




What

do we understand
about *young children*
and what does
this mean for
how we
support
them?

onclusions drawn from recent literature and experience

Children's growth and learning

There is a large and expanding body of research about the nature of young children's growth and learning, reported in a number of recent publications listed in the bibliography. In particular, brain development research is supplementing understandings about children's early development which have evolved from disciplines such as epidemiology, anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology and paediatrics.

Widely-accepted conclusions emerging from the research are that:

- Nature and nurture work in tandem - brain development is 'sculpted' by experience. The brain development that takes place before age one is more rapid and extensive than we previously realised, and it is much more vulnerable to environmental influence than was previously understood.
- It is clear that the early years from conception to about age six have the most important influence of any time in the life cycle on brain development and subsequent learning, behaviour and health. The effects of early experience, particularly during the first three years, on the wiring and sculpting of the brain's billions of neurons, last a lifetime.
- Children's development is essentially a process of change unfolding along individual pathways at different rates, with a series of significant transitions.

Well-being and resilience

- Feelings of competence and positive personal esteem are of central importance for a child's well-being and resilience. Successful experiences in a wide range of family and other settings can help to give a child a healthy, positive view of his or her competence, and a positive attitude toward learning and engagement in life.
- Abusive or neglectful care, growing up in a dangerous or toxic environment, and related conditions are manifest risks for healthy child development.
- Good nutrition and nurturing support optimal early brain and physical development and later learning and behaviour.
- Skills of self-awareness develop dramatically in middle childhood. While the basic mental capacity for these skills (such as retrieving and using information, reflection, planning and evaluation, empathy and cooperation with others) is in place at a very young age, during middle childhood these abilities become more conscious and conspicuous.
- The period of early adolescence (usually 10-14 years), marked as it is by biological change and growth, is a time of change in the way children view themselves and others. This often involves consideration of the possibilities available to them, and the development of a deeper understanding of others around them. In order for this transitional period to be smooth it is important that the young person's family, school and other organised environments are responsive and developmentally sensitive to the changes in the young person's needs and desires.

Promoting healthy child development

- The evidence is also clear that good child development and care programs that involve parents and other primary caregivers can vastly improve outcomes for children's behaviour, learning and health in later life.
- The earlier in a child's life these programs begin, the better. Comprehensive family support and information and good quality care and development services can have significant and long-term social and economic benefits, as well as immediate benefit for children and their families across all socioeconomic groups.

In conclusion, what happens during the first months and years of life absolutely does matter, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or a fragile base for what follows. The early stages of life have the potential for being a rich and rewarding foundation that will support a child all the way through life.

What does this mean for how we support young children?

Start early

The early years of life are as important for an educated, competent population as any other period. Given its importance, *society should give at least the same amount of attention to this period as it does to other periods of human development.*

The foundations for children's physical and emotional well-being are laid from conception. Children learn from before birth, and continue to do so throughout their lives.

Action to support children's care, development and learning should therefore aim to optimise children's well-being from conception.

Support families

Families are most children's first and most influential teachers and carers. Positive early experiences (good physical care, responsiveness, love, warmth, touch, and stimulation of all senses) are the most significant contributing factors to children's healthy development and learning. *Support to and involvement of families in caring for children should have primary consideration in policy and practice.*

Initiatives to support children's care, development and learning should be conceptualised as a continuum, reflecting the children's evolving capacities and growth.

Understand children's development

Children are active participants in their own development. They have an innate drive to explore and master their environment. *Children's learning in all settings should be based on quality, developmentally-attuned interactions with family members, caregivers and educators, with opportunities for experimentation through play-based problem-solving.*

Each child has unique characteristics and capabilities. This diversity ultimately contributes to our social and economic strength and well-being. *Policy and practice should promote and reflect an appreciation of and respect for difference among all members of the community, including children.*

Early identification of, and appropriate response to developmental delay, disability or handicap can result in a reduced impact on the child, family and society. *Policy and practice should ensure that families and children have timely access to the best possible information and services.*

Culture, including child-rearing beliefs and practices, influences every aspect of children's development. Children's personal identity is not static however, being influenced by new experiences and information, cultural change over time and their own development and awareness. *Support for children's care and development and learning should be designed to respond to each child's changing needs and circumstances.*

The growth of healthy self-esteem and resilience is a critical factor in children's well-being and emerging capabilities. Resilience can be promoted by instilling a sense of security and safety, establishing faith in self and others, and building capacity to communicate and problem-solve. *Action to support children's optimal development and learning needs to be premised on promotion of healthy self-esteem and resilience.*

Promote community awareness and involvement

Positive interactions between their family, other people, social institutions and the broader community can help children develop social skills, and a sense of connectedness, belonging and value. *Policy and practice should facilitate a positive view of children and families within the community, and opportunities for their participation in community life.*

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