

Growing Brains

Early Childhood Development: The Key to Healthy Development

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Brains are built over time, from the bottom up (1). High levels of sustained stress can impact brain development, leading to problems with learning, memory, and emotional/behavioral regulation. Stress can begin before birth.

The growing brain needs reliable interactions with caring adults and safe environments to explore (3).

Young children have a natural desire to interact with their environment. Infants and young children will naturally attempt to engage their world through facial expressions, gestures, and vocalizations. When infants and young children receive an appropriate response, they will continue their efforts to interact. Each interaction and every moment of stimulation feeds the brain and helps it grow. When the appropriate responses are lacking, the brain does not receive what it needs for healthy growth and learning and/or behavior problems may develop.

Studies have demonstrated that the number of adverse experiences (stressors) in early childhood directly correlates with an increase in the risk for developmental delay (3).

As the brain is built, there are windows of opportunity during which things like language will be more easily acquired. In time, these windows begin to close, making it more difficult to change existing patterns or to incorporate new skills. Normal short-lived stress is a natural and healthy part of development and encourages the development of certain skills. Chronic stress caused by such things as poverty, neglect, or ongoing abuse can be harmful to the developing brain.

Early intervention can help, and the earlier the intervention the more likely it is to be effective.

Infants and young children can receive nurturing and opportunities for safe exploration in a variety of settings: home, school or childcare, or foster care. Good homes and good programs will support all areas of growth and development: Social, emotional, cognitive, and physical. Each area of growth depends on and supports the others.



Enriching Experiences

What you can do

Understand what healthy early childhood development looks like. At what age (range) do we expect to start the emergence of language skills? When should a young child begin walking?

When young children are not meeting their developmental milestones, seek consultation through appropriate professionals and programs (birth-to-three, etc.)

Ensure that all young children have safe and consistent adults with whom they can interact. Observe how they interact with primary caregivers, when needed, guide caregivers towards more rewarding interactions.

Monitor the environments young children are in. Do they offer age appropriate stimulation and opportunities for exploration?

Assist caregivers in understanding their young children's need for experiences that will help their brains develop in healthy ways. Assist families in accessing resources such as age appropriate toys, books, music, and community experiences that will help them enrich the lives of their young children.

External stressors such as poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, and substance abuse all make caregivers less available to provide this critical role in a child's life. If caregivers are unable to fully meet their children's need for interaction due to mental illness, poverty, domestic violence, or other barriers assist them in obtaining appropriate services and provide the child with opportunities for enriching experiences through community based providers or in-home supports until the caregiver is able to be more available.

Look, Listen, Engage and Support. You can help promote the healthy development of infants and young children.



- 1) The Science of Early Childhood Development Brief from the National Symposium on Early Childhood Science and Policy. www.developingchild.net
- 2) Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain. www.developingchild.net
- 3) The Science of Early Childhood Development Brief from the National Symposium on Early Childhood Science and Policy, brief on The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development. www.developingchild.net