



Why the First Five Years Matter

FAST FACTS

The first five years of life are a period of extraordinary growth and development. During these early years, children's brains develop rapidly, relationships shape how they learn and grow, and the building blocks for future success are established. The experiences children have during this period influence every aspect of their development.

The evidence is clear: Investing in young children improves lifelong outcomes and generates lasting returns.

Rapid Development

Young children learn and grow at an extraordinary pace.

- More than one million new neural connections form every second during the first few years of life, building the foundation for learning, behavior, and health.¹
- By age five, children have developed foundational skills across language, thinking, movement, and social-emotional development that support future learning.²

Relationships Shape Development

Children develop through everyday interactions with parents, caregivers, educators, and other trusted adults.

- Responsive, back-and-forth interactions build early language and social skills and lay the groundwork for more complex learning.³
- Stable, nurturing relationships help children manage stress and support healthy brain development.⁴

Early Skills Build Future Success

Skills developed during the first five years help shape later learning and achievement.

- Early growth in vocabulary and communication predicts stronger academic achievement.⁵
- Children with stronger self-regulation in preschool perform better in literacy and mathematics during the early school years.⁶

Early Support Reduces the Need for Later Intervention

Identifying developmental needs early can improve outcomes and reduce the need for more intensive services later.

- Developmental screening helps identify concerns early and connect children to evaluation and support.⁷
- Long-running evaluations of major early childhood programs consistently find that participants need less special education and repeat a grade less often than comparable peers who did not participate.⁸

A Smart Investment

\$10.83

in benefits for every
\$1 invested

This estimate comes from the Chicago Child-Parent Center preschool program, one of the most rigorously studied early childhood interventions in the country.⁹ Building a strong foundation early can improve educational and health outcomes, strengthen the workforce, and reduce the need for more costly interventions later.

Benefits for Families	Benefits for Communities	Benefits for the Commonwealth
Early supports help children thrive while making it easier for parents to work, pursue education, and build financial stability.	Healthy early development contributes to stronger schools, a more prepared workforce, and more resilient communities.	Investing early improves lifelong outcomes while reducing long-term public costs.

Quality Matters

The size of the return on investment depends on how well a program is implemented.

Cost-benefit estimates like those cited above come from rigorously designed and implemented programs. In lower-quality settings, children show more modest academic, language, and skill outcomes.¹⁰

Endnotes

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Sources note: This brief uses findings from specific evaluated programs and research syntheses. Results vary with program design, quality, population served, and local context.