

Strengthening Physical, Social-Emotional, and Cognitive Development Through Child Care

Equitable access to quality early child care and education can help children achieve their potential by providing them with a strong foundation. Quality early child care and education can help facilitate the holistic development of all children, improving both their cognitive and social-emotional functioning and their physical health. In this way, the foundation built through quality early childhood programs improves a child's chances to grow and learn across all aspects of their lives. Early child care and education leads to improved long and short-term health outcomes, language development, social-emotional development, and school readiness—all of which can contribute to enhanced, successful life outcomes.

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION IMPROVES PHYSICAL HEALTH

In addition to rapid brain development, early childhood is a time of fast physical changes, meaning that a child's early experiences have the potential to affect their lifelong health. Studies have found that children who received quality early care and education had significantly better health into their mid-30s than their counterparts who did not participate in these programs. This improved health begins upon enrollment, as research suggests that participation in Head Start is associated with increased health screenings, immunizations, and dental exams.¹ Participation in quality early programs has also been found to decrease rates of obesity, contributing to lower body mass indexes for enrolled children.²

Through adolescence and adulthood, children enrolled in quality early care and education programs saw lower blood pressure and cortisol levels, and improved cardiovascular and metabolic health.^{3,4,5,6} Further, positive early learning experiences can help prevent chronic diseases, such as hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes.⁷ In addition to directly impacting health outcomes, studies have shown that quality early care and education prompts healthier lifestyle choices and behaviors. Female participants were more likely to eat nutritious foods at age 21, more likely to exercise, and significantly less likely to start drinking before age 17, and participants of both genders were less likely to smoke cigarettes.^{8,9}

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION FACILITATES LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The foundation for language development begins at birth. Research shows that vocabulary use at age 3 is predictive of language proficiency through at least fifth grade and is also a predictor of future academic and social success. Studies have also shown that high-quality early child care and education has a positive impact on language development at as early as 2 years old, with higher-quality care predicting better language performance at age 4.¹⁰ Evidence suggests that children living in poverty may hear 30 million fewer words by age 3, leading to lasting implications on children's development, so quality early learning experiences that foster language acquisition are also important to support young children's lifelong development. Further, data show that language ability prior to school entry was highest among children who had high-quality early care during both the infant-toddler and preschool periods, and lowest among children who did not have access to high-quality child care during either of these periods.¹¹

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROMOTES HEALTHY SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood serves as a unique opportunity to foster healthy social-emotional development, supporting young children's ability to manage their emotions, express strong feelings in a productive way, regulate their behavior, develop empathy for others, and create and maintain relationships.¹² As children grow older, these skills are necessary to hold a job, work effectively in a team, become a contributing member of society, build and sustain intimate relationships, and parent successfully.¹³ A child's social-emotional development is shaped by their early experiences and environments, meaning that quality early care and education can have a positive impact on how children relate to themselves and others. Through quality early care and education programs, children are provided with the opportunity to build stable, trusting relationships with adults—skills which they can later use to engage with less familiar adults.¹⁴ These relationships—including those with child care providers and educators—can impact a child's sense of self, emotional security, and understanding of others, including their peers. Quality early childhood programs also serve as psychologically safe environments that allow

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children to openly interact with their peers, develop strong social connections, and learn problem-solving and cooperation skills.

QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SUPPORTS SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness refers to a child's ability to easily and successfully transition into school. School readiness is a product of cognitive and social-emotional skills which underlie pre-academic ability, both of which are sensitive to early environmental experiences. Higher quality child care predicted greater school readiness, as measured by standardized tests, at 4 and a half years old and had enduring effects. Studies have shown that these same children who participated in quality early childhood programs continued to outperform their peers at 15 years old in literacy and numeracy skills.¹⁵

A study of universal prekindergarten (pre-K) in Tulsa, OK, found that quality early childhood programs positively impacted letter-word identification, spelling, and applied problem scores across children from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Children who attended pre-K were also more advanced in pre-reading, pre-writing, and pre-math skills than children who had not participated in early care and education programs.^{16,17} Similarly, a study of Boston's quality early education programs found increases to children's language, literacy, numeracy, and math skills and positive effects on executive functioning and emotion recognition.¹⁸

As children learn and grow during the early years, skills are rapidly building on one another, thus making delays and gaps in early learning difficult to overcome. School readiness helps create a foundation for lifelong success and achievement on which to build a child's educational future to overcome. School readiness helps create a foundation for lifelong success and achievement on which to build a child's educational future.

The Takeaway

Access to high quality early care and education helps children learn and grow by improving their physical, linguistic, and social-emotional development, culminating in school-preparedness and ultimately assisting them in fulfilling their potential. Since environmental contexts and factors play an enormous role in shaping children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive abilities, quality early care and education programs can not only actively shape positive outcomes, but combat adverse experiences that, unmatched, would likely hamper a child's ability to succeed. The United States must begin to view access to early child care and education as a comprehensive way to support the health and well-being of children among all demographics in many different aspects of their lives.

Endnotes

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