

The Importance of Early Childhood Education
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What do you think of when you hear “early childhood education”? I would guess that you might think of a preschool or some sort of public or private school classroom, but did you know that early childhood education starts at birth? A child’s brain development is most active between birth and age three. During this time, more than one million neural connections are developed every second! These connections are formed based on genetics, experiences, and the environment to which an infant is exposed.

Although children are born with certain skills already in place, experiences and the environment help to determine how well those skills will develop. Neural connections form the foundation which consequently impacts behavior, learning, and even health later in a child’s life. That being said, brain development occurs best when children are provided with a stimulating and language-rich environment. Nevertheless, gaps in language development can be seen as early as eighteen months in infants who are not exposed to language-rich environments. Furthermore, caregiver-child interactions can be just as important in a child’s life as those with his or her parents. Caregivers have the opportunity to encourage a child’s social and emotional development in positive ways that will last for a lifetime. However, caregivers can also contribute negatively to a child’s development if the home or center experiences high staff turnover or delivers poor quality interactions with children.

Fortunately, our brains are most flexible while we are young, so children who may show disparities in development can play catch-up, provided that they receive intervention early on and can form consistent and nurturing relationships with supportive adults.

Not only does quality early childhood education provide benefits for children, but also for our economy. Based on studies done on the impact of high quality early childhood education, our economy sees between four and nine dollars in a return on investment for every dollar spent on early childhood education, especially for low-income children and families. When children are supported with high quality early childhood education, they have been shown to have higher earnings in their adult careers. Additionally, the public sector can see less crime, lower welfare costs and special education, as well as higher tax revenue from adults who had access to quality early childhood education.

The benefits of quality early childhood education are undeniable. As a parent, be an advocate for early childhood education in your area and do your research on what quality should look like for your child. If you are a provider, stay up-to-date on child development science and learn as much as you can about how to improve your program. If you are in need of resources or programming strategies, feel free to reach out to your local Early Childhood Extension Educator.

Resource: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University