

Top 10 Things We Know About Young Children and Health Equity...

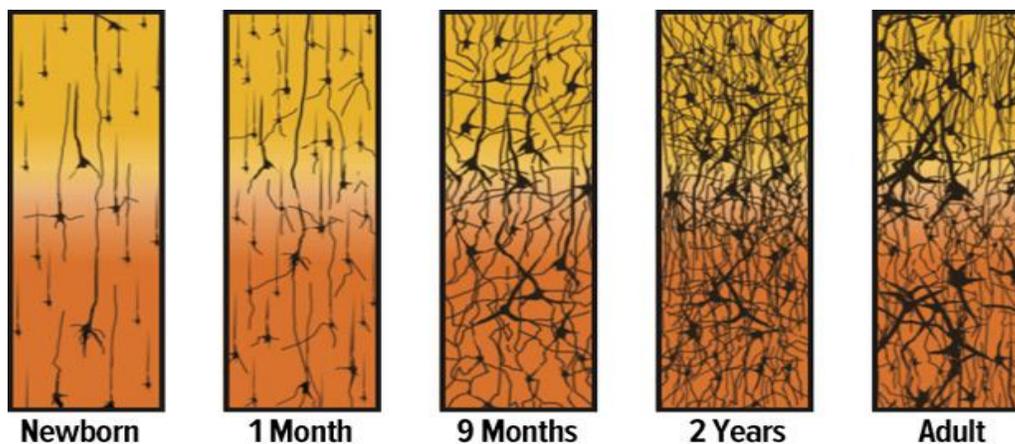
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THE FIRST YEARS ARE MOST CRITICAL TO LIFELONG HEALTH.¹

The first five (and particularly the first two) years of life (not the last five or two) have the most pronounced impacts on a person's health.

During the first five years of life, children are growing rapidly and the architecture of their brain is being established. This architecture forms the foundation for the child's sense of identity and relationship with the world and future cognitive and social development. Neuron connections in the brain are formed at a faster rate during the child's early years than at any other time (Figure 1). The brain creates many more neurons than it needs: at age 2 or 3, the brain has up to twice as many neural pathways (synapses) as it will have in adulthood¹. Neuroscience has shown that while the brain retains plasticity beyond the first years, the development of early neuron pathways establishes the basis for much of a child's personality and identity, as well as the child's cognitive development. These critical early years set the stage—the more opportunities the child's brain has to make healthy, strong, permanent connections, the better equipped the child is for success in school and in life.

Figure 1.



Source: Urban Institute <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/why-0-3/baby-and-brain>

Despite the overwhelming research on the importance of supporting early brain development, as a nation we invest the least during these critical years². While it is common to speak about the need for health maintenance among the adult population, children are growing, developing and setting their health trajectories in the earliest years that will have lifelong impacts. While the

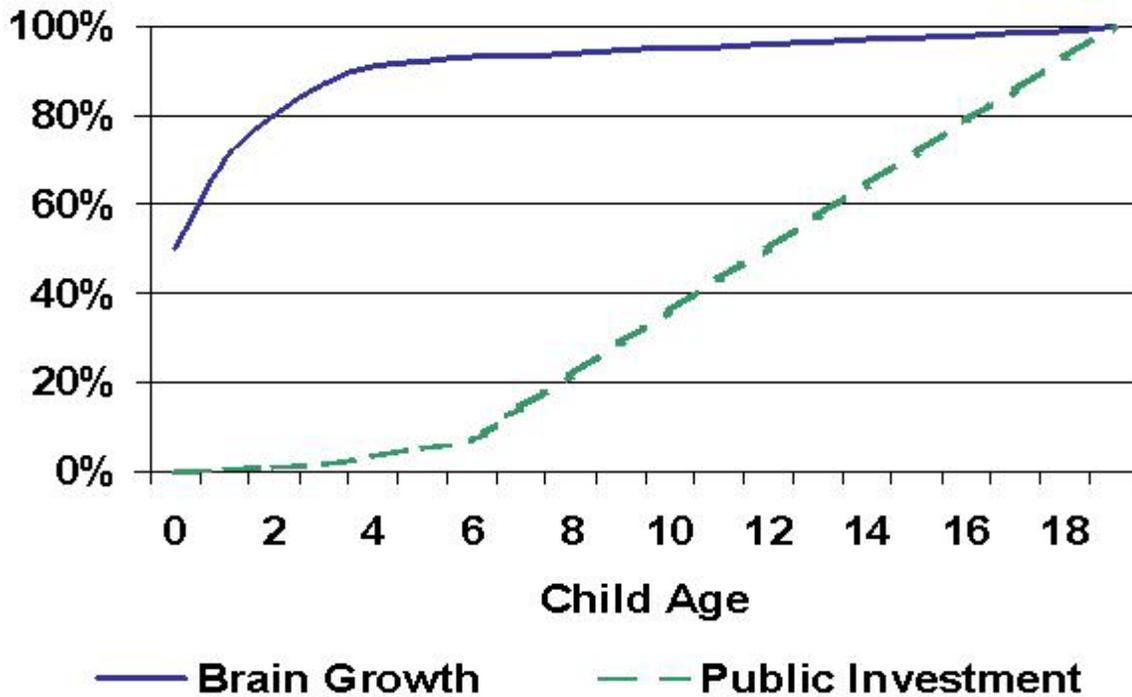
¹ Urban Institute <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/why-0-3/baby-and-brain>

² BUILD Initiative, Early Learning Left Out: Building an Early-Learning System to Secure America's Future <http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/661/Early-Learning-Left-Out.aspx>

lion's share of health care expenditures is in providing treatment and palliative care for chronic and often terminal health conditions among adults, the opportunity to prevent these chronic conditions is greatest by setting a positive life-course health.

Public Investments by Child Age

50 States & District of Columbia Composite Assessment



Source: BUILD Initiative, Early Learning Left Out: Building an Early-Learning System to Secure America's Future
<http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/661/Early-Learning-Left-Out.aspx>

Healthy child development, especially in the first five years, is influenced and shaped by the experiences and opportunities the child receives, as well as the environment they live in. When young children are raised in safe homes and communities with adults who provide a consistent and nurturing environment, appropriate developmental activities and primary and preventive health services, children are on track for healthy development and more likely to be ready for school and life. Negative experiences suffered during the early years have long-lasting effects on the child's life and ability to succeed. High-quality early-childhood programs can improve school readiness and subsequent school success. However, even the most effective preschool programs will only mitigate some of the disparities. Providing support and resources to families even before birth can drastically reduce disparities in all areas of development.

Focus in the early years involves not only providing services to the child, but also supporting the family to establish the safe and nurturing environment under which they can support their child's healthy development. The science of healthy development in the early years, known as [P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Science](#), highlights research that touches on a variety of areas that impact the family's well-being and, in turn, the well-being of their children. [P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Science](#) brings together research that helps advocates, providers and policymakers better understand that in

order to ensure children's healthy development, there must be an ecological approach that includes services and supports to the child's family and community. Focusing solely on the child denies the real issues that impact the child's development. [P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Science](#) provides additional knowledge on how to prevent or mitigate issues that impact healthy development and ways to support children and families.

Additional Resources:

- Zero to Three, Brain Development <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/brain-development/>
- Urban Child Institute, Baby's Brain Begins Now: Conception to Age 3 <http://www.urbanchildinstitute.org/why-0-3/baby-and-brain>
- Harvard University, Center for the Developing Child: Key Concepts - Brain Architecture http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/brain_architecture/
- Center for the Study of Social Policy: Strengthening Families - A Protective Factors Framework. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>