



Center for Urban Child Policy

Advancing Public Policy to Improve the Well-Being of Children

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION: PROMOTING HEALTHY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF A CHILD'S LIFE.

Between birth and three years of age, a child's brain undergoes profound physical changes and grows dramatically in size. As much as 80 percent of a child's brain development occurs during these first three years, laying the foundation for that child's later life outcomes.

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The First Years of a Child's Life Are Critical to Their Social, Emotional and Cognitive Development.

When young children are stimulated by high quality relationships and enriching environments, they are set on the path to a lifetime of learning. Conversely, when young children experience high levels of toxic stress, uncertainty, or neglect, a critical opportunity for development is lost. There is a direct link between the stimulation and support a child receives in their earliest years and their later successes in school and even the type of parent and citizen they will become.

Children's well-being, in turn, depends on the health and safety of their families and communities. Brain development reflects not only a child's health and nutrition, but also the relationships between a child and her caregivers. As she grows, a child's vocabulary, her interactions with classmates and teachers, and her ability to solve increasingly complex problems, are all shaped by her experiences during the first years of life (National Scientific Council 2006; Zero to Three.org).

Children from vulnerable, low-income families reach school at a disadvantage, and trail behind their middle-income peers in academic performance and well-being.

Too often, when families struggle to make ends meet, they lack the resources (including time and money) to foster optimal brain development. Regardless of family income, when parents read and play with their children, those children start school at an advantage. Success leads to success, and these same children are on a pathway to lifelong learning and well-being (Lareau 2003).

- Across the country, children who live below the poverty line are already developmentally 18 months behind their middle-class peers by four years of age (Layzer in press).
- By the time they reach kindergarten, children from affluent families have cognitive scores that are 60 percent higher than the scores of children from poor families (Lee & Burkham 2002).
- Growing up poor can account for a 12 to 20 IQ point deficit (vs. a middle class upbringing) (Kirp 2006).

Many young children in our community grow up in vulnerable, low-income families.

Over half of Shelby County children are born to families in poverty, far removed from many of the fundamental resources and opportunities that contribute to optimal brain development (TN Dept of Health 2007).



Even more troubling, in Shelby County, one out of every six preschool age children live in families in extreme poverty - surviving on annual incomes of less than \$10,600 for a family of four (U.S. Census 2007).

Investments that promote healthy brain development during early childhood provide dramatic economic and social returns.

High-quality early childhood investments that focus on at-risk families are cost-effective economic development policies. Careful long-term evaluations show that these programs return between \$3 and \$17 for every dollar invested (Council on Economic Development 2006; Rolnick & Grunewald 2007).

Children who participate in high-quality early care and education programs are more likely to go on to complete school, delay parenting until they are out of their teens, and earn higher wages. Conversely, without the benefit of high quality early childhood development, children are more likely to drop out of school, depend on welfare benefits and become involved in crime - thereby imposing significant costs on our community.

Science shows us that high quality early childhood initiatives can make a profound difference both for individuals and for society. Our job is to make sure that as many of our youngest children as possible have access to a strong start in life.

The demonstrated returns on high quality early childhood interventions lead economists to argue that the smartest development dollar that the government or business community can spend is on the healthy development of young children. Conversely, there are real and profound costs to both individuals and to society when more than half of our children are born into poverty and lack access to critical developmental resources and experiences.

For an overview of research-supported programs that work to improve the lives of young children, visit promisingpractices.net.



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