

# Meeting the Needs of Infants and Toddlers

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Decades of research has shown that experiences and circumstances surrounding the first few years of a child's life set either a sturdy or shaky stage for the life that follows.<sup>1</sup> In this issue brief, we summarize the research findings on five areas relevant to policy discussions regarding the healthy development of infants and toddlers: early relationships, brain development, family composition and economic status, and child care quality.\*

## IS BONDING A “NOW-OR-NEVER” PROPOSITION FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS?

Early relationships, we all know, are significant to healthy development. Science, however, has explanations that differ a bit from those in the popular press. Contrary to popular belief, “bonding” is not a now-or-never proposition that must take place in a critical period of time in the first months of life.<sup>2</sup> The relations between parents and children, just as all other relations, develop and change as both partners come to know and understand each other. The scientific idea about attachment is that early relationships are formative; babies form expectations, or “working models,” about others’ behavior based on their earliest relationships with parents/caregivers.<sup>3</sup>

These models are flexible; they grow and adapt given different experiences. This is why even repeatedly neglected children often escape long-term damage when there is someone in their lives who shows care and interest.<sup>4</sup> A relationship with a scout leader or teacher or grandpa can provide neglected children with a model for trusting, dependable relationships.

Development is dynamic throughout life, and subsequent experiences and relationships can modify substantially the long-term impact of these primary attachments. For children who are raised in environments where nurturing, trusting relationships are missing or disrupted, one cannot underscore sufficiently the need for supports like quality child care and supportive social networks.<sup>5</sup>

### Maine’s Infants and Toddlers: KEY FACTS

According to Census 2000:

- There are 13,456 infants (under 1 year of age) and 27,997 toddlers (1 to 2 years of age)
- 68% of Maine women with children under age 6 are in the labor force
- 65% of all children under age 6 have all parents in the family in the labor force
- 55% of single-moms with children under age 5 live in poverty
- 16% of all families with children under age 5 live in poverty
- 22% of Maine workers work outside their county of residence

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### Maine KIDS COUNT

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## DO CHILDREN NEED EXCEPTIONALLY ENRICHING ENVIRONMENTS FOR NORMAL BRAIN DEVELOPMENT?

There is no debating the fact that early experiences have influence. Infants who are healthy, nurtured, and engaged by their caretakers are developmentally advanced over those who are neglected. Yet much of the public reporting regarding “the new brain development research” exaggerates the scientific truth by suggesting to parents that special enriching environments are needed for healthy brain development, and that failing to provide such experiences has irreversible effects on the brain’s development.<sup>6</sup> This is remarkable for two reasons.

First, the brain development research focused mostly on the harmful conditions that can disrupt healthy brain development, not on conditions that might boost brain development.<sup>7</sup> What is interesting is that we’ve known for decades that these conditions - e.g., exposure to neglect, abuse, family violence, poor nutrition, poverty – are patently dangerous to all aspects of development, not just brain development. So what was “news” about findings from developmental neuroscience? It specified exactly *how such harmful environments affect the structure and function of the brain*.

Second, the scientific findings conclude that the kinds of experiences needed for normal brain development are the stuff of everyday life for most children: interacting with parents and caregivers, exploring sights, sounds and objects. Nothing more enriching than the child’s natural curiosity and is required for healthy brain function.

Given these facts, one might question why the public reports weren’t focused on **what we can do for children who are exposed to these known and cumulative threats to well-being**, rather than the persistent emphasis on parent-infant interaction. There is no doubt that the advice is well-intentioned, but we cannot deny that there are race and class issues at play in the public distortions of the scientific findings. Jerome Kagan cautions us that while it is much less expensive to urge poor parents to intensify their interactions with their babies, if the goal is healthy child development we should focus on improving the quality of education, housing and the health of children and families.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly we want parents to engage consistently with their babies, but telling poor parents that doing so alone will ensure healthy development is scientifically unfounded, masks the true culprits of compromised development, and diverts resources away from addressing the true and sustaining needs of vulnerable children and families. **The quality of health care, child care, schooling, and the home environment over the course of the child’s development will exert more important influences on a child’s healthy development and life chances.**<sup>9</sup>

## DOES A FAMILY’S ECONOMIC LEVEL INFLUENCE A CHILD’S DEVELOPMENT?

One of the most consistent findings in all of social science research is the strength of the relationship between economic adversity and negative outcomes for children. Of all aspects of children’s early environments, the family’s socioeconomic status is most predictive of children’s school readiness, school achievement, physical and mental health symptoms and later occupational choice.<sup>10</sup> Understanding exactly how different family resources affect young children’s lives is a difficult empirical task, but there is solid evidence of several means by which economic resources affect children’s development.

The first regards tangible resources, and is well established. Poor families have fewer financial and social resources. **Many of the negative outcomes associated with poverty are caused by a repeated history of exposure to poor nutrition, inadequate housing and inadequate medical care, as well as diminished access to supports such as transportation and quality child care.**<sup>11</sup>

Second, when families work hard, but live paycheck to paycheck, cannot build savings, and do not have access to such supports, parents’ psychological well-being is affected. There is, in other words, also a psychological cost to economic insecurity. Low-income parents are at greater risk for depression and other forms of psychological distress.<sup>12</sup>

Further, the negative outcomes correlated with socioeconomic class are most profound in societies where there is great affluence, and where material goods are associated with self worth.<sup>13</sup> The continuing misconception among many Americans that hard work is all that is necessary to obtain economic security contributes to both social prejudice and personal attributions of shame associated with low socioeconomic status. **Therefore, social and economic policies that value and support working families, and that seek to ensure that equal opportunity is afforded to all children can have an enormous impact on the health and well-being of both poor and low-income children and families.**

## DOES FAMILY COMPOSITION INFLUENCE CHILD WELL-BEING?

Understanding research findings on the links between family composition and child well-being is extremely important, particularly in current times, as policies and programs to address child support and promote marriage are at the forefront of public policy discussions.

Studies focused on children of divorced parents have found that the majority of children grow up without serious or enduring problems, though many experience short-term

behavior problems during or just after the divorce.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, studies have found that children of divorced parents have more adjustment and school-related problems than do children of never-divorced parents. However, many of the psychological and behavioral symptoms seen in children of divorce can be explained by measures of marital conflict. Numerous studies have shown that marital conflict is more likely than any other family variable to have adverse effects on children, and of course such discord is likely to precede separation and divorce, which are emotionally stressful experiences for all family members. Furthermore, the stress of parental separation and divorce often leaves children in the greatest need of emotional support when their parents are least capable of providing it.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding single parents, much of the research has studied all children of single-parents as one group (i.e. whether living with a separated, widowed or divorced parent, or a never-married single-parent). Nonetheless, Census and other data on family and household structure reveal that the overwhelming majority of single parents are women, and families headed by single mothers are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and socially isolated than other families. Further, all single parents, whether male or female, experience stress in terms of time constraints that may affect the ability to supervise their children and participate in activities. This is significant because parental supervision and monitoring is a significant predictor of a range of children's functioning.<sup>16</sup>

It is fair to assert that the particular family structure per se (i.e. married, divorced, single-parent, gay or lesbian parent) is not a direct cause of any difficulties some children may experience. The impact of family structure on child outcomes cannot be addressed without considering the quality of the relationship between parents and the social and economic standard of living of custodial parents. Both the immediate and long-term adjustment of children is closely related to these factors, as well as to the quality of the relationship between parents and their children.<sup>17</sup> In fact, given the association between parental conflict and negative outcomes in children, when divorce also terminates parental conflict, it can generate a healthier context for a child's development.

Policies that support the financial and psychological well being of parents – such as child-support enforcement, income supports, and counseling – can have an enormous impact on the healthy development of children.

## HOW DO WE DEFINE “HIGH QUALITY” CHILD CARE?

In the past decade, as it has become an economic necessity for most American families that all adults in the household work outside the home, widespread enrollment in child care

has become a way of life. Fortunately, research has established that child care has many positive attributes for the developing child: early socialization with peers, positive relationships with other adults, and providing a context for early learning and discovery.

A recently released 40-year follow-up of participants in a high quality preschool program for low-income students showed that the economic return on investment was \$17 for every \$1 invested.<sup>18</sup> The bulk of the public return was in savings due to reductions in crime, education costs, welfare costs, as well as increased tax payments due to higher earnings of the program participants.

Further, one of the most consistent and repeated findings in 30 years of research is that the quality of child care children receive is linked to virtually every developmental outcome that has been measured to date – cognition and language, social and emotional development, etc. Unfortunately, the reality is that only 10% to 15% of current child care is considered to be of high quality.<sup>19</sup>

What is high quality care?

- Fundamentally, the environment for care must be safe and stimulating
- A low child-to-caregiver ratio is one of the most predictive indicators of high quality care
- There is a strong relationship between staff wages and child care quality
- High quality is evidenced when caregivers offer responsive supervision (e.g. facilitating play among children) and verbal and cognitive stimulation (e.g. reading, music and arts), and provide children with individualized attention, and opportunities for stable relationships.

The weight of the evidence on the positive benefits of high-quality child care for children, families, and society in general is reassuring. Some of the most promising findings are the positive, long-term results for poor and low-income children with sustained participation in high-quality child care (e.g., math and reading achievement, high school completion, low rates of juvenile crime).<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, those low-income children who have access to high-quality child care are overwhelmingly outnumbered by those who do not. The children who are most likely to receive the greatest benefits of quality child care are the children who are least likely to receive it.<sup>21</sup>

Child care is a necessity for most families today. Many children participate in child care over the entire course of their early years, and often after entering school as well, particularly in

established after-school programs. There is clearly a significant need for policymakers to create more accessible and effective systems of high quality child care that are available to parents of all income levels.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The most important thing we can do for our youngest children is ensure they grow up in circumstances that promote healthy development. This means that children have opportunities for nurturing and trusting relationships with caregivers and other adults, that they experience high quality health care and child care, and that parents have social and economic

supports that allow them to be successful at work and at home. As Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, editors of the wonderful “From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development” note, our culture has experienced significant social and economic changes that have made it much more difficult for parents of all income levels to successfully negotiate the demands of work, economic security and the care of children.<sup>23</sup>

If policymakers were to respond to these social and economic changes by addressing family economic support policies, including child care, we could have a profound and revolutionary impact on helping families secure both economic self-sufficiency and the healthy development of their children.

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