

# Building Baby's Brain: What Child Care Can Do

The University of Georgia/College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Most of our children are being raised jointly by parents and child-care providers. More than half of all mothers of one-year-olds work outside the home (along with an even higher percentage of their fathers), and the percentages rise as children grow older.

Even if parents provide all the security, nurturing and enrichment that promotes healthy brain development, child-care providers must support and complement parents' caregiving for the best outcomes. This fact sheet discusses the components of quality child care that build healthy brains (and every other part!) in children.

## Child Care — Where?

About one-quarter of infants and toddlers with working mothers are cared for by their parents in the home. The rest are in some type of child care by others:

- one-quarter in child-care centers or schools;
- one-fifth in family child care;
- one-fifth in a relative's home;
- one-tenth in the child's home by a relative;
- the rest in the child's home by a non-relative.

*Where* a child receives care is less important than the *quality* of care she receives. Lots of research has examined the necessary conditions in children's care arrangements, whether by parents or child-care providers, that help children grow up healthy and happy.

## What is Quality Child Care?

Most parents describe quality child care as "good parenting." Is there any way to ensure that child care includes "good parenting?" Although there are no guarantees, research has shown that the following conditions are necessary:

- ***Small groups of children*** — No more than 6 to 8 babies, 6 to 10 toddlers, or 16 to 20 preschoolers, always with at least 2 adults in each group.

- ***A primary caregiver*** — Infants and toddlers especially need nurturing from a consistent caregiver.

- ***Scheduling that keeps children with the same caregiver*** — Rather than changing primary caregivers on an arbitrary schedule.

- ***Low staff turnover*** — Again, to prevent children's anxiety about changes in the very important adults in their lives.

- ***Active parent participation*** — To help ensure trust, communication, and consistency between home and child care.

- ***Training***— Staff training in child development is often

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linked to higher quality care, along with clean, safe and stimulating environments.

### Low-Quality Child Care — The Results

Some parents choose child care based on two factors that have little to do with quality: how much it costs, and how convenient it is to reach on regular travel routes. Recent studies have concluded that the quality of care in most child-care settings today is only fair or poor. Only about one in six children in child care is in a high-quality setting. In terms of brain development, what could happen to children receiving poor quality care? Here are some possible impacts:

- **Language skills** — Children exposed to lots of language, in reading, singing, and talking, develop more neuron connections in the part of the brain that handles language. Children not involved in lots of verbal interaction, as can happen when one adult cares for many youngsters, have brains that are measurably less developed.

- **Thinking skills** — Exposure to lots of language, as described above, is directly linked with advanced thinking skills. These children understand and can solve more difficult problems at a younger age than toddlers in poor quality settings.

- **Physical Skills** — Toddler brains thrive when youngsters have the opportunity to climb, play, splash, and run. Exercise actually causes the parts of the brain that control movement to develop more neuron connections. Leaving a child in a playpen all day, for example, slows his motor development.

- **Emotional control** — Many people don't realize that brain development also helps determine a person's emotional tendencies. Infants raised with inconsistent routines, changing caregivers, and stressful environments are more anxious and more impulsive. They also may be less caring toward others and have fewer problem-solving skills. Abused or neglected children often suffer from similar brain development problems. This lack of healthy emotional experiences early in life may contribute to a lack of emotional control as a child grows older.

### What Can You Do?

Remember: Where a child receives care is less important than the quality of care she receives. Most parents provide excellent care for their children. Many child-care settings also provide excellent care. Early brain development can flourish in either setting. Deficits that occur in the early years may be overcome with later enrichment, though the process will likely be more difficult.

Try to ensure that the child care you provide, or that you find for your child, is the best quality available. If you use a child-care provider, make sure that you talk frequently and build a close partnership. When it comes to brain development, the first years last forever!

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