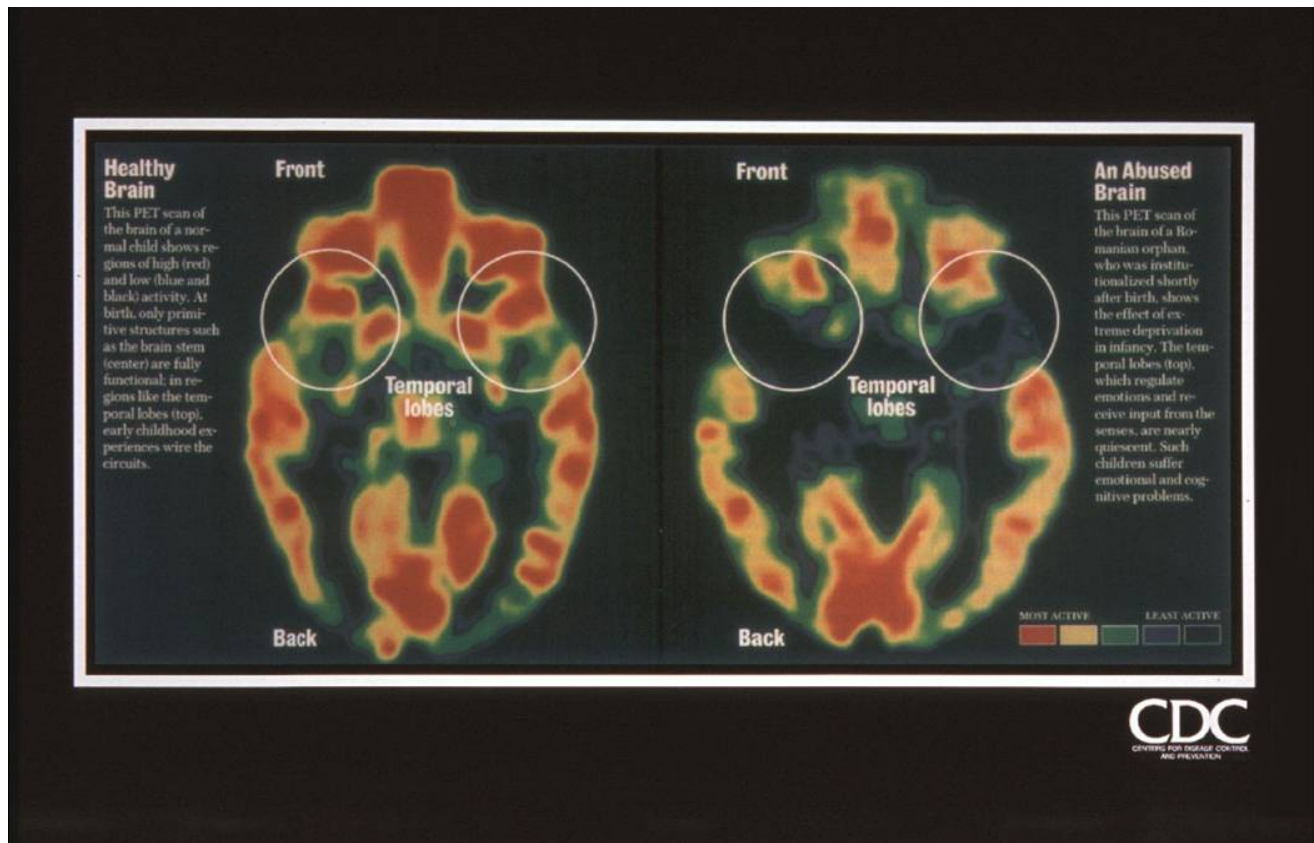


**GOOD HEALTH, STRONG FAMILIES, POSITIVE EARLY LEARNING EXPERIENCES  
An Overview of the Policy Agenda for Infants and Toddlers**

**Why focus on babies?**

Research shows that experiences in the earliest years of life play a critical role in a child’s ability to grow up healthy and ready to learn. Indeed, during the first three years of life, the brain undergoes its most dramatic development and children acquire the ability to think, speak, and reason. Our knowledge of the early years has been significantly enhanced by the incredible advances made by neuroscientists who have found that the way a baby reacts emotionally to how he or she is treated releases chemicals that affect his or her brain’s structure and functioning. As can be seen by the following photo, babies whose hearts are nurtured as carefully as their bodies and minds have more activity present in the brain and are more likely to become well-adjusted children and successful adults. Likewise, when experiences fail to support an infant’s or toddler’s biologically inherent desire to learn, grow, and succeed, “a child’s motivation diminishes, shifts, or finds problematic outlets.”<sup>1</sup> Ensuring that babies have good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences will lay the foundation for success throughout their lives.



**The Need to Invest Early**

Leading economists such as Dr. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate and Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, have done extensive research on the value of investing in early childhood programs and have found that dollars invested early in a child’s life yield extraordinary public returns. In

fact, research has shown that for every dollar invested in early childhood programs, savings of \$3.78 to \$17.07 can be expected.<sup>2</sup> While many of these savings directly benefit individuals, the public reaps far more of the benefits in terms of reduced crime, abuse, neglect, and welfare dependency while increasing educational performance and job training, leading to higher incomes and a better quality and more productive workforce. By investing early, we can build upon skills and have a longer timeframe in which to recoup the benefits of our investment.

### **Informing Public Policy**

While almost every social policy – from welfare reform to education to substance abuse and mental health treatment – affects infants and toddlers, the impact of these policies on very young children is seldom sufficiently addressed. We must translate what we know from science about the needs of infants and toddlers into effective, evidence-based policies and practices.

We need policies that support parents and other caregivers in providing young children with the foundations of early learning and healthy adjustment. The needs of infants and toddlers must be addressed in the context of their families, primarily by supporting parents in nurturing and teaching their children. School success begins not with learning ABC's as a preschooler, but with learning as an infant how to trust and feel secure, explore one's environment, and form close attachments. Research shows that it is these early experiences and warm, loving relationships that form "both the foundation and scaffold on which cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and moral development unfold."<sup>3</sup>

Children learn and grow through their relationships with parents and other caregivers. Policies that build strong families – starting even before a child is born – are the best way to point children toward later success in school and in life. Such policies must recognize that very young children have physical *and* mental health needs. These needs must be considered when supporting positive early learning experiences for infants and toddlers, both in their homes and in other settings. As leaders work to strengthen comprehensive services for young children, science dictates they include systems that support social and emotional development in order to substantially improve the course of children's growth.

Intervention with at-risk children must begin early. Policies that wait until children are already behind are inadequate – children who start behind, stay behind. The early years represent an unparalleled window of opportunity to support children. Research shows that programs that serve infants and toddlers – such as Early Head Start – can positively impact success in school, family self-sufficiency, and parental support of child development.<sup>4</sup> Devoting resources to programs to improve success in school for preschool-age and older children is important. But unfortunately, by the time they reach preschool, underprivileged children are often playing "catch up" with their more advantaged peers. Expanding funding for early interventions for these at-risk infants and toddlers will help them be fully prepared when they reach preschool. Developing such proactive policies today can reduce the need for more expensive reactive policies in the future, while helping to ensure that *all* children enter school healthy and ready to learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, James, Grunewald, Rob, and Reynolds, Arthur. 2006. The dollars and cents of investing early: Cost-benefit analysis in early care and education. *ZERO TO THREE Journal* 26 (6): 10-17.

<sup>3</sup> Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. 2002. *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of Early Head Start*. [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs\\_research/reports/impacts\\_exesum/impacts\\_execsum.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/ehs/ehs_research/reports/impacts_exesum/impacts_execsum.pdf) (accessed October 23, 2006).