

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

“Early care and education” is what many professionals are calling child care these days, because quality child care provides both care and nurturing for the child as well as early learning. It supports healthy child development. For low-income families quality child care is critical. High-quality child care settings provide safe places for kids to be and grow, offer food programs and good nutrition, provide environments for socialization, physical development and learning. These are all things that contribute to child development and have effects into teen and ultimately adult years, yet they are things low-income working parents may not easily provide. In addition, the economic impacts brought about by quality child care benefit not only the children but also local economies. Resident services programs can be a significant link for families seeking these resources, whether they offer child care on-site or help families find it in the neighborhood.

Brain Development

The first three years of a child’s life are critical to healthy development. During these years, proper stimulation of all the facets of the growing brain is crucial. Some experts believe that the critical period extends up to even 5 and 6 years old. Here are some excerpts from Frequently Asked Questions on brain development from the Zero to Three website, www.zerotothree.org.

Does experience change the actual structure of the brain?

Yes. Brain development is "activity-dependent," meaning that the electrical activity in every circuit—sensory, motor, emotional, cognitive—shapes the way that circuit gets put together. Like computer circuits, neural circuits process information through the flow of electricity. Unlike computer circuits, however, the circuits in our brains are not fixed. Every experience—whether it’s seeing one’s first rainbow, riding a bicycle, reading a book or sharing a joke—excites certain neural circuits and leaves others inactive. Those that are repeatedly and consistently turned on will be strengthened, while those that are rarely excited may drop away. Or, as neuroscientists sometimes say, "Cells that fire together, wire together." The elimination of unused neural circuits, also referred to as "pruning," may sound harsh, but it is generally a good thing. It streamlines children’s neural processing, making the remaining circuits work more quickly and efficiently. Without synaptic pruning, children wouldn’t be able to walk, talk or even see properly.

What is a critical period in brain development?

Pruning or selection of active neural circuits takes place throughout life, but is far more common in early childhood. ...Babies require normal visual input or they may suffer permanent impairment; children born with crossed or "lazy" eyes will fail to develop full acuity and depth perception if the problem is not promptly

corrected. Language skills depend on verbal input (or sign language, for babies with hearing impairments) in the first few years or certain skills, particularly grammar and pronunciation, may be permanently impacted. The critical period for language-learning begins to close around five years of age and ends around puberty. This is why individuals who learn a new language after puberty almost always speak it with a foreign accent.

For more information on brain development:

- Zero to Three, FAQs on brain development, see <http://www.zerotothree.org/brainwonders/FAQ.html>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children: Brain Development Research: What It Means for Young Children and Families, visit <http://www.naeyc.org/ece/1997/11.asp>
- Better Brains for Babies, University of Georgia, see <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/bbb/>

Child Health

Child care providers can help parents provide their children with many critical elements, including good nutrition, lead and environmental safety, asthma and access to child health insurance. Quality home-based and center-based child care programs provide meals for the children and nutrition education for parents, through the Federal Child and Adult Care Food Program from the Department of Agriculture and local university extension offices. Some centers have on-site medical screening. One center in Rochester, New York, has teleconference medical screenings with off-site doctors, via a computer video link-up at the center with an on-site trained staff person. This ensures that no children attending the center will fall through the cracks.

Access to child health insurance is now available almost universally for low-income children. Following are some examples of initiatives and resources on efforts to enroll children. Resident services programs can provide links to similar local programs or find out how to provide this information themselves.

From the American Academy of Pediatrics:

Quality child care and early education can have a profound positive influence on children's health, development and ability to learn. The striking correlation between children's experience in quality child care and their later success demonstrates the importance of continually improving child care environments.

From the National Child Care Information Center website:

With support from the California Endowment, Children Now, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Children's Partnership have spearheaded the 100% Campaign: Health Insurance for Every California Child. This campaign is implementing a pilot program in Fresno County, supporting a partnership between the Central Valley Children's Services Network (a child care resource and referral agency) and the Fresno Health Consumer Center (FHCC), an advocacy group and health insurance enrollment organization, to increase children's enrollment in

low-cost health care programs. This pilot project provides outreach to families in three ways:

- It encourages child care providers to distribute flyers about health insurance to parents.
- It informs parents seeking child care about how FHCC can help them enroll in health coverage (by providing FHCC contact information to parents and conducting a follow-up call to interested families to offer enrollment assistance).
- It includes FHCC contact information with every child care application mailed, and reminds parents who are on the waiting list for subsidized child care about how FHCC can help them apply for health insurance.

For more information on child health:

- Fresno pilot project or the 100% Campaign, visit www.100percentcampaign.org.
- Child health and safety or to access Quality Early Education and Child Care from Birth to Kindergarten, visit www.healthychildcare.org or e-mail hcca@aap.org.
- Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Enrolling Children in Health Coverage Before They Start School, see <http://www.cbpp.org/10-1-01health.pdf>.

School Readiness

In “Where We Stand: NAEYC on School Readiness,” the National Association for the Education of Young Children says that school readiness requires access to opportunities. More and more, states are increasing these opportunities, accepting the research and recognizing that to close achievement gaps in later years they need to invest in children’s education at earlier ages. Therefore, they have begun to fund pre-kindergarten for 3 and 4 year olds. According to NAEYC, “The absence of basic health care and economic security places many children at risk for academic failure before they enter school. Families...are not always able to prepare their children for a school setting.” Early childhood and resident services programs can be a valuable support to help children prepare for school.

For more information on school readiness:

- NAEYC position’s statement on school readiness:
<http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/readiness.pdf>
- Cost Quality and Outcomes Study Goes to School:
<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/pages/cq.cfm> or
<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/CQO-es.pdf>
- One state’s example, in Connecticut:
<http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/Early/PreschoolReport.pdf>

Social Outcomes and Juvenile Crime

A study of preschoolers that began 40 years ago in Ypsilanti, Mich., the High/Scope Perry Preschool study, has shown that children from a quality preschool program outperformed a control group in educational achievement, economic performance and employment, and had a lower incidence of arrests for violent crimes as well as drug and property crimes. More males raised their own children. More participants, male and

female, got along very well with their families. This is just one example, albeit a very significant one, of the growing body of research that is showing the positive effects over time of quality early childhood education.

“America’s Child Care Crisis: A Crime Prevention Tragedy” (2000), by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, found that young people who spend their early years in high-quality child care are half as likely to be arrested later. The report compared the juvenile arrest records of 1,000 18-year-olds who had been enrolled in those centers as children, with similarly at-risk youths who had received full-day kindergarten, but not the pre-school and parent-coaching program provided by the centers. Of those who had only kindergarten, 26 percent had had at least one juvenile arrest and 15 percent had had two or more arrests as juveniles. Of those who had attended the pre-school program, 16 percent had had at least one arrest and 8 percent had had two or more. The complete report is available at <http://www.fightcrime.org/reports/childcarereport.pdf>.

For more information on social outcomes and juvenile crime:

- The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: <http://www.highscope.org/NewsandInformation/PressReleases/PerryP-Age40.htm>
- The Abecedarian study in North Carolina is another key study in this area: <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/>

Economic Impact

Finally, a growing number of studies are showing the broader economic impacts of quality early education experiences on individuals as they grow into adulthood. Common findings include:

- Increased tax revenues resulting from increased employment and earnings
- Decreased welfare outlays, including Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children and general assistance (typically funded by counties)
- Reduced expenditures for education, health and other services, such as special education, emergency room visits, and stays in homeless shelters
- Lower criminal-justice system costs, including arrest, adjudication and incarceration expenses

For more information on the economic impact of early childhood education:

- The Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank has developed some highly acclaimed research on the economic outcomes of quality care. Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return (March 2003): <http://minneapolisfed.org/research/studies/earlychild/earlychild.pdf>
- Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know about the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions (1998): <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR898/>
- The Alliance on Early Childhood Finance has an array of resources and links, including work from Cornell University on the regional economic impacts of child care: www.earlychildhoodfinance.org

- Economic Benefits of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs: What Makes the Difference? (February 2006), by Ellen Galinsky, published by the Committee for Economic Development:
http://www.ced.org/docs/report/report_prek_galinsky.pdf.

For more general information on the effects of quality care on young children see:

- The resource database of the National Child Care Information Center at
<http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/effectsqualitycc.html>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.naeyc.org

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