

Building Baby's Brain

What Child Care Can Do

Many young children spend some of their time in child care each week. More than half of mothers of children under age 5 work outside the home. Child care providers play an important role in nurturing children's healthy brain development. Even if parents provide all the security, nurturing, and enrichment that promote healthy brain development, child care providers must support and complement parents' caregiving for the best outcomes. Children's experiences in child care and early learning programs can help build healthy brains—but only if the child is enrolled in a high-quality environment.

► Types of Child Care

According to the U. S. Census statistics from 2011, 12.5 million children under age 5 were in some type of regular child care while their parents worked. These young children are in a variety of child care arrangements.

- 24 percent are in child care centers or schools
- 24 percent are cared for by grandparents
- 8 percent are in family child care homes
- 7 percent are cared for by another relative (not including their father)
- 3 percent are cared for in their own home by a non-relative



When it comes to supporting healthy brain development, the type of child care is less important than the quality of care a child receives. Researchers have examined what high-quality child care looks like, and they have identified some key components of a child care setting (whether in a home, school, or center) that help support healthy brain development.

► Components of Quality Child Care

Every child care setting is different, but child care arrangements that include the following components tend to be the most effective in supporting healthy brain development.

- **Small groups of children.** Children receive more individual attention and nurturing when they are in smaller groups and when each caregiver is responsible for fewer children.
- **A primary caregiver.** Infants and toddlers especially need nurturing from the same caregiver every day, so they can build trusting relationships. High-quality child care programs give primary responsibility for certain children to a specific caregiver.
- **Scheduling that keeps children with the same caregiver.** Early brain development depends on stable, consistent relationships. When children move from caregiver to caregiver (or classroom to classroom), they have to build new relationships each time. High-quality programs keep children with the same caregiver for as long as possible.
- **Low staff turnover.** Programs that keep the same staff for long periods of time give children more stability and reduce children's anxiety about changes in the very important adults in their lives. Good pay, benefits, and supportive program directors are some of the factors that may reduce staff turnover.
- **Active parent participation.** Staff in high-quality child care work hard to build relationships with parents in order to ensure trust, communication, and consistency between home and child care.
- **Staff training.** Child care providers who receive more training in child development tend to provide more sensitive and responsive child care and make the environment clean, safe, and stimulating.

► Effects of Low-Quality Child Care

Some parents choose child care based on two factors that have little to do with quality: how much it costs and how convenient it is to reach on regular travel routes. Recent studies have concluded that the quality of care in many child care settings today is only marginal or poor. In terms of brain development, what could happen to children receiving low-quality child care? Here are some possible effects:

- **Language skills:** Children exposed to large amounts of language through reading, singing, and talking develop more neuron connections in the part of the brain that handles language. Children in lower-quality child care may not be involved in a lot of verbal interaction because one adult is caring for many youngsters. As a result, the language areas of their brains may be less developed.
- **Thinking skills:** Exposure to large amounts of language, as described above, is directly linked with advanced thinking skills that are needed for school success. Children in higher-quality, language-rich child care settings tend to understand and solve more difficult problems at a younger age than children in poor-quality settings.
- **Physical skills:** Toddler brains thrive when children have opportunities to climb, play, splash, jump, and run. Physical activity actually causes the parts of the brain that control movement to develop more neuron connections. Leaving a child in a swing or playpen all day, or expecting him to sit quietly for long periods of time, actually slows his motor development.
- **Emotional control:** Infants raised with inconsistent routines, changing caregivers, and stressful environments tend to be more anxious and impulsive and less able to control their own behavior. They also may be less caring toward others and have fewer problem-solving skills. This lack of healthy emotional experiences early in life may contribute to a lack of impulse control as the child grows older.



► What Can Child Care Providers Do?

Young children thrive when they have sensitive, responsive care and opportunities to learn through play. Child care providers can support healthy brain development by learning about child development, by responding to each child's individual needs, and by building positive relationships with each child in their care. It's also important for child care providers and parents to talk frequently and build a close partnership. When it comes to brain development, the first years are essential.



Selected References:

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