

## Ask the Expert

RICHARD ATLAS

ZERO TO THREE Board Members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.

**MEET:** Rich Atlas is co-founder and trustee of The Atlas Family Foundation, Los Angeles, CA; retired general partner, Goldman Sachs & Co., and a Board Member of ZERO TO THREE since 2001. Mr. Atlas and his wife, Lezlie, are philanthropists who are dedicated to supporting parents and early childhood professionals to impact healthy development of the first years of life. The Atlas Family Foundation works in partnership with its grantees to help lay solid foundations on which to build social, emotional, and cognitive development that can enhance learning in school and throughout life. Rich has a particular interest in increasing the sensitivity of business leaders about the impact of company attitudes and policies on family priorities.



### Helping to Make a Difference

#### Q. Why have you focused the Atlas Family Foundation resources in the area of early childhood intervention?

**A:** Our mission is based on our belief that from the prenatal to preschool years the map of one's life is pretty much set. Early intervention programs taking corrective action on children's social, emotional, and cognitive problems as they are developing have high success rates and are relatively inexpensive. As children get older, the interventions required to take corrective action later in life—such as special education, prison, drug rehabilitation, and other forms of rehabilitative treatment—are much more costly and the probabilities of success much lower.

Soon after my retirement from Goldman Sachs, I was elected to the board of a new California-based foundation, The California Endowment. During the Endowment's initial 6 months of operation, I served as interim-CEO while our board conducted a search for a permanent leader. Leading a large new foundation was an incredible privilege. I learned about health care in its broadest definition, and the issues, obstacles, and challenges faced by people of low economic and educational status.

My experiences in this responsibility had important consequences for the evolution of The Atlas Family Foundation's mission and grant-making style. This was primarily due to my exposure to the communities the Endowment served: ethnic minorities, women, children, the elderly, disabled, and immigrants (both documented and undocumented). In addition, I gained an understanding of the impact of culture, geography, and economic status on health outcomes and disparities among different populations.

Ultimately, we decided to work in low income, high-risk communities that did not have natural constituencies of support. The traditional institutions that we formerly funded, such as our and our children's former schools and local museums and hospitals,

generally catered to higher income communities with access to resources that the underserved could not reach. We envisioned a portfolio of grantees representing the cultural and ethnic diversity of our community. Getting involved in early intervention programs served our desire to gain exposure and knowledge from the complicated and chaotic world close by in our communities.

#### Q: In your view, what do early childhood programs need to be effective?

**A:** Many of the same attributes and principles that apply to good investments also extend to quality programs. As my interests and goals shifted away from the private sector and into finding ways to improve human social capital, I found myself emphasizing the same types of strategies and values that were markers for success throughout my professional career: quality relationships between and among organizations, long-term commitments and involvement with outstanding people, innovation in both solving problems and building solutions, and development of a deep understanding and appreciation for the economic and social diversity in a community. In my view, these values need to be actively embraced and practiced well inside a program for it to function effectively.

In the world of investing, wealth creation is most likely to come from a focused approach. Although focused investments carry high returns as well as high risks, the opportunity to make a significant difference by building expertise and bringing a deep understanding of an issue's many complexities is great. Having open, trusting relationships in place between grantors and grantees is critical to ensuring that failures can be acknowledged and discussed in a spirit that will foster learning opportunities. We strongly believe that our grantee partners really know what is required to make their programs successful. Always, we seek to foster supportive, not intrusive, relationships with our programs.

#### Q. How can private foundations and public agencies better partner to increase the resources available to children and families?

**A:** In a word—Collaborate! My specific experience in Los Angeles County taught me much about the power of collaboration. As I began to develop relationships with public agency heads and department leaders, I was struck by their passion, commitment, knowledge, and dedication to the issues in early childhood. I found, however, that these public leaders had very little dialogue and minimal relationships with private funders. It made no sense to me—we were all passionate about same issues and funding the same programs!

As I said earlier, strong relationships are critical. Just as a child needs a trusting relationship with an adult, public and private funders need strong and trusting relationships with each other in order to be successful in positively influencing the outcomes of public/private collaborations.

Several years ago, we initiated a public/private dialogue group, The Los Angeles Public/Private Funders Partnership for Infants and Toddlers, to begin the relationship building process. This group gets together on a regular basis to discuss what each of us is doing, review programs that we are funding, talk about needs, and identify opportunities to impact policy and strengthen communications. We also periodically host early childhood experts so that we can continue to build knowledge and find new ways to translate the research and science of early neurological development into effective programs and services. This partnership helps to make a difference in raising our overall effectiveness and maximizing the use of our precious capital and human resources. We continue to use this model as an effective way to bring agencies, philanthropists, and other interested parties together to make smart investments in our economic and social future.