

The Importance of the Early Years

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An increasing body of research has shown conclusively that the early years are critical to later positive outcomes. The time period from conception to age 6 (and particularly up to age three) has the most important influence of any time in a person's life cycle. The effect of early experiences last a life-time, setting the stage for life long learning, health and behaviour. Recent Canadian reports have linked coronary heart disease, Type II diabetes, obesity, depression and suicide to experiences in the early years. Reading, math skills, academic achievement, IQ, and aggressive, addictive or criminal behaviours are also linked to early experiences. Exposure to physical harm or emotional trauma in infancy can actually change the developing brain, making it more difficult to control impulsive and aggressive behaviour as the child grows up.

It is now known that the human brain continues to physically develop after birth. Humans are born with billions of brain cells, but at birth most of the connections are not formed. A child's brain almost triples in weight between birth and age 3. And by age 5 approximately 90% of brain development is completed. There are 'windows of opportunity' which are relatively short periods of time in which the baby's or child's brain needs appropriate stimulation in order to develop properly.

So what can parents do for their babies and children in the important early years?

In the physical domain, babies and children need ample nutritious food, freedom from contaminants in air, water, food and soil, physical activity, sufficient sleep, safe and secure housing, and regular health check-ups including vision and hearing screening.

For emotional development, babies and young children need consistent, sensitive, and predictable responses to having their needs met with warmth, empathy and affection. They need to feel protected and cared for, not only physically, but also emotionally.

For intellectual development, they need a safe and stimulating environment to play, explore and learn. Parents should offer opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving, and should set reasonable limits. Daily reading with your baby or child is one of the simplest, yet most effective ways to encourage language and intellectual development. It is never too early to begin reading to your baby.

Social opportunities are very important. Babies and young children need opportunities to interact with others, with lots of warm and caring contact with parents, other caregivers and other children. Parents need to talk frequently with their babies and young children, to encourage speech and language development.

For more information or ideas about supporting your baby or child's development, or for research on the early years, try the following Canadian websites: Government of Alberta Parent Link website, www.parentlinkalberta.ca, the Invest in Kids Foundation

www.investinkids.ca, or The Offord Centre of Knowledge on Healthy Child Development. www.knowledge.offordcentre.com

Or, contact your local Parent Link Centre, at Family Services of Central Alberta 343-6400. www.fsca.ca

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