

ERIKSON INSTITUTE | 2004 ANNUAL REPORT

**Celebrating a Life | Irving B. Harris, 1920–2004**

**Erikson Institute’s Founder, Friend, and Champion**





For Irving B. Harris, the decision to establish Erikson Institute was an easy one.

As he explained years later, “I was sold on the logic of getting to the child early and therefore was quite prepared to help start a graduate school to train preschool teachers.”

For Harris, it was just that simple. He recognized a need, saw a solution, and gave what was needed to make it happen—and continued to do so for nearly forty years.

His straightforward explanation perfectly captures the unique blend of pragmatism, idealism, generosity, and vision that inspired his legendary philanthropic career.

Founding Erikson was the first major step in a campaign to give children the best possible start in life that would engage Harris until his death in September 2004 at age 94.

As a successful businessman, Harris’s initial interest in children centered on keeping them in school, to ensure a skilled workforce. In the mid-1950s when he was involved with an educational publishing company, he grew concerned with the high school dropout problem. This interest led him to read the 1964 book *A Crisis in Black and White*. Author Charles Silberman argued that the dropout problem began not in high school or even junior high but when the child leaves the cradle.

This viewpoint—combined with psychoanalytic ideas about the importance of attachment and early childhood experience gleaned from his friends Maria and Gerhardt Piers—made a strong impression on Harris. He became convinced that to succeed in school and in life, each child must be well-nurtured in the earliest years. He clearly saw the need for more well-trained preschool teachers who truly understood child development.

So when Maria Piers and cofounders Lorraine Wallach and Barbara Taylor Bowman met with Harris in the fall of 1965 to present their idea for starting such a training institute, Harris was a willing collaborator. He and Piers went to Washington, D.C., to seek federal funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity, which was just launching Project Head Start.



*Irving B. Harris in 2000 at with children at the Educare Center in Chicago's Grand Boulevard community. Harris provided start-up funding for Educare.*

Their request was enthusiastically received and funding was promised, but months later they were still waiting for the federal money. By April of 1966, the founders had to decide whether to quit their jobs and forge ahead with the school. “Irving said, ‘Go ahead and start. I’ll cover your deficits,’” recalls Bowman. The school—originally known as the Chicago School for Early Childhood Education—was born. The first class enrolled in the fall of 1966. By 1968, the school had affiliated with Loyola University to offer degrees and was soon renamed for psychoanalyst Erik Erikson.

Today Erikson Institute is a thriving leader in child development due in large measure to Irving’s vision, enthusiasm, and immeasurable support; without him, the institute as we know it would not exist.

#### A CHAMPION FOR THE SCHOOL

From 1966 onward, Harris nourished the school with both his steadfast interest and financial support. He was a vital sounding board, cheerleader, and perceptive critic who guided and invested in every aspect of the school—not just its academic programs but also the infrastructure that supported the school’s growth and development.

“He had a profound belief in the importance of properly educating those who work with and advocate for young children and families. He bought into the idea that the people who work with children need the best preparation for the most important work,” says Frances Stott, vice president and dean of academic affairs at Erikson.

“I can’t stress enough that he made it possible for us to start up and grow because we didn’t have to worry about financial deficits; he would cover them,” says Stott. “For years, he was single-handedly responsible for mobilizing people to support the school.”

He saw that those working with children and families often couldn’t afford the education they wanted and needed on their small salaries, so he established generous scholarships (see story on p. 4). Realizing that the school’s future depended on its ability to attract skilled leadership, he and his brother Neison endowed the President’s Chair to underwrite the salary for the position. Neison and his wife, Bette, funded the Barbara T. Bowman Chair in Early Childhood Education to help support faculty who will teach and conduct research at the highest levels.

Harris was quick to recognize the value of the Internet to expand Erikson’s reach beyond Chicago, so he funded the development of the



technical infrastructure and course materials for the Online Infant Studies Program. He also underwrote a new, database-driven website for the school. His contributions to Erikson’s academic, research, and community programs—especially in the area of infant studies—are simply too numerous to list.

Stories abound that demonstrate how freely Harris gave as soon as he understood a need. Erikson president Samuel J. Meisels recalls that Harris once asked if Erikson lost prospective students to competing institutions. Meisels replied, “No, we lose them to other occupations in fields where they can earn better pay.” Out of that conversation, less than an hour later, Harris had committed funds for student fellowships that cover tuition and provide a stipend. “He said he couldn’t do anything about salaries, but he could take care of students while they were at Erikson,” Meisels says.

Likewise, Harris was there with unstinting support when Professor Linda Gilkerson needed additional support to launch the Fussy Baby Network. A national foundation was very close to providing a grant, but hesitated at the last minute. “The foundation asked if we could locate matching funds that would show solid support from other funders. We knew we needed to go to Irving, yet we did not want to ask too much, since so much had been given already,” says Gilkerson, who is director of both the Irving B. Harris Infant Studies Program and the Faculty Development Project on the Brain. The day

**Making careers come true**

To Erikson alumna Jennifer Krieger, a Harris Leadership Fellowship meant she could accelerate her education, studying full-time to finish her master’s degree in just one year.

To Laura Miao, a current student from Singapore, the fellowship made it possible for her to pursue the degree she dreamed of in the U.S. “I’m very indebted to Mr. Harris. Without him, I wouldn’t be here,” says Miao.

Years ago, Irving B. Harris recognized that the cost of an Erikson education was beyond the means of many dedicated

but low-paid professionals who could benefit from advanced education in child development. In response, he generously established the Harris fellowships with a gift of nearly \$4 million over ten years. The fellowships provide full tuition for Erikson’s master’s degree programs and a \$10,000 annual stipend for two years. Fellowships for doctoral students provide five years’ tuition and a \$15,000 yearly stipend.

The fellowships are awarded to students who demonstrate the highest potential for leadership in the field of early childhood. All applicants are

automatically considered for the fellowships; fewer than ten are awarded each year. The financial support makes an enormous difference for the recipients.

Krieger came to Erikson right after completing her master’s degree in social work in New York. She knew she wanted to pursue additional training to prepare for a career in child life, and she also wanted to move back to Chicago for family reasons. She decided to pursue the second master’s immediately, even if it meant a large debt load. Receiving the fellowship “allowed me to move to Chicago, get an apartment, support

after she contacted him, Harris pledged a \$250,000 match—more than requested. “The power of his faith in us was why we received the grant,” she says.

Even in the last weeks and months of his life, when Erikson faculty would visit him, Harris’s first question would be, “What’s new at Erikson?” Meisels recalls. “He was proud of Erikson. He said he never imagined it would become what it has: a respected force in child development.” Bowman agrees: “I don’t know if he started off thinking that this was going to be a long-term, all-embracing project.”

MORE THAN A DONOR

Yet from the beginning, Harris was more than just a source of funding. He was an active, informed, and articulate member of the Erikson Board of Trustees, chairing the board for decades. He was very involved in decisions about the school’s growth—yet he didn’t call the shots.

“Irving didn’t interfere,” Bowman says. “He was constantly asking questions and pushing us to think through what we were doing, but I can’t remember a time when he actually said we should do something.”

And yet, she adds, “There’s no question that his interests helped guide the directions we took. When he got interested in infant development, it was very easy for us to establish a program in this

myself, and complete the program in one year. The stipend meant I could go to school full-time, finish the program faster, and start my career.”

A 2003 graduate, Krieger now is happily employed as a child life specialist at the University of Chicago Hospitals. Although she never met Harris, she notes, “He made an impact on my ability to do what I wanted to do with my career.”

Krieger was unaware of the fellowships and was delighted to learn that she received one after admission. “It was a complete shock. My father had passed

away a couple of months before, and it was really meaningful to receive this kind of acknowledgement after having gone through something so difficult.”

Miao, a preschool teacher, did know about the fellowships, and they were a major factor that drew her to Erikson. She, too, wanted to pursue a career in child life, a field that is very new in Singapore. “I had been researching opportunities to study in the U.S. for five years. Erikson was the only child development program offering significant financial aid,” she says. Without the fellowship, an American degree would have been

beyond her reach. The stipend helped cover all the extra costs an international student faces when moving to Chicago and getting settled in an apartment.

After earning her degree, she plans to go back to Singapore for a few years, and then travel to use her skills in other countries and cultures. Grateful for the opportunity she has been given, she says, “I have to give this back to society. It’s not an obligation, but I feel compelled to give back somehow.”

Through her and many other fellows who put knowledge into practice, Irving Harris’s gift will keep on giving.

area. He was interested in the brain, and that pushed us to be more interested in the brain.”

“His giving genius is that he gave to people and then never looked over their shoulders,” Stott notes. “He didn’t need regular progress reports. He just believed in people and trusted them to do their best work.”

Gilkerson adds, “We felt a lot of trust from Irving. He’d call me and ask, ‘What do you think about this?’ You definitely felt he knew what you were doing on a concrete level. You were part of Irving’s squad, but he did not interfere. There was an affection and a bond between us—a sense of being on a mission together.”

Harris was a man of great personal charm who was known for both his intellectual and physical vigor. Even late in life, he could often be seen rapidly walking the streets of Chicago. Bowman recalls encountering him on the sidewalk when Harris was in his 80s and had just had both hips replaced: “I said, ‘Irving, you have to slow down. I can’t walk this fast.’”

A boundless curiosity drove him to learn everything he could about any issue that interested him. He voraciously read the latest research in childhood development and attended scientific conferences. Eventually his knowledge rivaled that of professionals in the field, and he was eager to share it. “He would get excited about something new he learned and tell us all about it,” Stott recalls. Many people who met him for the first time were struck by how much this businessman knew about early childhood. While he was opinionated, he was also “intellectually honest,” Bowman says. “Even when he disagreed, he was willing to listen to your arguments, and he did reverse his position on issues.”

Over time, emerging scientific knowledge about brain development shifted Harris’s interests from preschool to infancy. As his focus shifted to an earlier age, so did Erikson’s offerings. Stott and Lucinda Lee Katz launched Erikson’s Infant Studies Program in 1984 to train professionals in this area, and a few years later it was named for Harris to honor his passionate interest in the field.

More recently, Harris enthusiastically supported the Doula Program. He believed doulas, who provide support for mothers before, during, and after birth, were a very direct and effective way to improve the mother-infant bond—and could readily cite the statistics



to prove their impact. “He was very, very fond of the doula program. I imagine that as he was leaving this earth he was still thinking of the doulas,” says Meisels.

“Irving was always one step ahead of us, seeing the future of the field and encouraging us to move forward,” Gilkerson says. One new area in which Erikson has played a role is infant mental health. Through academic specializations and community-based programs, Erikson is addressing needs in this newly recognized field.

Near the end of his life, Harris commented, “I’ve had two dreams in my life. One is to get people to focus on the proper care of infants, and that dream has been realized. The second was to focus on child mental health. The world hasn’t woken up to that one yet, but it’s starting to.”

Erikson now has a \$2.4 million grant from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to provide infant mental health screenings to all children, parents, and foster parents in the foster care system. “Irving would have been so proud of that,” Stott says.

Few institutions are fortunate enough to have a benefactor so knowledgeable, passionate, active, and committed to their cause. Like a good father, Harris gave Erikson the time, attention, and support it needed to grow strong, and prepared the school to carry on without him. He played a significant role in establishing an endowment to secure Erikson’s future. “It was his way of helping us live on after he was no longer contributing personally,” says Bowman. He also helped recruit others who would champion the institute, including his own family members. His brother Neison made many generous gifts and today his grandson, Jack Polsky, is an Erikson trustee. His nephew, King Harris, has long been a generous Erikson supporter, and King’s wife, Caryn, served as a trustee. Harris’s son, Bill, and many other relatives have also played important roles in Erikson’s growth.

As our founding father, Irving B. Harris has earned a permanent place in our memory, but his claim on each of us goes deeper. “He was a brilliant man. We love him, and we miss him,” says Meisels. “His passionate drive to change the world we live in will always inspire us, and we will carry him forever in our ideals and in our deeds.”

Harris joined the infant studies students and staff to celebrate the program named in his honor (right). A gifted and persuasive speaker, he took every opportunity to call for action on early childhood issues (below right).



The Harris legacy at Erikson and beyond

1960s

**1966**  
Irving Harris, Maria Piers, Barbara Bowman, and Lorraine Wallach establish the Chicago School for Early Childhood Education. Sixteen students enroll in the first class.

**1968**  
The school forms an affiliation with Loyola University Chicago to grant degrees and is renamed for Erik Erikson.

1970s

**1976**  
Harris helps launch Family Focus, a community-based family support program in Evanston.

**1976**  
Harris founds the Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center.

Joan and Irving Harris with Erikson cofounder Maria Piers (left).



1980s

**1982**  
Harris and Bernice Weissbourd start the Ounce of Prevention Fund, aimed at stemming child abuse and neglect through intensive intervention with families, especially teen mothers. As chairman of Pittway Corporation, Harris pledges matching funds from the Pittway Foundation that help win major state funding.

**1984**  
The Infant Studies Program is founded at Erikson. Later the program is named for Harris to honor his work in raising awareness of the importance of infancy in successful development.

**1986**  
Erikson launches its doctoral program in child development in conjunction with Loyola University Chicago.

**1986**  
Ounce of Prevention launches the Center for Successful Child Development in the Robert Taylor Homes. Known as the Beethoven Project, this program offers long-term support to every child in the community from before birth to age five. Erikson faculty act as consultants to the project.

**1987**  
Harris funds the Provence-Harris Child Development Unit at the Yale Child Study Center. Later, he creates fellowships and professorships in early childhood education and development there.

**1988**  
Harris establishes the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago, reflecting his concern for informed and effective policymaking.

*Harris counseled—and often developed personal relationships with—Erikson presidents, from cofounders Maria Piers (near right) and Barbara T. Bowman (below) to current president Samuel J. Meisels.*



*At a 2003 event, Harris shared a moment with president Samuel J. Meisels and trustee Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund.*

## 1990s

**1994**

The Harris Professional Development Network is created, linking Erikson and seven other infant studies programs across the U.S. plus programs in Israel in an effort to increase the number of knowledgeable infant development professionals.

**1996**

The Harris children donate funds for the Irving B. Harris Endowed Chair in Child Development, providing faculty support to keep Erikson at the forefront of the field.

**1998**

A gift from Neison and Bette Harris establishes the Barbara T. Bowman Chair in Early Childhood Education.

## 2000s

**2001**

Harris and his brother give \$2.5 million to endow the Irving and Neison Harris President's Chair, enabling Erikson to recruit and retain top leadership.

**2002**

Erikson awards its first honorary doctorates to Irving and Joan Harris.

**2002**

Erikson partners with the Duke Foundation to start its first clinical program, the Fussy Baby Network. A Harris gift helps win the Duke funding.

**2002**

Harris endows a ten-year fellowship program at Erikson that provides full tuition and stipend support for students who show strong promise as leaders in the early childhood field.



**2002**

Backed by Harris's interest in and support for infant mental health, Erikson offers a certificate in this specialty.

**2004**

Erikson launches the Irving B. Harris Infant Studies Online Certificate Program. The distance learning initiative is underwritten by a Harris gift.

*Honorary degree recipients Joan and Irving Harris posed with son Jonathan Frank (left), Erikson's chief information officer, and grandson and Erikson trustee Jack Polsky.*

## Irving B. Harris was masterful at crunching numbers

and marshalling statistics that measured the scope of a problem, the effectiveness of a solution, or the payoff on an investment.

But not even he could measure how many people he influenced in nearly forty years of inspired philanthropy aimed at giving all children a better start in life.

“I once asked if he ever had any real way of knowing all he had accomplished and how many lives he had touched,” recalls Samuel J. Meisels, president of Erikson Institute. “He said, “Oh, no, I really don’t.”

Founding Erikson Institute in 1966 with Maria Piers, Barbara Bowman, and Lorraine Wallach was just the start of his efforts. Harris left behind a legacy of contributions to the field of early childhood research, education, intervention, and policymaking that boggles the mind.

Harris played a major role in establishing:

- Family Focus (1976), an intensive community-based family support program launched in Evanston.
- Barr-Harris Children’s Grief Center (1976), established to serve children who had suffered a loss in their family.
- Ounce of Prevention Fund (1982), which supports numerous initiatives in Illinois aimed at preventing child abuse, neglect, and teen pregnancies. Harris pledged a grant from the Pittway Corporation Foundation that helped win significant funding from Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. He also named the program, served as its chairman and board member, and was very involved in many of its programs.
- The Center for Successful Child Development (1986), a comprehensive program in the Robert Taylor Homes housing project that served mothers and children from pregnancy through kindergarten. Known as “The Beethoven Project” for the school where it was based, this program became a model for Early Head Start programs.
- The Provence-Harris Child Development Unit at the Yale Child Study Center (1987).

- The Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago (1988), established to prepare individuals to shape and influence public policy. Harris also encouraged the Bush Foundation to fund centers in child development and social policy at Yale, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, and University of California at Los Angeles.
- The Harris Professional Development Network (1994), which aimed to increase the number of professionals trained as infant specialists. The network links eight training centers across the U.S. from Boston to San Francisco, including the Irving B. Harris Infant Studies Program at Erikson. The network also includes a consortium of programs in Israel.

In addition, he was an early and active board member of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, founded in 1978 and now called Zero to Three.

He accomplished all of this from the mid-1970s onward, in the last third of his life. To put this in some perspective, in a 2001 oral history Harris observed that if he had died at the age of 66 as his father had, very little of this extraordinary legacy would have existed. In other words, Harris accomplished more in his later years than most of us ever will.

And there's more. Personally or through the Irving B. Harris Foundation, Harris and his wife Joan supported countless other programs, initiatives, and individuals. "I have had the experience of bumping into his vision and influence all over," says Meisels. "When I visited the Frances Parker School one time, I came across a small, lovely auditorium named for Irving and Joan Harris. That same day I got on a plane to give a talk at the Yale Child Study Center. Their new building was largely endowed by Irving and his brother Neison."

Later, Meisels learned that Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan's mother, a reading tutor, had once received a small grant from Harris to support a program when Duncan was very young. The Harris Foundation still backs many initiatives that are active in the schools; Harris's influence has lasted generations.

"He had all this stuff in his head like a puzzle," Meisels says. "We only see pieces. He saw the whole, like a brilliant, beautiful mosaic."



## PHENOMENAL PHILANTHROPIST

Harris was a man of vision who could clearly see the connections between early nurturing, education, and poverty. And he was a man of action, willing to attack huge, complex societal problems. He addressed them broadly, from every angle.

“He took seriously the information we had about the importance of the first five years of life,” says Barbara Taylor Bowman, cofounder and past president of Erikson Institute. “He believed in it and used his resources to push for better care and education for young children in every way he could: from the point of view of schools, child care, training for those working with children, preventing teen pregnancies, the Doula Program, women’s health, and public policy. He spread his money around, but it was all focused on helping children to grow more successfully.” (In fact, while child development was his principal concern, accounting for about 60 percent of the Irving Harris Foundation’s grants, Harris and his wife, Joan, gave generously to other causes. The foundation, established in 1946, estimates that 20 percent of its giving is to arts and humanities organizations, 10 percent is to a wide array of Jewish organizations and causes, and 10 percent is to community organizations.)

Harris was a uniquely gifted activist whose impact went far beyond his financial contributions. A venture philanthropist years before the term was coined, he invested his time, ideas, and influence as well as start-up funding. He served on the boards of many of the projects and institutions he supported, and he used his money to leverage public funding.

He was effective because he was both extremely well informed and well connected. He immersed himself in the science of child development. He met—and often funded—leading researchers in the field and developed a widespread personal network of experts and practitioners. Through his advocacy, he gave their work a much wider audience.

In his writings, Harris quoted George Bernard Shaw: “The mark of a truly educated man is to be moved deeply by statistics.” Harris certainly matched that description. He was galvanized by the worrisome numbers of kindergartners not ready to learn; of functionally illiterate high school graduates; of teenage and unplanned pregnancies. He knew these numbers by heart and would cite them readily to anyone who would listen. “If people think I’m nuts, they say I’m nuts,

but I speak out on [these causes] whenever I get a chance, and it's very useful," Harris commented in his 2001 oral history. Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, says this is one of the top ten lessons she learned from Harris: "Talk to everybody, everywhere, all the time; sow all your oats, because you never know which will take root."

A wealthy and successful businessman, Harris had opportunities to talk to the right people—governors, senators, congressmen, agency heads, foundation leaders, journalists—and he wasn't afraid to use his connections to encourage investment in children or help change policy.

For example, when he and Maria Piers went to Washington in 1965 to seek funding to start Erikson Institute, Harris already knew Sargent Shriver, who was funding Head Start through the Office of Economic Opportunity. No doubt this connection helped get them in the door.

Later, his years of advocacy for intervention during infancy and the track record of the Beethoven Project—along with successful lobbying by his son Bill, head of KidsPAC—helped convince Congress to set aside funding for Early Head Start initiatives aimed at pregnant mothers and children under three.

With his vast circle of friends, family, associates, practitioners, and policymakers, Harris was often the vital link that connected ideas and programs with resources to make them a reality. For example, he was asked by a pediatrician friend to fund some research on the effectiveness of birth assistants called doulas. The clinical trial showed so many positive benefits for mother and child that Harris was an immediate convert, and later started a doula project through the Ounce of Prevention Fund.



*Harris chatted with proud relatives at an Erikson graduation ceremony.*

#### PRAGMATIST AND IDEALIST

Harris was enormously successful at persuading public officials to invest in children. With a winning combination of passion and pragmatism, he argued for intervention programs in dollar-and-cents terms. A businessman who understood investment risk and payoff, Harris

convinced bureaucrats that prevention was cheaper than curing many of the social ills that stem from inadequate nurturing in childhood. He often explained that funding higher education for child development professionals made sense because if each student educated went on to prevent just two or three children from “failed lives” each year, the costs saved would outweigh his investment.

His pragmatism was balanced with idealism. His goals were lofty; one aim was, “every child a wanted child.” Yet he made it clear that he was motivated less by an unusually great love of children than the desire to change society. “He didn’t exactly set out to do good; he set out to solve problems,” says Frances Stott, vice president and dean of academic affairs at Erikson. Starting with society’s most vulnerable, he aimed for nothing less than the eradication of poverty. “Poverty is not ordained in heaven. It is a problem created by human beings; if we really wanted to, we could stop it,” he wrote.

#### NO ONE LIKE HIM

Harris passed on his concern for children and families to his own children. His daughters, Roxanne and Virginia, have both worked in preschools. His son, Bill, is a dedicated lobbyist for children’s causes, as are *his* sons. Bill’s wife, Robie, writes books for children about stages in their own development. A grandson, Jack Polsky, serves on the Erikson Board of Trustees.

Harris considered himself lucky to be blessed with wealth, curiosity that fueled his lifelong learning, and the belief, instilled by his parents, that anything was possible if you tried hard enough. For nearly half of his life he tried—with a unique blend of science, statistics, and personal anecdotes—to convince the world that babies could learn from birth, and that failing to nurture that ability had crippling lifelong consequences. That most people no longer find that idea surprising is a sign of his success.

In the end, his impact is beyond measure. Professor Linda Gilkerson says “He was the most prominent and effective advocate for children ever—particularly for babies.”

Says Meisels, “Many people say he is responsible for creating the field of infant-family studies, not because he did the research, but because he made it possible for the research to be done, and then made sure the knowledge was transferred to the public domain and translated into public good. He left the world so much better than he found it. There’s no one like him.”





# Erikson

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