

Learning Begins at Birth



It's 5 a.m., and 3-month-old Anne is crying loudly to let her parents know that she is ready for breakfast. Her father, exhausted from months of interrupted sleep, grudgingly pulls himself out of bed and goes to Anne's crib. He tenderly

picks her up, saying, "Hello, my mixed-up little angel. Don't you know it's still the middle of the night?" He cuddles and sings to Anne while he warms a bottle, and then father and baby both start to doze while he holds and feeds her in the rocking chair.



Down the street, 3-month-old Carrie is crying too. Her exhausted parents try to ignore the crying, but soon Carrie is frantically wailing. Her mother pulls herself out of bed and gets a bottle from the refrigerator. She stands by the crib

and tries to push the cold bottle into Carrie's mouth, but the baby is thrashing about and can't calm down enough to start eating. "Fine, don't eat then," her mother says in frustration, throwing the bottle into the crib. She returns to bed, leaving Carrie crying, hungry, and alone.

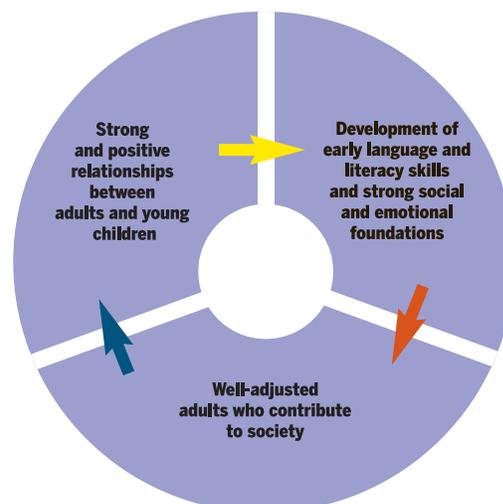
From these experiences in their young lives, Anne and Carrie are learning some critical and very different first lessons about themselves and the world they live in, lessons that can influence the course of their lives.

Anne is lucky. With parents who respond to her distress by providing comfort and meeting her needs, Anne is learning in a very tangible way that she can communicate her needs to others, and that she can trust the adults in her life to meet these needs in a caring, loving way. From these earliest lessons, Anne will build the *confidence*, *self-control*, and *ability to relate to others* that she will need for success in school and in life.

Carrie's lessons are quite the opposite. With parents who ignore her bids for attention or meet these bids with harsh reproaches and rough handling, Carrie is learning that she is NOT an effective communicator, and that she is unworthy of caring attention. Learning early to be wary and distrustful, Carrie is likely to become a young child who *lacks confidence* and *has difficulty getting along with others* when she enters school.

We know, however, from years of program experience, now confirmed by research, that Carrie can be helped. If she and her family have the opportunity to participate in a high-quality program for infants, toddlers, and their families, the likelihood of Carrie becoming as confident, trusting, and eager a young learner as Anne increases significantly.

Today, we have a tremendous opportunity to create a **Cycle of Promise** for our youngest citizens. Helping all young children get the foundation they need to realize their full potential is something *we can achieve*.



Why the Early

Children Are Born Learning

Our expanded knowledge of human growth and development in the earliest years has taught us that children are learning from the moment they are born. Brain growth, approaches to life and learning, language skills: all these are shaped by what does—or does not—happen in a child’s first days, months, and years.

In infancy and toddlerhood...

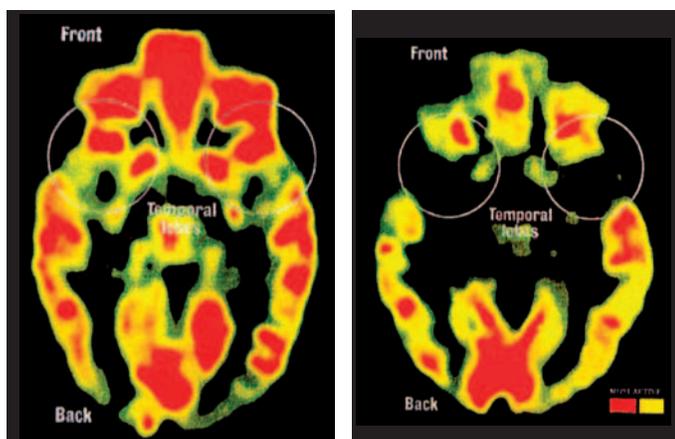
● Brain architecture develops.

Early experiences that are nurturing, active, and challenging actually thicken the cortex of an infant’s brain, creating a brain with more extensive and sophisticated neuron structures that determine intelligence and behavior.

While good experiences help the brain develop well, poor experiences can literally cause a genetically normal child to have a lower IQ. Children who are exposed to fewer colors, less touch, little interaction with adults, fewer sights and sounds, and less language actually have smaller brains.

Comparison of the Developing Brain

Source: (Chugani, H. T., Wayne State University)



Healthy Development

Development Affected by Environmental Stress

● Children learn how to learn.

Responsive and nurturing relationships early in life build not only synapse-rich brains, but also the social and emotional foundations that support lifelong learning.

Developing School “Smarts”

Today, young children are expected to enter kindergarten being able to count, recite the alphabet, and write their names. Equally important, on that first day of kindergarten, teachers also expect children to be able to listen, follow directions, be interested in toys and tasks, start and finish small projects, express their needs, be able to wait, and know when they need help.

We now know that to possess these school “smarts,” a child must have developed, long before that first day of school, the **key ingredients of successful learners**:

- confidence and self-control
- persistence
- curiosity
- ability to communicate
- self-reliance
- cooperativeness

These are difficult, inter-related skills that must be nurtured through responsive relationships with adults during a child’s earliest years. Warm, nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers provide infants and toddlers the **emotional nourishment** they need to succeed.

● Children build language and literacy skills that last a lifetime.

Basic language and communication skills—essential building blocks of school readiness—are also formed in the first three years of life. Scientific evidence confirms that *how much* parents and caregivers talk to their babies is critically important to early language acquisition:

- Children who hear fewer words in their first three years are engaged in less conversation before age three with their caregivers, and have dramatically smaller vocabularies than children who have richer early language experiences.

11 million:
number
of words
a high-
income
child hears
in a year.

6 million:
number
of words
a working-
class child
hears
in a year.

3 million:
number
of words a
very low-
income
child hears
in a year.¹

- There is a strong correlation between caregiver responsiveness and vocabulary growth rates during a child’s first and second years. Language development improves when adults put into words what an infant is looking at or listening to.

Years Matter



Preschool: The Risk of Too Little Too Late

While quality preschool is a critical piece of helping all children enter school ready to succeed, state leaders are beginning to recognize that **for some children, one or even two years of preschool is too little too late.** For young children struggling with economic, social, and psychological stressors, more than a good preschool experience may be necessary to avoid early school difficulties.

To wait until children are three or four years old ignores the potential of promoting child development in the earliest years, and providing parent education and coaching at one of the most critical periods of parenthood. **Growing preschool and birth-to-three programs concurrently, especially for children at risk, is essential.**

Families Need Options: Successful Birth-to-Three Program Models

Home Visiting Programs provide trained parent coaches who reach out to parents in their homes beginning during pregnancy or shortly after a birth. Coaches bring parents up-to-date information and connect them to critical services. Through consistent and respectful relationships, parent coaches help parents learn the skills to become their child's primary teacher.

Doulas are specially trained home visitors who provide support to new mothers immediately before and after a birth, helping to build a strong parent-child relationship right from the start.

High-Quality Infant-Toddler Child Care Programs support early child development by ensuring

- Warm, sensitive caregivers trained in infant development and able to form partnerships with parents;
- Consistency through low staff turnover;
- Small group sizes and low child-to-teacher ratios;
- Strong parental support and involvement;
- A comprehensive approach addressing cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.

Comprehensive Early Childhood Services, like those of the federal Early Head Start program, include access to health, mental health, and other community supports within a home visiting or child care program.

High-Quality Programs Improve Outcomes for Children

Recent evaluation data on the federal **Early Head Start** (EHS) program for low-income pregnant women and children under three indicate that:

- EHS *children* exhibit better social-emotional development and more positive approaches to learning than their peers; their *parents* are more supportive of their children's development, more likely to enroll their children in formal preschool programs, and less likely to be depressed.
- Children who receive high-quality services for five years beginning at birth fare better than those who spend only two years before kindergarten in a high-quality preschool program.²

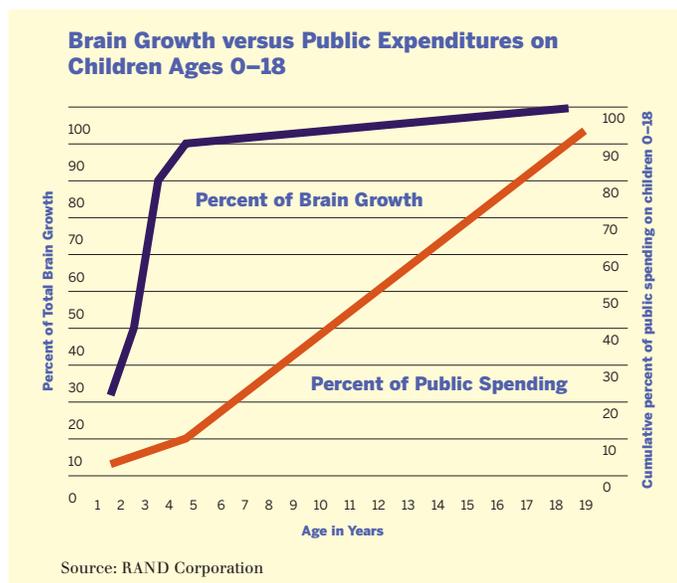
Studies of **home visiting programs** have shown both short- and long-term benefits:

- Participating families talk more, read more, and have more positive interactions with their children;³ and, they are more likely to have health insurance, a medical home, and have their children immunized.⁴
- Teen parents who work with **doulas** experience positive effects on breastfeeding, maternal depression, father involvement, and the amount of time they spend reading to their babies.⁵

Recommendations for Policymakers

1. Ensure that the allocation of scarce resources reflects current research.

Science tells us that 85% of the core structure of the brain develops in the first three years of life, yet only 5% of public investments in children occur during these years.



A society committed to having all children enter school ready to learn must invest public funding to address the learning and nurturing needs of children younger than age three.

2. Build on what Illinois has learned.

- **Birth-to-three set aside:** Continue to grow comprehensive birth-to-three programs, especially for children at risk, concurrently with expansion of preschool programs to fund comprehensive early childhood services.
- **Home-based parent coaching programs:** Increase investments for home visiting for high-risk families with infants and toddlers.
- **High-quality infant-toddler child care:** Provide rewards to programs for increased quality and provide parents with information about the quality of local programs.



Early childhood is both the most critical and the most vulnerable time in any child's development...in the first few years, the ingredients for intellectual, emotional, and moral growth are laid down. We cannot fail children in these early years.⁶

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¹ Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

² Administration for Children and Families (2006). *Preliminary Findings From the Early Head Start Prekindergarten Follow-up*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_resrch/index.html

³ Chambliss, J. & Emshoff, J. (1997). *The Evaluation of Georgia's Healthy Families Programs*; Katz, A., Pratt, C., & McGuigan, W. (2001). *Oregon Healthy Start 1999-2000 Status report*;

Galano, J. & Huntington, L. (1997). Year V Evaluation of the Hampton, Virginia Healthy Families Partnership; Kamerman, S.B., & Kahn, A.J. (1995). *Starting Right*, New York: Oxford University Press; Wagner, M. & Spiker, D. (2001). *Multisite Parents as Teachers Evaluation: Experience and Outcomes for Children and Families*; Administration for Children and Families (2005). *Research to Practice: Early Head Start Home-Based Services*, Washington, DC: DHHS, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/ehs/ehsintro.html.

⁴ Berkenes, J. P. (2001). *HOPES Healthy Families Iowa FY 2001 Services Report*; Klagholz & Associates (2000). *Healthy Families Montgomery*

Evaluation Report Year IV; Greene et al. (2001). *Evaluation Findings of the Healthy Families New York Home Visiting Program*; Katz, A., Pratt, C., & McGuigan, W. (2001). *Oregon Healthy Start 1999-2000 Status Report*.

⁵ The Ounce of Prevention Fund (2007). *Making a Difference: A "Doula" Offers Key Support for Young Families*, Chicago, IL: The Ounce of Prevention Fund.

⁶ Brazelton, T. B., M.D., & Greenspan, S., M.D. (2000). *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.

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