

# Investing in Children: Prenatal to Age Three

**Building a strong foundation for success in school and life.**

**Every child deserves a strong start. The foundation we provide for them in the early years shapes their future and the future of our communities. We have to get it right.**

During the first three years of life, the brains and bodies of infants and toddlers make huge gains in development. Babies' brains develop fastest from birth to age three, and their early experiences—both positive and negative—build the foundation for brain and body architecture that will support their ability to learn, their behavior, and their overall health.

Parents play the lead role in their child's healthy development, but all parents are stretched in the earliest months and years of their child's life. The COVID-19 pandemic has added additional hardship and stress for families during this already challenging time. Whether providing direct support, or through a community-based network of organizations and programs, there is no doubt that government has a role to play in helping parents access needed services at this especially critical and stressful time.

**We must act now to ensure that children grow into socially, emotionally, and physically healthy kids who are confident, empathetic, and ready for success in school and life.**

By making sure all infants, toddlers and their families have equitable access to supports—including mental and physical health services, high-quality child care, paid leave, family and newborn support networks, and programs and policies that can improve financial security—we can strengthen our communities and live up to our promise as a nation.

## PRENATAL TO AGE THREE IS CRITICAL FOR LIFELONG HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Reports from the [Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University](#) show the importance of the prenatal period and the first three years for lifelong health and well-being. The conditions and environments experienced by young children affect their bodies and brains—for better or for worse.

Supportive relationships, consistent routines, and positive experiences early in life are just as important for healthy brain and body development as good nutrition and protection from environmental toxins. These experiences build sturdy brain architecture, which becomes the foundation for core social- emotional skills, early executive functioning and self-regulatory skills, literacy skills, and the body's ability to cope with stress, battle illness, and overcome hardship.



To help children achieve healthy development by age three we must invest in national, state, and local policies and programs that:

- Increase the number of families with children prenatal to age three who are connected to essential maternal and infant health, mental health, development, and social emotional support services.
- Increase access to high-quality, affordable child care for infants and toddlers living in poverty.



Supportive relationships and positive learning experiences begin at home and can also be supported and provided through a range of effective programs and policies that help children succeed and prevent the need for more costly interventions later on.

## EARLY INVESTMENT WORKS

It's not just infants, toddlers, and their families who benefit when we start early—it's the entire community. When we invest in the first three years of a child's life, the returns for communities are the highest, and we can reduce the need for more expensive interventions later.

**Infants and toddlers must be our highest priority; they need our investment now because they only get one chance at a strong start.**



**Investments in high-quality programs that support young children starting at birth deliver a 13% annual return**—significantly higher than the 7-10 percent return delivered by preschool alone.<sup>1</sup>



**A major investment in child care and early learning would create an estimated 2.3 million new jobs**, as well as provide **opportunities for parents** with low incomes to return to the workforce.<sup>2</sup>



**One in six children** in the United States has a disability. Identifying those needs early and addressing them immediately **reduces the likelihood of disabilities worsening, decreases the need for later services, and saves money.**<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program/>

2 <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2017/12/07/443783/child-care-working-families-act-will-boost-employment-create-jobs/>

3 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/index.html>