



UPDATES ON DATA, EDUCATION AND POLICY

Center for Urban Child Policy

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EARLY CHILDHOOD SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BRAIN DEVELOPMENT CONTRIBUTES TO SUCCESS IN SCHOOL AND LIFE

During the first months and years of life, children's brains develop at an astonishing rate. During this period, children begin to develop not only their cognitive abilities but also social and emotional skills that will be keys to their success in school and life. When young children learn to express anger and frustration in appropriate ways, when they learn to pay attention for reasonable stretches of time, and when they are able to interact with teachers and classmates, they are at a profound advantage when they reach school (Parlakian, 2003).

Across Tennessee, too many young children reach school with weak social and emotional skills. As a result, Tennessee preschools have some of the highest expulsion rates in the country (Gilliam, 2005). In general, these children are sent home from preschool because they have behavioral problems which disrupt the learning process.

This policy brief examines social and emotional dimensions of brain development, and their implications for school readiness. Some highlights of the brief:

- » Growing up in poverty places children at greater risk for poor early social and emotional brain development, making this issue particularly salient to our community, where over half of all children are born into families living in poverty.
- » Nurturing, responsive and consistent care from a parent or another caregiver is a vital way to promote healthy social and emotional development.

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What is Social and Emotional Development?

During early childhood, children begin to engage the world around them. This process takes place largely through children's interactions with the caregivers in their lives, and through their early explorations of their home and community (Cohen, Onunaku, Clothier, & Poppe, 2005; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Through these interactions, children learn to recognize and express emotions, to empathize - and share - with others, and they begin to develop their sense of self-confidence and trust. These are all vital aspects of early brain development that support later learning and well-being (Miller, 2008; Zero to Three, 2009b).

Since brain development is responsive to experience, children's earliest experiences of stress shape the way that their neural pathways are formed. Children's brains will access those same neural pathways again and again as they grow up in order to determine how they should respond to stress (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

It is natural to experience fear, frustration and anger when we encounter stress, but early experiences guide the way that we deal with those feelings. Children who experience stress in a controlled way - and with the help of a trusted adult - develop the capacity to deal with negative experiences and emotions in a constructive manner (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

Children who repeatedly experience high levels of stress, and lack trusted adults to help them cope, strengthen the neural pathways which allow them to experience fear, anger and frustration but do not develop their capacity to deal with these feelings in a positive way. In time, these same children can lose their willingness to explore their environment or try new experiences, which are keys to their continuing development and growth (Onunaku, 2005; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

When parents are able to provide their children with stable environments, and when they help children learn to navigate the relationships around them, then children are more likely to reach kindergarten with a developing understanding of how to cooperate with teachers and with their peers, and how to actively engage in group activities and to enjoy the experience of learning (McLearn, Knitzer, & Carter, 2003; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Early Childhood Social and Emotional Brain Development Contributes to Later School Success.

Research tells us that the emotional, social and behavioral competencies of young children are strong predictors of their success in kindergarten and first grade. Unfortunately, kindergarten teachers estimate that two in ten children (and three in ten low-income children) lack the social and emotional skills that they will need to participate effectively in kindergarten (Child Trends, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Raver & Knitzer, 2002).

The skills children acquire in early childhood provide the mental scaffolding on which more complex intellectual, relational and behavioral skills are built. Children cannot develop their cognitive skills in the absence of social and emotional competencies (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Risk Factors Associated With Poor Social and Emotional Brain Development

Across the population, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor early childhood social and emotional brain development. The research literature identifies several key risk factors which are prevalent in the Memphis community. Growing up in poverty or in a fragile family adds toxic stress to early childhood, increasing the risk of poor social and emotional brain development of young children (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005).

The concept of risk is very important. Not all children confronting risk factors will experience adverse development. Family characteristics, socioeconomic status, sources of support outside of the family, and characteristics of the child interact in a complex fashion. When several risk factors occur together - for example, poverty, parental antisocial behavior and community violence, their effects are not merely additive but multiplicative. For example, two such factors occurring together more than double the probability that a child will be at risk. If a third factor is added, the chance of a negative outcome is even higher (Quinn & McDougal, 1998).

Growing Up In Poverty

Poverty is perhaps the most critical problem undermining families. Poverty often means that families live in inadequate or dangerous housing, in neighborhoods with substance abuse and violence. Neighborhood conditions, in turn, may contribute to parents and children being victimized, adding to their feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness (Kauffman, 2001).

As is true across the country, in Memphis and Shelby County most impoverished families with young children have at least one full time adult worker. Unemployment as well as employment that does not pay a living wage are both sources of stress on families (Kauffman, 2001).

When families lack adequate financial resources, too often their children are exposed to serious and uncontrolled stress. Because many parents in poverty were themselves raised in poverty, they may never have had the chance to develop the emotional resources and coping skills they now need in order to help their children learn to cope with stress. As a result, by age five, children raised in poverty are more prone to crying, shyness and may be more withdrawn. They are also more prone to fighting, hitting, biting and yelling (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Payne et al., 2001).

- » Almost half of young children in Memphis [47% of children < 5] live in poverty (ACS, 2007).

Young, Single, And Undereducated Parents

Young, single and undereducated parents confront higher rates of poverty and a lack of social supports (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Menning, 2002). Boys raised in these families are more likely to be highly aggressive by age five. Early aggression, in turn, is strongly correlated with higher levels of violence and delinquency in adolescence (Tremblay et al., 2005).

It is the factors that often accompany single parenthood, including economic hardship and a lack of parental support and nurturing, that appear to shape a child's development, regardless of whether a family contains one parent or two (Baumrind, 1995).

- » In Shelby County, almost 10% of children (approximately 1,500 each year) are born to young, single mothers who lack high school diplomas (TN Department of Health, 2006).

Growing Up With A Parent In Prison

When a parent is incarcerated, children have fewer caregivers at home, are more likely to grow up in poverty, and may experience more violence in early childhood (Gabel & Johnston, 1995). Research suggests that when their fathers are incarcerated, young boys are likely to be more aggressive (Wildeman, 2009).

- » While the data is incomplete, at least 4% of children born in Shelby County each year (roughly 600 children) will have a parent spend time in prison (See notes for estimation method). Twenty-one percent of children with a parent in prison are under five years of age (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Child Abuse and Neglect

Young children who are abused or neglected are exposed to high levels of toxic stress, uncertainty and fear. These children experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and aggression (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, December 2008).

- » In 2008, 659 children in Shelby County between birth and age three were confirmed victims of abuse and neglect (TN Dept of Children's Services, 2008).

Parents and Caregivers Can Promote Social and Emotional Early Brain Development

Birth to 12 months

Parents and caregivers can do many things to promote children's early brain development. The following advice is drawn from **Zero to Three**, a national research and advocacy organization promoting the healthy development of young children.

A key to optimal child development is consistent, loving, and responsive care. In the first year of life, children begin to develop self-esteem, self-confidence, and trust. These are crucial social and emotional skills.

To support social and emotional development in the first year of life, parents should:

- » Provide their baby with a consistent schedule;
- » Respond when she initiates interaction (smiles, cries, laughs, babbles, reaches);
- » Praise him as he masters new tasks;
- » Remain calm and be consistent as she deals with frustration and anger;
- » Support her developing sense of identity by introducing her to language, music and food;
- » Nurture him through cuddling, talking, singing, reading and play (Zero to Three, 2009a).

12 to 24 months

Young toddlers are developing their sense of self and becoming more mobile. This means that they explore new situations and experiences. They are also developing their ability to recognize emotions. They are also learning how to share and interact with other people.

To support their one year old, parents and caregivers should:

- » Observe, compliment and praise her as she learns new skills;
- » Create opportunities for him to play with other children;
- » Help her practice taking turns;
- » Distract and redirect him to other tasks if he becomes frustrated or angry;
- » Provide her with stable routines and let her know about upcoming activities (Zero to Three, 2009b).

24 to 36 months

Older toddlers are developing a more distinct self-identity. They are also learning self-control and forming relationships with peers. As they turn two, toddlers also begin to use "pretend

play” to explore situations, feelings and thoughts. Older toddlers are also learning about rules, cooperation, and the consequences of misbehavior.

Parents and caregivers of older toddlers can support their social and emotional development in the following ways:

- » Schedule activities with peers and assist children as they “pretend play” their way through different situations and experiences;
- » Help children learn to name and express their emotions in constructive ways;
- » Assist children in observing and responding to their friends' emotions and experiences;
- » Provide toddlers with opportunities to practice sharing, taking turns, and working through conflict;
- » Help her complete new tasks and praise her success in problem solving as well as task completion;
- » Teach him how to resolve conflict through discussion;
- » Help her understand rules and the benefits of cooperation (Zero to Three, 2009c).

PreSchool As A Socializing Institution

Along with parents, preschool teachers play a major role in the social and emotional development of young children. Good preschool teachers provide children with developmentally appropriate experiences, followed by appropriate positive feedback and direction.

Because of normal variations in the development of young children, preschool teachers must be skilled observers of children's activities and ideas. This observation provides teachers with knowledge about individual children's abilities and also offers the opportunity to extend learning by asking thought-provoking questions and engaging children in additional activities at appropriate times. Preschool teachers benefit from specialized training in strategies that facilitate young children's social and emotional growth (Hanson, J. & Carta, J., 2006).

Young children who are identified by their preschool teachers as having significant deficits should be referred for early intervention services.

For more information on the well-being of children in Memphis and Shelby County, please visit [The Urban Child Institute](#), and [The State of Children in Memphis & Shelby County: Data Book](#).

[The Urban Child Institute \(TUCI\)](#) promotes optimal brain development for children from conception to age three. The Institute's [Center for Urban Child Policy](#) supports that mission by building our understanding of inputs to - and implications of - early brain development in our community.

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Estimation Note:

Glaze & Marushak (2009) reported on the percentage of children, by race, who had a parent imprisoned in 2007. To estimate the annual percentage of children in Shelby County who will have a parent go to prison, we multiplied the national rates by the number of children born in Shelby County, by race, for the last year of birth certificate data that is available (2006). We then totaled the number of children that the estimation indicated would have an incarcerated parent and divided by the total number of children born in Shelby County to derive a percentage of children born each year who will have a parent go to prison.