



Early Childhood 101

Understanding the basics about children's earliest developmental experiences



What is early childhood?

Early childhood refers to the first eight years of life, beginning with the prenatal period and continuing through third grade. This is the time in the human life cycle when the cognitive, social-emotional and physiological foundation for future growth and development is laid.



Where is the foundation formed?

A child's brain forms neural connections at an astonishing rate throughout the earliest years of life. The strength and resiliency of these connections are directly influenced by the kinds of experiences a child encounters, especially as an infant and toddler. Stimulating, high-quality experiences produce healthy neural connections for future growth and learning. Negative early experiences can suppress the formation of neurons and threaten the emergence of crucial skills children need to thrive. Inadequate or even harmful early experiences can mean a child enters kindergarten one to two developmental years behind peers.



What are the crucial skills needed to thrive?

Any kind of skill a child acquires is cognitive in nature because 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 a young child. Well-developed character skills give a child 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. Cognitive and character skills are interdependent. Each type of skill supports the development of the other as a child grows, so it's important that a child has high-quality experiences when the foundation for skill development is being formed.



Why is 'high-quality' important?

Not all early childhood experiences stimulate a child's healthy development. High-quality refers specifically to the kinds of interactions and environments that actively promote skills a young child will need to succeed in the classroom and in life. For a very young child at risk of failing in school, high-quality early learning and developmental experiences are known to cultivate the cognitive and character skills that narrow the achievement gap and pave the way for a successful career.



How can we recognize high-quality early learning and developmental 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, caregivers 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 create a child's sense of security and self-confidence. Clean, safe, and stimulating environments supervised by skilled, responsive caregivers nurture children's curiosity, creativity and willingness to play, learn and explore together which builds the neural connections for all future skill growth.

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Why it matters when developing public policy



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

Studies of early childhood development reveal that the achievement gap begins before kindergarten. High-quality early learning experiences increase the likelihood that children—especially children at risk of failing in school—will enter kindergarten on par with their peers in language development. These experiences create foundational, behavioral and social skills such as the ability to follow directions and work cooperatively with others. They also create foundational analytical skills resulting in a motivation to learn. Helping families provide high-quality early experiences results in higher standardized test scores, higher graduation rates, less reliance on special education and remedial education services and more participation in higher education and continuing education.



How do children's early learning and developmental experiences contribute to economic growth?

The cognitive and character skills children use to succeed in the classroom are the same skills that allow them to function as capable, productive members of society as adults. Children who begin life with stimulating, supportive early interactions and environments are more likely to achieve higher levels of education, earn more as working professionals, rely less on public support and contribute more to the economic vitality of their communities. New business and industry seeks locations where a high quality of life is complemented by a skilled, professional labor force. Leading economists calculate that each dollar invested in high-quality early learning opportunities—particularly for children at risk of failing in school—**can produce as much as a 13 percent return.**



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

Children in high-quality early environments gain foundational skills that help them understand their emotions, exhibit empathy, respect others and control their impulses. These key skills contribute to school success and make better life choices, reducing the chances they will become involved in crime as adolescents and adults. Reduced rates of crime and incarceration increase quality of life in Nebraska communities and can help alleviate the enormous public expense associated with correctional and remediation services.



Can we correct deficiencies in early childhood learning and developmental experiences later?

Healthy brains never stop learning. But the ease with which the neural architecture changes in response to learning experiences declines rapidly around age 3. By the time children reach kindergarten, it requires significantly greater effort to acquire the cognitive and character skills they will need to thrive in school and in life. Thereafter, it becomes increasingly difficult to “re-wire” the brain's neural connections to make up for inadequate early learning experiences even if a child receives special or remedial education.