



# COMMONWEAL Chronicle

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## INSIDE...

- ✓ Learning Begins at Birth
- ✓ Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains
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The Commonweal Foundation operates and supports educational programs and projects assisting underserved children and youth. The Foundation focuses on primary and secondary education.

## FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

**Boarding and Day School Program**

**After School Program**

**Grants Program**

Commonweal invests significantly in offering programs that help children.

*Message From Chair, CEO and President, Barbara Bainum*

## The Social Emotional Development of Young Children




As parents we often wonder: How long will it take my child to walk? What will her first word be? Will she be outgoing or introverted? Will she have self-confidence or tend to follow the crowd? We wonder how much of our children's personalities are innate, and how much can be credited to us. As a mother, grandmother and social worker, I've learned that children's personalities are both intrinsic and crafted, and that their social and emotional experiences in infancy and early childhood set the foundation for who they will be and how they will carry themselves in life.

Social emotional development is a fundamental part of a child's overall health and well-being, as it both shapes and reflects the developing brain's wiring and function. It informs how our children interact with others and how they manage or cope with adversity and stress. Social emotional development within the first few years of life sets a precedent and prepares children to be self-confident, trusting, empathic, intellectually inquisitive, competent in using language to communicate, and capable of relating well to others.<sup>1</sup>

What our children experience during infancy and early childhood is pivotal. Research shows that children born into poverty endure difficult experiences that translate into stress. This stress leads to emotional instability, which prevents children from functioning properly as successful students in the classroom (and, consequently, as adults in life). Schools that incorporate this understanding of child development into the educational environment provide wrap-around services for children living in poverty, and it's no surprise that their students are doing much better than those who lack such support. The good news, however, is that as more schools and organizations fortify their instructional environments, the damaging impacts of poverty can be reversed.

Given what we now know about the effects of poverty on children, Commonweal is following current philanthropic trends: addressing the Poverty Achievement Gap in order to close the Educational

Achievement Gap. In this issue, we encourage you to take a deeper look at the fundamental role that social emotional development plays in the lives of children, and to identify the skills, techniques, and resources necessary to ensure that the children you work with are equipped to succeed. 

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<sup>1</sup> R. Parlakian, *Before the ABCs: Promoting School Readiness in Infants and Toddlers* (Washington, D.C.: ZERO TO THREE, 2003).

# Learning Begins at Birth

## Ounce of Prevention Fund

Reprinted with permission from Ounce of Prevention Fund.  
View original article here <http://www.ounceofprevention.org/news/pdfs/LearningBeginsAtBirth.pdf>

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 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.

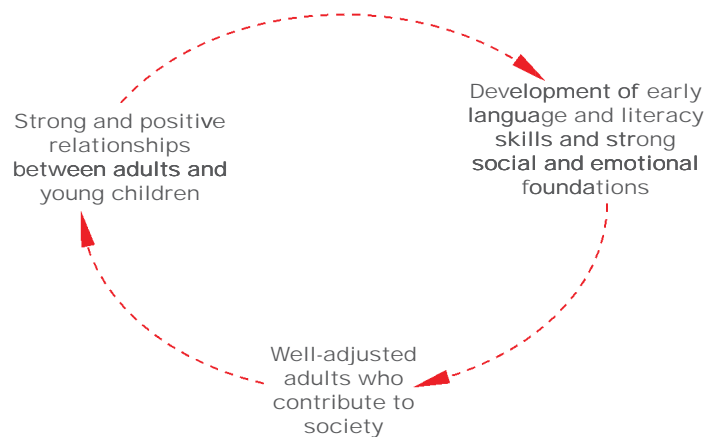
**Anne is lucky.** With parents who respond to her distress by providing comfort and meeting her needs, Anne is learning in a very tangible way that she can communicate her needs to others, and that she can trust the adults in her life to meet these needs in a caring, loving way. From these earliest 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's 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 YEARS MATTER

## 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.

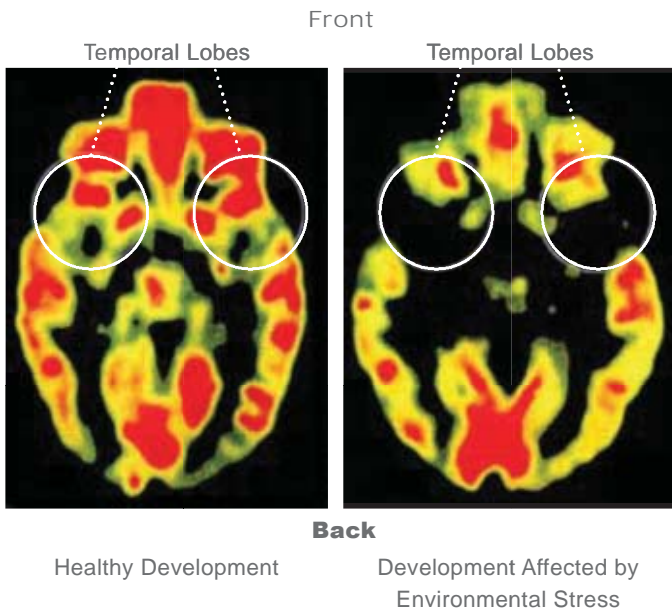
## In Infancy and Toddlerhood...

### 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

#### Children Learn How to Learn.



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

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

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
- curiosity
- self-reliance
- persistence
- ability to communicate
- cooperativeness

These are difficult, interrelated 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 or are engaged in less conversation with their caregivers before age three have dramatically smaller vocabularies than children who have richer early language experiences.

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.

11 million:	6 million:	3 million:
<b>number of words a child with professional parents hears in a year</b>	<b>number of words a child with working-class parents hears in a year</b>	<b>number of words a child with welfare parents hears in a year<sup>1</sup></b>

Source: Hart & Risely

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### 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

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# Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains

*The following is an excerpt from a paper (Working Paper 2) published by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. This particular excerpt focuses on "What Science Tells Us" about children's emotional development. The full article can be accessed at: [http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports\\_and\\_working\\_papers/working\\_papers/wp2/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp2/)*



## What Science Tells Us

The core features of emotional development include the ability to identify and understand one's own feelings, to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others, to manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner, to regulate one's own behavior, to develop empathy for others, and to establish and sustain relationships.<sup>2,11,12</sup>

Emotional development is actually built into the architecture of young children's brains in response to their individual personal experiences and the influences of the environments in which they live. Indeed, emotion is a biologically based aspect of human functioning that is "wired" into multiple regions of the central nervous system that have a long history in the evolution of our species.<sup>13,14,15,16,17</sup>

These growing interconnections among brain circuits support the emergence of increasingly mature emotional behavior, particularly in the preschool years. Stated simply, as young children develop, their early emotional experiences literally become embedded in the architecture of their brains. Here is what we know:

**The emotional experiences of newborns and young infants occur most commonly during periods of interaction with a caregiver (such as feeding, comforting, and holding).**<sup>8,11,18,19</sup> Infants display distress and cry when they are hungry, cold, wet, or in other ways uncomfortable, and they experience positive emotions when they are fed, soothed, and held. During this early period, children are incapable of modulating the expression of overwhelming feelings, and they have limited ability to control their emotions in the service of focusing or sustaining attention.<sup>13</sup> Associations between positive emotions and the availability of sensitive and responsive caregiving are strengthened during infancy in both behavior and brain architecture.<sup>20</sup>

**The emotional states of toddlers and preschoolers are much more complex.**<sup>21</sup> They depend on their emerging capacities to interpret their own personal experiences and understand what others are doing and thinking, as well as to interpret the nuances of how others respond to them.<sup>2,11,22,23</sup> As they (and their brains) build on foundations that are established earlier, they mature and acquire a better understanding of a range of emotions. They also become more capable of

managing their feelings, which is one of the most challenging tasks of early childhood.<sup>3,24,25,26,27</sup>

**By the end of the preschool years, children who have acquired a strong emotional foundation have the capacity to anticipate, talk about, and use their awareness of their own and others' feelings to better manage everyday social interactions.**<sup>2,11</sup> Their emotional repertoires have expanded dramatically and now include such feelings as pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment — all of which influence how individuals function as contributing members of a society.<sup>21,28</sup> Throughout the early childhood years, children develop increasing capacities to use language to communicate how they feel and to gain help without “melting down,” as well as to inhibit the expression of emotions that are inappropriate for a particular setting.<sup>3,29</sup>

**When feelings are not well managed, thinking can be impaired.** Recent scientific advances have shown how the interrelated development of emotion and cognition relies on the emergence, maturation, and interconnection of complex neural circuits in multiple areas of the brain, including the prefrontal cortex, limbic cortex, basal forebrain, amygdala, hypothalamus, and brainstem.<sup>30</sup> The circuits that are involved in the regulation of emotion are highly interactive with those that are associated with “executive functions” (such as planning, judgment, and decision-making), which are intimately involved in the development of problem-solving skills during the preschool years.<sup>31</sup> In terms of basic brain functioning, emotions support executive functions when they are well regulated but interfere with attention and decision-making when they are poorly controlled.<sup>19,32,33,34,35</sup>


**We now know that differences in early childhood temperament — ranging from being extremely outgoing and adventurous to being painfully shy and easily upset by anything new or unusual — are grounded in one's biological makeup.**<sup>36,37</sup>



These variations lead to alternative behavioral pathways for young children as they develop individual strategies to control their emotions during the preschool years and beyond. They also present diverse challenges for parents and other adults who must respond differently to different kinds of children.<sup>38</sup> When it comes to finding the “best” approach for raising young children, scientists tell us that one size does not fit all.<sup>39</sup>

**Young children are capable of surprisingly deep and intense feelings of sadness (including depression), grief, anxiety, and anger (which can result in unmanageable aggression), in addition to the heights of joy and happiness for which they are better known.**<sup>40,41,42,43</sup> For some children, the preschool years mark the beginning of enduring emotional difficulties and mental-health problems that may become more severe than earlier generations of parents and clinicians ever suspected.

**The emotional health of young children — or the absence of it — is closely tied to the social and emotional characteristics of the environments in which they live, which include not only their parents but also the broader context of their families and communities.**<sup>44,45,46,47,48</sup> Young children who grow up in homes that are troubled by parental mental-health problems, substance abuse, or family violence face significant threats to their own emotional development. The experience of chronic, extreme, and/or uncontrollable maltreatment has been documented as producing measurable changes in the immature brain.<sup>49,50</sup>

**Children's early abilities to deal with their emotions are important not only for the foundation these capacities provide for the future, but also for the children's current social functioning with their parents, teachers, and peers.** Indeed, differences in how young children understand and regulate their own emotions are closely associated with peer and teacher perceptions of their social competence, as well as with how well-liked they are in a child-care setting or preschool classroom.<sup>51,52,53</sup> 

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one of the most critical periods of parenthood. **Expanding 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; and
- ✓ 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.<sup>2</sup>

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;<sup>3</sup> and, they are more likely to have health insurance, a medical home, and have their children immunized.<sup>4</sup>
- Teen parents who work with doulas experience positive effects on breast feeding, maternal depression, father involvement, and the amount of time they spend reading to their babies.<sup>5</sup>


## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

### 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.

### Build on what Illinois has learned.

- **Birth-to-three set aside:** Continue to expand 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.<sup>6</sup>”

**T. Berry Brazelton, MD, and Stanley Greenspan, MD,  
George Washington University Medical Center**

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

<sup>2</sup> Administration for Children and Families (2006). *Preliminary Findings from the Early Head Start Prekindergarten Followup*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs\\_research/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_research/index.html).

<sup>3</sup> Chambliss, J., & Emshoff, J. (1997). *The Evaluation of Georgia's Healthy Families Programs*; Katzev, 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 (2003). *Research to Practice: Early Head Start Home-Based Services*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing\\_research/ehs/ehsintro.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/ehs/ehsintro.html).

<sup>4</sup> 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*; Katzev, A., Pratt, C., & McGuigan, W. (2001). *Oregon Healthy Start 1999-2000 Status Report*.

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

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



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## Additional Information

### What Prevention, Early Intervention, and Intensive Early Childhood Mental Health Strategies Should Do:

- Enhance the emotional and behavioral well-being of young children, particularly those whose emotional development is compromised by virtue of poverty or other environmental or biological risk factors;
- Help families of young children address the barriers they face to ensure that, as children's first nurturers and teachers, parents promote their children's healthy emotional development;
- Expand the competencies of non-familial caregivers (e.g., child care providers, home visitors, Early Head Start and Head Start staff, health care providers) to promote the emotional well-being of young children and families; and
- Ensure that young children experiencing clearly atypical emotional and behavioral development and their families have access to needed services and supports.

*J. Knitzer, Using Mental Health Strategies to Move the Early Childhood Agenda and Promote School Readiness. National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2000*



## UPCOMING Events & Training

### Council on Foundations 2014 Annual Conference

June 8-10 (Preconference June 6-7)  
Washington, DC

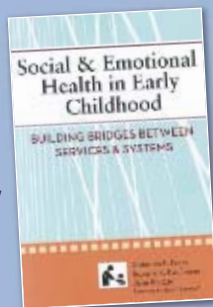
### Zero to Three 29th National Training Institute

December 10-13, 2014  
Westin Diplomat  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL

## RECOMMENDED Reading

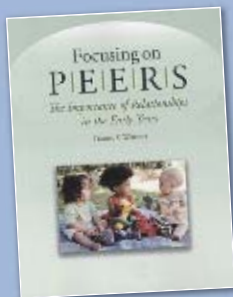
### Social and Emotional Health in Early Childhood: Building Bridges Between Services and Systems

Edited by  
Deborah F. Perry,  
Roxane K. Kaufmann,  
& Jane Knitzer



### Focusing on Peers: The Importance of Relationships in the Early Years

Donna Wittmer,  
Published by  
Zero to Three,  
2008



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Click the titles below for more information.

## TOOLS AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS:



- Born Learning: Ages and Stages.
- Brazelton Touchpoints Center.
- Healthy Children.
- Learn the Signs, Act Early.
- Social and Emotional Development Tools: What to Expect and When to Seek Help.
- Tips on Nurturing Your Child's Social Emotional Development.
- Everyday Ways to Support Your Baby's and Toddler's Early Learning.
- What Young Children Like in Books, Ways to Share Books with Babies and Toddlers.

- Getting Ready for School Begins at Birth.
- Child Development Tracker: Social and Emotional Growth.
- Child Development Tracker: LITERACY.
- Child Development Tracker: Approaches to Learning.

## RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONALS:

- Promoting the Emotional Well-Being of Children and Families, Policy Paper No. 3 Ready to Enter: What Research Tells Policymakers About Strategies to Promote Social and Emotional School Readiness Among Three- and Four-Year-Old Children.
- Maternal and Child Health Library at Georgetown University.