

# Investing in Prenatal to Age Three

Building a strong foundation for success in school and life.

**A child's early experiences during the prenatal period and first three years after birth shape brain development and the healthy development of all other systems in the body.** What happens during this early period can have substantial effects on both short- and long-term outcomes in learning, behavior, and physical and mental 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. 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. When we support them in their earliest years, infants grow into healthy kids who are confident, empathetic, and ready for school and life—and our communities, workforce, and economy become stronger and more productive.

## 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.

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.



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 health, development, and social emotional support services.
- Increase the number of low-income infants and toddlers receiving affordable, high-quality child care.



## 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. Research from Professor James Heckman at the University of Chicago found that investments in high quality programs that support young children starting at birth deliver a 13 percent annual return—significantly higher than the 7 to 10 percent return delivered by preschool alone.

## SUPPORTING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT BY AGE THREE

The National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers (NCIT) is a nationwide network of advocates working inside and outside state and local government to ensure children are on track for success in school and life by age three. We are measuring progress through a robust system of national, state, and local metrics.

Visit [www.theNCIT.org](http://www.theNCIT.org) for more information.



### Healthy Beginnings

A healthy beginning for a child starts before birth with a healthy mother. To improve chances for a strong start in life, all expectant mothers need access to comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care, screenings and services to ensure infants are born safely and continue to thrive.



### Supported Families

For healthy development, infants and toddlers need quality health care, stimulating learning opportunities, and nurturing, responsive relationships. A system of supports for families should be in place to reach every parent and child at or before birth with needed information, assessments and referrals that offer each child a strong start.



### High-Quality Child Care & Early Learning

High-quality child care must be accessible and affordable for every family that needs it. Whether it's in a child care center or with home-based providers, stimulating learning opportunities and nurturing, responsive relationships are crucial to support healthy brain development.