

The First Three Years Last Forever

A baby's brain is unique and precious. The way it develops will determine who he or she will become.

Genes may establish a child's potential, however it is day to day experiences that will help the child to fulfil that potential.

At birth a baby's brain is not fully developed. Most of the baby's brain actually develops after the birth – in the first three years of life.

Neglected children can face lifelong learning, behavioural and social difficulties.

It is the child's experiences during these years that enable the brain to grow.

The Brainwave Trust has been formed to make sure that parents, caregivers, those who work with children and the Government know that:

The first three years of life are the most important.

They can last forever.

You can make a difference.

Abuse and neglect in childhood have been linked to depression, mental health problems, family violence, aggressive behaviour, criminal offending and suicide in adulthood.

How The Brain Develops

A baby's brain begins to form within days of conception.

By birth the brain has most of the brain cells but few (about 15%) are connected to each other. Over the next three years the brain will connect up. It is these connections that build the brain. They will enable the baby to see, hear, learn and think in a more developed way.

When a baby is touched with warmth and care, the brain is flooded with hormones. These enable the child to form the brain connections he or she will need to develop feelings of warmth, love and empathy towards others.

Experience

Brain connections are formed in response to the baby's day to day experiences.

Infants learn about the world through their senses.

A baby's experiences of the world – what he or she sees, hears, feels, tastes and smells – trigger electrical activity in the brain, enabling it to form connections and grow.

Good experiences

Infants who have received stimulation, in a loving, caring environment, develop healthy brains which will help them become competent adults.

Poor Quality Experiences

A baby's brain is equally vulnerable to poor quality experiences.

The brains of children who do not get enough care, attention and stimulation may not grow properly.

They lack the experiences they need to form enough connections to enable them to reach their full potential.

Violence and abuse in these early years can also have a severe affect on brain development. The brain connects up in an unhealthy way. Withdrawal (dissociation) or aggression then becomes 'normal' behaviour for these children. It can also disrupt their ability to learn.

Why are the first three years so important?

There are prime times for developing different parts of the brain. Many of these windows of opportunity start to close in the first three years. The skills associated with these parts of the brain then become difficult, and in some cases impossible, to learn fully.

A warm, loving and stimulating environment in these years will provide the experiences a child needs to become a happy, secure and bright adult. Poor experiences during this time can have lasting negative effects on a child's brain.

Giving Children The Best Start

Before birth

Brain development begins very soon after conception.

Low stress and a healthy diet in pregnancy will give the baby's brain the best start.

Alcohol, drugs and cigarettes should be avoided as they can cross the placenta and damage the brain of an unborn baby. Even small amounts of alcohol can be harmful.

Poor experiences in the first three years can cause lasting behavioural and developmental problems.

After the birth

Infants need a loving, stimulating, secure environment. They need lots of interaction.

- Smile and have fun with them
- Talk, read and sing to them
- Cuddle them and give them lots of attention
- Promote safe opportunities for them to explore the world.

Children are naturally curious. Responding to their curiosity will provide the right stimulation at the right time.





Make sure children have regular eye, hearing, health and developmental checks and that they are meeting their milestones.

Child Care

Children need quality care. Make sure all caregivers provide the nurturing and stimulation children need.

Flashcards and gadgets

Love, care and attention do far more to boost learning than educational toys, computer games, flashcards or tapes.

If you are concerned about a child's development ...

Don't 'wait and see' – get help early. Even small delays in treatment count.

If a parent is not coping...

Parents suffering from depression or living in a violent situation need immediate help. Contact a trusted friend, family member, Plunket nurse, GP or health worker. Early help reduces the risk of the parent and child suffering long-term effects.

Children at extreme risk...

If a child is at risk from violence, abuse or neglect, contact CYFS or the police immediately. Children cannot wait.

It is never too late to change the life of a child.



Brainwave Trust

Brainwave is a charitable trust funded by grants and donations.

Our mission is to use the scientific research on brain development to enable children in New Zealand to reach their full potential and to improve their well-being and that of their families and communities.

The Trust has been set up by leading paediatricians and medical, educational, legal, academic and business professionals dedicated to making sure that this crucial information on brain development becomes widely known.

For further information Brainwave has:

- Professionally trained presenters available to give presentations on early brain development
- Educational videos and written material
- A website as an ongoing resource. www.brainwave.org.nz

TV programmes, videos and computer games do not provide the type of interaction that children need. Carefully select the programmes children watch and limit the time they spend watching TV, videos and playing computer games.

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