



Early Childhood 101

Understanding the basics about children's earliest developmental experiences



What does “early childhood” mean?

Early childhood refers to the first 8 years of life, beginning during the prenatal period and continuing approximately through third grade. This is the period in the human lifecycle during which the cognitive, social-emotional and physiological foundations for future growth and development are laid.



Why is early brain development so critical?

Children's brains form neural connections at an astonishing rate throughout the earliest years of life. The strength and resiliency of these connections are directly influenced by kinds of experiences children encounter, especially as infants and toddlers. Stimulating, **high-quality experiences** produce a healthy neural connections for future growth and learning. In contrast, negative early experiences can suppress the formation of healthy neurons and threaten the emergence of crucial skills and traits children will need to thrive as they grow older. Inadequate or even harmful early experiences can set children *as much as 1-2 developmental years behind their peers by the time they reach kindergarten.*



What are “cognitive” and “character” skills?

Any kind of skill a child acquires is cognitive in nature since it is built upon a neural foundation in the developing brain. Some of these skills are associated with language, numeracy and analytical functions, while others shape the emerging character of young children—the ability to understand and govern their emotions, control impulses, plan and focus on tasks, form healthy attachments with parents and caregivers, and function appropriately in social settings. Character and cognition skills are interdependent. Each type of skill supports the development of the other as children grow toward school age, adolescence and adulthood.



What are “high-quality” early learning and developmental experiences?

Not all early childhood experiences stimulate children's healthy development. *High-quality* refers specifically to the kinds of interactions and environments that *actively promote* the skills that young children will need to succeed in the classroom. For very young, at-risk children in particular, high-quality early experiences are proven to cultivate the traits of cognition and character that will better equip them to keep pace with their peers academically, narrowing the achievement gap in our schools.



How can we recognize high-quality early experiences?

High-quality early experiences begin with parents and caregivers who understand and are prepared to meet the developmental needs of young children. Capable, informed parents and educators know how to engage young children using direct eye contact, back-and-forth interactions that stimulate language growth, and warm, affirming tones and gestures that encourage children's sense of safety and self-confidence. High-quality settings feature appropriate levels of adult supervision, clean, safe and stimulating environments for children to explore, and educators with a high level of professional competence.



Can't we correct deficiencies in early childhood development later on?

Healthy brains never stop learning, even in the later stages of life. But the ease with which our neural architecture changes in response to learning experiences begins to decline rapidly around age 3. By the time children reach kindergarten, it requires significantly greater effort for them to acquire the fundamental traits of cognition and character they will need to thrive in school. Thereafter, it becomes increasingly difficult to go back and “re-wire” the brain’s circuitry in order to make up for inadequate early learning experiences, even given the availability of special and remedial education services as children grow older.



How can high-quality early learning experiences change children’s educational outcomes?

Studies of early childhood development reveal that the achievement gap that separates disadvantaged children from their peers is evident well before kindergarten entry. High-quality early learning experiences increase the likelihood that children—especially those facing serious risk factors early in life—will enter the K-12 system on par with their peers in language development, the ability to follow directions and work cooperatively with others, and a motivation to learn. Interventions that help families provide high-quality early experiences for their youngest children at risk result in stronger performance on standardized tests, less reliance on special education services, higher rates of school completion, and increased participation in higher education later in life.



How can high-quality early childhood experiences make our communities safer, more attractive places to live and work?

Children who begin life with the skills that enable them to understand their emotions, exhibit empathy, respect others and control their impulses are less likely to engage in behaviors that will guide them into the criminal justice system as adolescents and adults. Aside from improving the overall quality of life in our communities, reduced rates of crime and incarceration can help alleviate the enormous public expense associated with correctional and remediation services.



What do children’s early learning experiences have to do with growing the economy?

The same fundamental traits of cognition and character that help children succeed in the classroom are the same ones that allow them to function as skilled and productive members of society and the workforce. Children who begin life with the benefit of stimulating, supportive early interactions and environments are more likely to achieve higher levels of education, earn more as working professionals, rely less on sources of public support and contribute more to the economic vitality of their communities overall. In turn, these individuals become attractors for new business and industry that seek out locations where a high quality of life is complemented by a skilled, highly-professional labor force. All in all, leading economists calculate that each dollar invested in high-quality early learning opportunities -- particularly for children at-risk--can **produce as much as a 7 to 10 percent return.**