

# NO SMALL MATTER

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## PRESS KIT

**TRT: 74 minutes**

**FILM TITLE**

*No Small Matter*

**LOGLINE** (72 words)

*No Small Matter* is the first feature documentary to explore the most overlooked, underestimated, and powerful force for change in America today: early childhood education. Through poignant stories and surprising humor, the film lays out the overwhelming evidence for the importance of the first five years, and reveals how our failure to act on that evidence has resulted in an everyday crisis for American families, and a slow-motion catastrophe for the country.

**SYNOPSIS**

**Short (283 words)**

*No Small Matter* is built from stories of real children, families, and teachers, illustrating the impact of high-quality early childhood experiences. We meet parents who are struggling to do their best for their kids, incredible teachers who model what early childhood classrooms should and could be like, and children learning and developing in real time. These positive, hopeful stories serve as motivational tools in both the film and the *No Small Matter* campaign: Change is necessary, critical, and attainable if we put our minds to it.

The film is also firmly grounded in science, opening up the “black box” of what’s happening inside children’s brains with exciting, stimulating animation and the voices of compelling scientists, physicians, and ECE experts. Drawing on the work of economists such as James Heckman, and the latest research in brain imaging and child development, we break down complicated scientific details into layman’s terms, demystifying prevailing ideas that hinder our thinking about children’s behavior, and paving the way for us all to see what children truly need to thrive. When it comes to understanding the incredible dynamism of how a child’s mind develops, seeing is believing, and these illustrations drive home the critical nature of these early years.

*No Small Matter* is unique in the way it dives deep into the complicated science, history, and sociology that has brought our early care and education system to where it is today, but does so without sacrificing entertainment or emotional impact. From a comic cameo by Cookie Monster to the tearful testimonial of an amazing preschool teacher making poverty-level wages, the film has the power to move audiences in ways that a policy fact sheet or op-ed piece simply can't do.

## **Long (1,271 words)**

There are 24 million children under the age of six in America today. You know how many of them have to be taken care of all day, every day by an adult?

All of them.

Who provides that care—and how they do it—is the most overlooked, underestimated, and potentially game-changing issue in America today. Directed by an award-winning team of filmmakers, *No Small Matter* is the first feature documentary to lay out the overwhelming evidence for the importance of the first five years, and to reveal how our failure to act on that evidence has resulted in an everyday crisis for American families, and a slow-motion catastrophe for our country.

Over the last twenty years, a revolution in our understanding of early childhood has led to one, inescapable conclusion: the experiences we have in the first five years of life shape our brains and bodies in profound and lasting ways—it's no longer about "nature versus nurture", but how the two work together to shape who we become. Using cutting-edge technology, neuroscientists like the ones at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences (I-LABS) at the University of Washington in Seattle are starting to unlock the secrets of the infant brain, recording in real time how hearing a song, seeing a face, or feeling a touch changes the brain. What the research has revealed is that it's not flashcards or fancy apps that help build a healthy brain—it's everyday, back-and-forth interactions with loving, supportive adults. In the first five years, being taught and being taken care of are one in the same, and "school" is basically anywhere with anyone.

But even as we've come to understand what kids truly need to thrive, social, economic, and demographic changes have made it harder and harder for parents to give it to them. In 1950, just 12% of all moms with children under age five were in the workplace; today, it's 65%, a huge change, with no equivalent shift in public policy or attitudes. Wages have stagnated, work schedules are unpredictable, there's less support from extended family, and education is increasingly important. In order to make ends meet, parents desperately need to find a place to put their kids. But today, in 28 states, childcare for an infant costs more than tuition at a public college, and just 10% of the childcare in America is considered high quality. The stress of America's "Wild West" approach to childcare takes an enormous financial and emotional toll on families, and it's all happening while the child's brain is growing faster than it ever will again (from 25% of its adult size at birth to 90% by age five), making over a million neural connections every second. Laments one mother in the film, "It's not supposed to be this way."

But because it is, an array of other problems follow, many of which have only recently come to be linked to disparities in 0-5. Higher income parents have more money and

time to invest in their kids' early care and education; as a result, kids from wealthier families start kindergarten up to two years ahead of low-income kids, a gap in opportunity that becomes a gap in achievement, which only reinforces the cycle of poverty. Kids who fall behind in school are more likely to drop out, and high school dropouts are eight times more likely than graduates to end up in prison. As John Wetzel, the Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections tells us, "It's really simple. True criminal justice reform is investing in early childhood education." It's a sentiment echoed by a trio of retired military commanders, who note that an astonishing 71% of all Americans between the ages of 17 and 25 can't qualify for military service, either because they're too poorly educated, they have a criminal record, or they're physically unfit. To them, our failure to invest in early childhood education is a full-blown national security problem.

More haunting still is the devastating impact of "toxic stress". When a young child experiences constant, inescapable stress—violence, abuse, neglect, parental drug use or mental illness—and there's no supportive adult to protect them from it, their fight-or-flight response goes haywire, flooding their brain and body with powerful hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Over time, these chemicals start to corrode the wiring of the brain and damage nearly every other system in the child's developing body. In the short term, toxic stress affects a child's ability to learn, control their emotions, and get along with others. Remarkably, however, its shrapnel-like impact can show up years, even decades down the line, in health and behavior problems. As Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, a California pediatrician and currently the state's Surgeon General, declares, "Experiencing high doses of early adversity doubles your risk of seven out of the ten leading causes of death in the United States", including heart disease, diabetes, and COPD. While toxic stress can affect any child, rich or poor, low-income kids are especially vulnerable to it. Today, that's nearly half the children under six in America.

*No Small Matter* brings the case for early childhood education to life in a variety of ways, from high-end 2d graphics, animation, and YouTube videos, to expert interviews and unexpected doses of humor (like Cookie Monster singing "Total Eclipse of the Heart"). But it's the memorable characters that give the story its emotional punch. Rather than focusing on families in the most dire or extreme circumstances (which all too often only serves to reinforce stereotypes about whom these problems affect, and can leave audiences feeling like the solution is simply a heroic effort from an extraordinary individual), the film highlights the stories of ordinary Americans and their day-to-day struggles: a middle-class, African-American couple in Yorktown, Virginia, searching for affordable, high-quality childcare for their 7-month-old; a white couple in Henderson, Nevada, struggling to do the best by their four-year-old son despite the stresses of minimum wage jobs and irregular schedules; an Hispanic mother of four in Waco, Texas who finds hope in a free program that combines high-quality childcare with parenting and job training classes; and an African-American mother and U.S. Army sergeant whose four-year-old daughter is thriving in a preschool classroom subsidized by the military.

As with all early learning settings, the success of that classroom is the result of the relationships between the adults and the children. Like the kids, audiences will fall in love with Ms. Giannini, the wry, tattooed, lead teacher of the "Yellow Room", only to be heartbroken to learn that she's leaving at the end of the school year because she simply can't make ends meet, even with a second job as a bartender. The early learning workforce is among the most poorly paid in the country, making less on average than dog walkers and parking attendants. Ms. Giannini's departure is a stark reminder that,

first and foremost, investing in young children means investing in the people who teach and take care of them when their families can't.

*No Small Matter* is unusual for an issue documentary in that there's no real villain—unlike battles against Big Ag or Big Pharma, there's no “Big Small Child” standing in the way of progress. Instead, the film is more investment brief than exposé, an argument that early childhood education is both the most powerful and the most plausible solution we have to begin to address a host of American problems.

Emotional, entertaining, and ultimately inspiring, *No Small Matter* will change the way audiences see the world, and in the process, help turn early childhood education into the grown-up issue it deserves to be.

## **TRAILER**

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## **CAST & CREW**

### **About Kindling Group**

Kindling Group creates highly crafted documentary media with a keen eye for story and a deep commitment to impact beyond the screen. Kindling films are more than entertainment; they are vehicles for social change, illuminating an issue and calling the audience to action. Kindling's team brings a unique background in film and documentary production, digital engagement and traditional organizing. We embrace a fast-changing world of storytelling — combining the artistry of award-winning films with innovative strategies that take media and impact across platforms, genres, and technologies. Kindling Group is a 501(c3) nonprofit founded in 2002 by Danny Alpert, and has produced over 10 hours of award-winning documentaries for public tv, as well as innovative digital projects, such as CPB's Veterans Coming Home and the forthcoming ITVS series *Pulling the Thread*.

### **About Siskel/Jacobs Productions**

Siskel/Jacobs Productions (SJP) is a Chicago-based documentary production company that seeks to tell compelling stories with integrity, complexity, emotion, and humor. Co-founders Jon Siskel and Greg Jacobs produced and directed the documentary feature *Louder Than a Bomb*, which received a perfect 100% score from rottentomatoes.com, won the 2011 Humanitas Prize for documentaries, and aired nationally as part of the Oprah Winfrey Network's “OWN Documentary Club.” The film has helped Young Chicago Authors, the non-profit that created and runs the Louder Than a Bomb youth poetry festival, seed “LTAB”-style events in fifteen cities and counting, and garner national and international attention.

In 2008, SJP produced the groundbreaking History Channel documentary *102 Minutes That Changed America*, which won three Primetime Emmys, including Outstanding Nonfiction Program, and has since been seen by more than thirty million viewers in over 150 countries. SJP has also produced shows that have aired on PBS, Discovery Channel, and the National Geographic Channel, including *Witness: Katrina*, which won the 2011 News and Documentary Emmy for Outstanding Historical Programming.

### Executive Producer

- **Alfre Woodard:** Alfre Woodard was born on November 8, 1952 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the youngest of three children of Constance, a homemaker, and Marion H. Woodard, an interior designer. She was named by her godmother, who claimed she saw a vision of Alfre's name written out in gold letters. A former high school cheerleader and track star, she got the acting bug after being persuaded to audition for a school play by a nun at her school. She went on to study acting at Boston University and enjoyed a brief stint on Broadway before moving to Los Angeles, California. She got her first break in [Remember My Name](#) (1978) which also starred [Jeff Goldblum](#). She lives in Santa Monica, California with her husband, writer [Roderick M. Spencer](#), and their two adopted children: Mavis and Duncan. She was named one of the Most Beautiful People in America by People Magazine.

### Co-Directors

- **Danny Alpert, Co-Director:** Danny Alpert is a director, editor, and producer. In 2002, his documentary work was nominated for both Academy and national Emmy Awards. His films have aired on PBS, HBO and A&E and at festivals around the world.

Alpert was Series Director and Executive Producer on *The Calling*, a groundbreaking documentary series that shares the journeys of Muslim, Christian and Jewish Americans who have decided to enter the clergy. The series aired nationally on PBS' acclaimed series *Independent Lens* in December 2010. His previous film, *A Doula Story*, about a remarkable woman who empowers disadvantaged pregnant teenagers with the skills and confidence to become loving mothers, aired on PBS stations across the nation. Alpert also directed *A History of God*, a two-hour documentary special for A&E Networks, based on the bestseller by British theologian Karen Armstrong. He co-produced and edited *Legacy*, a feature length documentary for HBO, which was nominated for a 2001 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, a National Emmy for Best Documentary and was an official selection at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival. From 1994 to 1997, he produced *No Time to be a Child*, a three-part series that aired nationally on PBS and was nominated for a national Emmy Award.

- **Greg Jacobs, Writer/Co-Director:** Greg Jacobs co-founded the Chicago-based television and documentary production company Siskel/Jacobs Productions in 2005. Prior to Siskel Jacobs Productions, he served as VP/Chief Creative Officer at Towers Productions, where he oversaw the content of more than two hundred documentaries on five different networks, including award-winning shows and series for A&E, History, Discovery, The Weather Channel, and CNN. A graduate of Yale University, Greg has a master's degree in history from Ohio State, and is the author of *Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools*. He is also a 2016 [New America](#) fellow.

- **Jon Siskel, Co-Director:** Jon Siskel co-founded the Chicago-based television and documentary production company Siskel/Jacobs Productions in 2005. Prior to Siskel Jacobs Production, he was executive producer and co-creator of the series “Fake Out”, which ran for two seasons on Court TV. He also produced shows for the A&E series *Investigative Reports* and Biography, and his work has been shown on the Travel Channel, Discovery, and History. Jon serves on the board of directors of Free Spirit Media, a Chicago-based youth media organization.

## Producers

- **Rachel Pikelny, Producer:** Rachel Pikelny is the founder of Nyla Pictures. From 2014 to 2019, she served as Director of Production at Siskel/Jacobs Productions, where she produced two feature documentaries, *No Small Matter* and *The Road Up*, and directed and produced the short film *Grace*. Prior to joining SJP, Rachel was affiliated with Kartemquin Films, where she collaborated on five feature-length documentaries, including *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* and *A Good Man*. She has also produced shows that have aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network, CNBC, and A&E.
- **Laura Fallsgraff, Co-Producer & Campaign Director:** Laura Fallsgraff is the Director of Engagement at Kindling Group, a nonprofit production company, leading strategy and impact for feature films and digital campaigns. Laura honed her organizing skills as a digital producer on President Obama’s re-election campaign in 2012, experience she is thrilled to couple with her passion for documentary film. At Kindling Group, she has led campaigns on issues ranging from early education to veteran reintegration to homelessness, and her day-to-day can range from managing a screening on Capitol Hill to leading a brain trust to editing a video for Facebook. She has led impact for award-winning films including *No Small Matter* and *Radical Grace* (Hot Docs, AFI Docs), as well as video campaigns with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, ITVS, and prominent foundations. In 2017, she premiered her directorial debut, *The 39th*, a short about a grassroots political campaign in her Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago.

## Talent

- **Rachel Giannini, Featured Preschool Teacher:** Rachel Giannini is an educator, an early childhood advocate, and a video blog host for *No Small Matter*, as well as the Chicago Children's Museum. Rachel has been published in The New York Times, Child Care Exchange, and Chicago Parent. Her adventures can be heard on Kids Stuff Podcast and Hi Mama. Rachel has a MFA in Museum Education from the University of Illinois, Chicago. She is the Deputy Digital Director for the Chicago Children's Museum and a volunteer hospital magician for Open Heart Magic.

## DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

**“Duh!”**

*But seriously folks: When people ask us, “Why a film about early learning?” that’s about all we have to say. As you’ll see in the film, early learning has such explosive potential to shape children’s futures, and reshape our society, it’s the most rational, no-nonsense, high return investment that we can make. Duh!*

- Danny Alpert, Greg Jacobs, and Jon Siskel

## **PRODUCED WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM:**

- Robert R. McCormick Foundation
- The Irving Harris Foundation
- Bezos Family Foundation
- JB & MK Pritzker Family Foundation
- Rauch Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Einhorn Family Charitable Trust
- Overdeck Family Foundation
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Caplan Fund for Early Childhood
- David & Lucile Packard Foundation
- Bluhm Family Charitable Foundation
- Horace & Amy Hagedorn Fund at New York Community Trust
- Ellen and Ronald Block Family Foundation

## **EXPERTS APPEARING IN THE FILM**

- Rhian Allvin, NAEYC
- Nadine Burke Harris, California Surgeon General
- Geoffrey Canada, Harlem Children's Zone
- Robert Dugger, Ready Nation
- Lynette Fraga, Child Care Aware
- Alison Gopnik, UC Berkeley
- Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Temple University
- Myra Jones-Taylor, Zero to Three
- Patricia Kuhl, University of Washington I-LABS
- Matthew Melmed, Zero to Three
- Andrew Meltzoff, University of Washington I-LABS
- Dipesh Navsaria, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Deborah Phillips, Georgetown University
- Seth Pollak, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Arthur Rolnick, University of Minnesota
- Jack Shonkoff, Harvard University
- Rosemarie Truglio, Sesame Workshop

## **PARTNER NETWORK**

*No Small Matter* is working with the following group of impactful, well-regarded organizations focused on bringing high quality early learning to more American families:

- 30 Million Words
- All Our Kin
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- American Enterprise Institute
- America Forward



- Ascend at the Aspen Institute
- Association of Children's Museums
- Bipartisan Policy Center
- Center for American Progress
- Center on the Developing Child - Harvard University
- Center for High Impact Philanthropy at UPenn
- Chicago Children's Museum
- Child Care Aware
- Common Sense Action Network
- Council for a Strong America
- The Erikson Institute
- Families & Work Institute
- First Five Years Fund
- Fathers, Families, and Healthy Communities
- Fred Rogers Center
- Harvard Education Redesign Lab
- I-LABS at the University of Washington
- HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters)
- NAEYC
- National Association of Counties
- National Association of Family Childcare Providers (NAFCC)
- National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI)
- National Governors Association
- National League of Cities
- New America Foundation
- Nurse Family Partnership
- Ounce of Prevention Fund
- Parent Child Home Program
- Parents as Teachers
- Read Aloud 15 Minutes
- Save the Children Action Network
- Sesame Workshop
- Too Small to Fail
- UnidosUS
- United Way
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation
- Vroom / Mind in the Making
- YMCA / YWCA
- Zero to Three

## **FAQs**

### **1. Why a film about early learning?**

Thanks to new brain scanning technology and rigorous inquiry, scientists understand more about children's brains than ever before. With every new study, the incredible development happening in a child's early years becomes more and more apparent. For example, we now know that the number of words a child hears before age three can vastly improve her school readiness; the first few years of life are a kind of "big bang" for learning — 86 billion neurons being connected by synapses at a rate of a million times per second; and when a child lacks an engaging, loving environment, "toxic" experiences actually have the power to rewire her brain, with consequences that can last a lifetime.

The lack of high quality, affordable childcare has, in recent years, emerged as a full-blown crisis for working and middle-class families. At the end of World War II, just 12% of American mothers with children under six worked outside the home; today, that number is closer to 65%. Parents are left to fend for themselves, too often caught between wanting what's best for their children and needing to make ends meet.

The United States has always been defined by opportunity — and no issue so glaringly highlights our failure to deliver on this promise as the imbalance in the opportunities afforded to our youngest children. Today there is consensus amongst the fields of neuroscience, education, and developmental psychology that a child's experiences between ages zero and five have an enormous impact on her opportunity to thrive for the rest of her life — from academic achievement to health to her future earnings as an adult.<sup>[1]</sup> Experts calculate that the return on investment (ROI) for quality early childhood education — in terms of money saved in the health care system, in prisons, in tax revenue, in special education — is somewhere between \$4 and \$13 for every one dollar invested in a young child.