases the likelihood of academic failure, dropping out of high school and teen pregnancy. Those stumbling blocks often lead to crime, substance abuse and reliance on public assistance.

All businesses need access to creative, reliable employees, and we are working to assure a vibrant talent pool, now and in the future. At Hershey Entertainment & Resorts, our employee-partners are the lifeblood of our company. We earn our reputation as a leader in our business categories because of our people who have demonstrated that they have the skills to serve our visitors.

I don't believe that those skills are innate. They develop when parents and teachers work together to immerse children in an environment of enrichment. As Pennsylvanians, we can point with pride to our support for quality early childhood education. Our state's system to fund and set high standards for early learning is considered a model for the nation.



Ted Kleisner

However, these benefits don't reach everyone. In Dauphin County, 60 percent of children under age 5 live in economically at-risk families, but only 40 percent participate in quality, publicly funded early learning

programs. In Cumberland County, 45 percent of youngsters are at risk, but only 28 percent receive early learning services. In Perry County, the gap stretches to 72 percent at risk, 26 percent receiving quality early learning.

Even in an economic downturn, we must redouble our efforts to assure quality early education for every child. We can't wait to invest in today's kids — the future cost of that neglect is too high. Investing in quality early childhood education saves money, enriches our young people, strengthens our future workforce and assures economic development for years to come.

**Ted J. Kleisner is chairman of the board & CEO of Hershey Entertainment & Resorts Co. He also is a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission.**

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