

## 2. Nurture (as well as Nature) Matters

Nurture—not just nature—matters. Young children do not grow up in a vacuum, nor are their abilities set genetically. Both nature and nurture are involved in what children are able to attain. Children’s environments need to be stimulating, as well as safe and stable, for their minds to grow and develop. In particular, children need stable, nurturing families that provide attention, support, and a safe home environment—parents are their children’s first and most important teacher.

Brain and child development research, entirely consistent with common sense, has defined several fundamental and universal needs of young children for healthy growth and development:

- **Competent and confident parenting** that is constant and consistent throughout the early years of life (at least one, and preferably two, parent figures who provide nurturing, protection, and stimulation and with whom the child bonds and forms attachments)
- **Health and nutrition** (adequate food and exercise for physical and mental growth, protection against and response to disease and injury, and early identification and treatment of special health care needs)
- **Guidance and instruction** (help and practice in developing large and small motor skills, pre-literacy cognitive skills, and the ability to relate with adults and other children)
- **Constant, stable, appropriate supervision** (continuous adult oversight and support that enables the child to safely explore the environment)

Failure to meet any of these needs puts a child at developmental risk. The severity, duration, and number of unmet needs all impact the risk to the child.

Fortunately, most children are born healthy and into families that can provide them with all of the nurturing and support they need. At the same time, some parents struggle to provide that environment, and almost 3 in 10 babies manifest some risk factors at birth, with nearly 1 in 10 possessing several risk factors (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Single parenting, adolescent parenting, and parenting by parents with low education levels all are known to present risk to a child’s growth and development. Babies born at low birth weight or without adequate prenatal care are also vulnerable to health concerns.

Virtually all parents love their children and want to provide a nurturing environment for them; most are receptive to preventive and developmental services. There is a growing body of research and evidence that policies, practices, and programs, including those listed below, can be developed to meet children’s universal needs for:

- **Confident and competent parenting**—general child development information (through the media, at the hospital and doctor’s office, and at other places parents go to receive information); parenting education, home visiting, and family support programs and resource centers providing help to parents in nurturing their children; and income supports to ensure stability in family home life (including housing subsidies, the earned income tax credit, and other supports to meet basic needs)
- **Health and nutrition**—health insurance coverage, prenatal care, primary and preventive (well child) health services, and a medical home; nutrition programs; and early identification and treatment of developmental and other special health care needs

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- **Guidance and instruction**—pre-school programs that are developmentally appropriate and enable pre-school children (3-5) to interact and learn through more formal guidance and instruction, including enriched and more comprehensive programs and services through Head Start or other programs targeted to children with additional needs
- **Constant, stable, appropriate supervision**—affordable and accessible child care that provides developmentally appropriate care and supervision, available for families who need child care for children from birth through age 5; child care standards, training, technical assistance, and support to reduce turnover and help ensure the quality of care in formal settings; information and supports for informal caregivers (family, friend, and neighbor care) that enable them to provide safe and developmentally appropriate environments; and family leave policies that enable parents to stay at home when their children are very young

Research also has shown that the effectiveness of programmatic efforts to achieve gains in school readiness on a statewide or community-wide basis by meeting these universal needs is dependent on three important factors:

- The ability to identify and serve those children (and their families) at risk of otherwise not having these basic needs met
- The effectiveness in meeting those needs
- The extent to which they serve all children with these needs

### Sources for More Information

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