

Making the most of childhood

The importance of the early years



All of us learn throughout our lives. It starts from the day we are born. It is now recognised that the early years of life are the most important for learning. That's when the foundations for the future are laid, and when we begin moving down the path that will take us through childhood, the teenage years and ultimately into adulthood.

What are the early years?

People use the term 'the early years' in slightly different ways. To some it means the years from birth to eight years; to others it means the years before school; while others focus mainly on the first three years of life. All these periods are critical in every child's life. The important thing is that we provide real opportunities for children to learn, develop and have fun during those years, regardless of what term we use.

What affects learning?

Children are born ready to learn and interested in the world around them. It is natural for them to use all their abilities to learn. From birth, children are learning about themselves, other people and the world around them, and playing an active role in their own learning and development.

There is no question about the amazing amount children are learning. All you have to do is spend time with any baby, toddler or child to witness the incredible leaps in skills knowledge and understandings that happen in the first eight years of life.

Children's development and learning are affected by:

- influences within themselves – their genetic inheritance, temperament, gender, and health
- influences within the family – family relationships, parenting styles and

values, the family's financial situation, parents' level of education, parents' occupation, and parents' physical and mental health

- influences within the community – children's services (both availability and quality), support for parenting, housing (both quality and security of tenure), safety and crime in the neighbourhood, unemployment levels and the general feeling of trust among the residents
- influences within their culture – with different cultures marked by differences in parenting styles, beliefs and values, and different views on how children should be educated.

What does the research show about the importance of the early years?

The importance of the early years is now well known throughout Australia and the rest of the world. These years are a time when the brain develops and much of its 'wiring' is laid down. The experiences and relationships a child has, plus nutrition and health, can actually affect this enormously. Positive experiences help the brain to develop in healthy ways. Seriously negative experiences such as neglect and abuse, on the other hand, affect brain development in more harmful ways, and contribute to emotional and behavioural problems later in life. So the experiences a child has in the early years can either support learning or interfere with it.

As the organisation Zero to Three says in its booklet titled *Getting Ready for School Begins at Birth*: "The brain is the only organ that is not fully formed at birth. During the first three years, trillions of connections between brain cells are being made. A child's relationships and experiences during the early years greatly influence how their brain grows".



What are some important areas of learning?

Health and physical wellbeing are the basis for all learning and development. Such areas as eating habits, attitudes towards exercise and self care routines build from the child's earliest experiences.

One of the most important things children learn in the early years is about themselves – that is, they develop a picture of themselves that affects the way they approach any situation, task, or relationship with another person. In other words, they develop a self concept. An important part of that self concept is the picture they have of themselves as learners: is it okay to be curious, to explore, to ask questions, to tackle problems, to try to figure things out, to experiment? Is it okay to try something and fail sometimes? Being a good learner means having a go, seeing yourself as capable, and taking reasonable risks.

There are many different ways to categorise learning in the early years, but whatever the categories, it is important for parents, and others who work and live with children, to keep in mind the broad range of kinds of

learning that are important in the early years. Some important areas of learning are listed below.

- use of the body, including hands
- respect for others
- how to relate to others, both adults and other children
- how to resolve conflict
- problem solving skills
- communication
- getting used to the things that make people different from each other
- self knowledge - understanding of feelings, a sense of your own strengths, talents and uniqueness
- confidence
- a sense of belonging to family, community, culture
- how to look after and take care of yourself
- behaving in acceptable ways and controlling your own behaviour.

What do children need to support learning in the early years?

They need:

- adults who help them to stay safe and healthy.
 - Positive caring relationships that are ongoing - the most important factor in supporting a child's learning. All children need people, or at least one person, who believe in them, care for them, and want to support them as learners. Children do some of their most powerful learning from copying what people around them do, so it is important that they are with adults who are learners themselves.
 - adults who appreciate the uniqueness of each child, and who respect the child's feelings, needs and interests.
 - help to learn to control their behaviour and patient teaching about what behaviour is accepted.
 - materials and experiences to learn from, and time to get involved with them.
 - opportunities to 'be in the world doing things'. Children need to be actively involved in meaningful experiences. Learning happens best in context, that is, when there is a real need to know. Going to the supermarket, working in the garden, cooking with an adult, helping to wash the car, as well as going to the park or the beach are some of the best kinds of learning experiences. Young children especially need chances to get actively involved. 'Hands-on, minds-on' is the expression sometimes used. TV, DVDS, computers and other forms of technology, can be wonderful tools for learning if used in moderation and with the help of an adult.
- books to look at and read stories to listen to and people to have conversations with. Loving language and books makes a great and strong start to developing a wide vocabulary and literacy skills. Children can benefit from having stories read to them from the very beginning, even before they are able to understand what is being said.
 - time to really get involved and build relationships with other children and adults.
 - a group experience. This might be a playgroup, a childcare or occasional care centre, a family day care home, a kindergarten program, school or outside school hour's care. In order for children to benefit, these experiences need to be of a high quality. As well, the relationship between parents and professionals can support parents in child rearing particularly if services are co-located and working in an integrated way. Children need encouragement but they do not need to be 'pushed' and put under pressure to learn things earlier than they would if they were not pushed. Learning happens best when caring adults work with the child, have loving relationships, and explore the world together in ways that are interesting and fun.

Some information in this brochure was sourced from: *Getting Ready for School Begins at Birth*, n.d., Zero to Three, Washington, DC.

For further information go to
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/maternal-and-child-health-services

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