

A woman in a black jacket and pink shirt is lifting a baby in a pink outfit into the air. The woman is lying on her back on a grassy field, looking up at the baby with a joyful expression. The background shows green trees and a clear blue sky. A yellow banner is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title text.

Early Education Begins with Strong Parents

Who in Nebraska
benefits when our
youngest children
begin their lives in
the care of confident,
capable parents?

We all do.

Parents play a critical role as their children's first and most important teachers. No other relationship children experience in the first five years has the same influence on the way they will grow and learn over a lifetime.

Parents who provide positive, stimulating experiences for their youngest children, help them lay the foundations for lifelong success. These children are more likely to perform better in the classroom, graduate with marketable skills, and take their places as contributing, self-sufficient members of society.

That's why we all have a stake in seeing parents find the skills and resources they need to give their youngest children a stronger start in life. It means stronger families and a stronger Nebraska.

Everybody benefits.

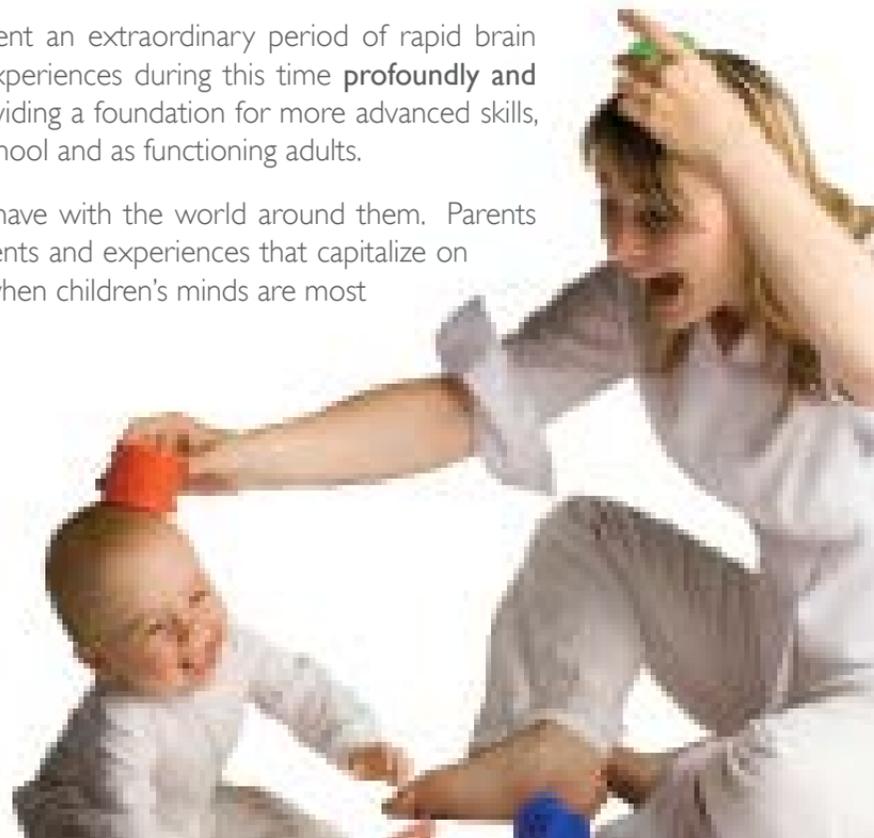
Parenting and the Importance of the First Five Years

How do children learn in their earliest years? Why is this moment in life so critical to healthy development?

Neuroscience shows us that the first five years of life represent an extraordinary period of rapid brain development in children. A child's interactions and learning experiences during this time **profoundly and measurably affect the neural architecture of their brains** providing a foundation for more advanced skills, capabilities and behaviors that will enable them to succeed in school and as functioning adults.

Parents are the first and most influential relationship children have with the world around them. Parents are uniquely positioned to provide the kinds of early environments and experiences that capitalize on the critical, developmental window in the first five years of life when children's minds are most receptive and ready to learn.

Children are more likely to thrive when their parents are capable and knowledgeable in their role as teachers and caregivers. Strong parenting in the earliest years is essential to building children's sense of security and self-confidence, their readiness to learn and explore, and their ability to exercise self-control and interact appropriately with others. All of these qualities have a direct impact on children's ability to succeed in school and beyond.



Changes in the economy, technology, education, and society in general all have an enormous impact on parents' abilities to meet the developmental needs of their youngest children.

Children's needs, however, remain constant: safe and healthy homes, stimulating learning experiences, and loving, supportive interactions with parents and caregivers.

Strong Parenting in a Changing World

The day-to-day demands on families are ever-changing, requiring parents to adapt constantly to meet their children's most crucial developmental needs. But while the world around them continually changes, the kinds of relationships and learning experiences children require for healthy cognitive, emotional and social growth remain constant.

- **Taking time to play.** Parents who dedicate a portion of their time to play and interact with their children lay the foundation for healthy emotional and social development. Children who have strong attachments to their parents and caregivers make better life choices as they grow towards adulthood, enabling them to function as contributing members of society.
- **Words, words, words.** Young children need stimulating language-rich learning environments. Parents who speak, sing, play simple word games and look at picture books with their youngest children are building strong communication skills – an important basis for cognitive development and a recognized predictor of success in school and beyond.

■ **Knowledgeable parents are strong parents.** The more parents know about children's developmental stages, their physiological and emotional needs, and the services and supports available to them in their communities, the better equipped they are to provide the strongest possible start for their youngest children. Informed parents are more prepared to identify children's developmental problems early and seek help, recognize and seek out quality childcare options, and oversee their medical care offsetting the likelihood of serious and costly health problems as children grow older.

Serve and Return: The Habits of Building Healthy Minds

The simplest parent-child interactions have the most significant influence on children's neurological development in the first five years of life. Neuroscientists call it the "serve and return" pattern, in which babies communicate with their parents and caregivers through babbling or physical gestures, and adults respond meaningfully with sounds, words, facial expressions and touch.

Such interactions build and condition synaptic connections in children's brains, forming a crucial foundation for all future cognitive, social and emotional development. Parents and caregivers who **habitually engage in warm, positive "serve and return" interactions** with their youngest children are therefore laying the neurological framework for the growth of healthy minds.



While government cannot and should not assume the responsibilities of parents, public policy does play an important role in enabling parents to raise their children to the best of their abilities.

In developing public policy, legislators should ask, *how will this affect parents as capable, confident caregivers for their youngest children?*

Parenting Matters . . . Policies Help

It is not, nor should ever be, the job of legislators, state systems or social service agencies to decide how Nebraska's youngest citizens should be raised. First Five Nebraska is steadfast in the belief that the most critical developmental needs of young children are best met when parents understand and fulfill their responsibilities as their children's first teachers.

While government cannot and should not assume the responsibilities of parents, public policy does play an important role in enabling parents to raise their children to the best of their abilities. Nearly every piece of public policy that passes through the legislative process has some direct or indirect effect on Nebraska's families regardless of its most immediate aim.

When legislators are mindful of that fact and allow it to inform a wide range of policy discussions, over time it can have a profound aggregate effect on the overall environment in which parents prepare their youngest children for success in school and the workforce.

What Can Policymakers do to Help the Parents of Nebraska's Youngest Citizens?

Every year, Nebraska becomes an increasingly diverse and multifaceted state. But regardless of our varying cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds, we can agree that strong parents and healthy children are essential to the long-term success of our state. There are many strategies that legislators can adopt to enhance the environment for the families of young children living in their districts.

- **Increase opportunities for parent education.** The more knowledge that parents can bring to the important task of raising young children, the better the outcomes will be for those children. Parent education equips caregivers with the kinds of skills they need to monitor and guide their children's growth, and address special developmental problems or needs early.
- **Improve access to high quality care and learning opportunities.** No early care and learning environment outside the home can fully replicate the benefits of positive in-home parenting, but childcare is a reality for many working parents in Nebraska, especially for those without immediate family supports. High quality childcare environments reinforce parental child rearing at home without replacing it, allowing parents to more effectively provide for their children's material needs and be responsible for their family's success.
- **Work with local employers to empower parents.** As more and more business leaders see early childhood development as an economic issue, opportunities abound for involving them in policies to improve the lives of families. Workplace policies that promote positive work-life balance and healthy parenting ultimately have a real effect on the quality of children's early learning experiences and their development as future participants in the workforce.
- **Coordinate resources and encourage accountability.** Dwindling budgets and increased fiscal pressures mean that legislators must be more deliberate than ever in how public funds are utilized. Systems that serve parents of young children can yield the strongest outcomes when they are integrated, cost-effective and evaluated on the quality of their results.



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