

Early Life

Early childhood is a unique period of opportunity for building a foundation of lifelong habits that can vastly improve lifetime health and financial outcomes. However, current programs to support this stage of life, such as high-quality daycare, nurturing environments for children, and facilitated access to medical services and parental support, are only available to a portion of the population. Even when they are available, they are often ineffective. Learning, creativity, and physical activities that foster positive growth come naturally to young children, often in the context of play, so supporting development in childhood does not necessarily mean giving children more work and responsibility. Rather than shrinking early childhood by making early education more like schools for older children, we should consider extending it to leverage the special abilities that develop during this period and subsequently drive future life success.

Notable Statistics

- **Adverse experiences** account for 1/2 of all psychiatric disorders in children and 1/3 of disorders in adults.¹ Childhood experiences are powerful determinants of well-being across the lifespan.
- Only 30% of children ages 3 to 5 years old in the U.S. are enrolled in **full-time preschools**.²
- **Comprehensive, high-quality education programs** lead to an estimated 13% annual return on every dollar spent.³
- **Children spend less time playing** than in the recent past. (Time for play 25% from 1981 to 1997).⁴
- **Routine childhood immunization** was estimated to prevent 322 million illnesses for 78.6 million children born between 1994 and 2013, saving an estimated \$402B in direct medical costs and \$1.5T in societal costs.⁵

Areas for Investigation

- Identify how risks and advantages in early childhood compound over time and lead to disparities in well-being.
- Identify how we can use longer lives to redefine the meaning of childhood, what it entails, and how long it lasts.
- Analyze how the development of early social-emotional skills are drivers of life success.
- Define and analyze the benefits accrued to the private sector for providing parental and family support.
- Identify how to extend childhood propensities for learning and exploration to other life stages.



In modern times, early childhood is a period in life designed to give children time and space to learn, play, and explore. Children are particularly open to experiences and activities that help build social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Acquiring these skills leads to future learning, motivation, productivity, health, and resilience to the challenges faced over a long life.⁶ On the other hand, difficulties in early childhood can lead to lifelong problems that have considerable personal and societal costs.⁷ Early childhood is thus a period of great opportunity, as well as risk. For example, our belief that early childhood performance sets the stage for adult success puts pressure on children to “perform” at increasingly younger ages. This is related to a growing emphasis on academics in preschool while cutting back on free play.^{4,8}

One cost of this trend toward emphasizing early performance is that it shrinks early childhood as a developmental stage. Given the potential advantages of this stage, however, it seems that we should be considering ways that early childhood can be extended. Multiple studies have found that children’s flexibility and creative thinking can lead them to outperform adults on some learning tasks.^{9,10} Increasing the number of years in early childhood and fostering this flexibility and creative thinking may be very important for lifelong learning and retraining. Increased appreciation and understanding of children’s unique abilities may also inform novel cognitive and learning strategies during other life stages.

Early childhood is also an important time for establishing lifelong healthy behaviors. Creating environments that encourage children’s active play is important in promoting engagement in physical activity throughout life.¹¹ This is also the time in life to establish healthy eating habits, as childhood obesity has been linked to chronic disease later in life.

Policies and programs that strengthen support for families are essential for improving the quality of longer lives. Despite the proven benefits of high-quality childcare, only one third of young children in the U.S. are currently enrolled in full-time preschool.² Economic models suggest that comprehensive, high-quality early education and childcare programs are excellent public investments, delivering a 13% annual return on every dollar spent.³ High quality programs help children develop foundational skills that contribute to future success and well-being, while also helping parents pursue adult education, employment, and higher income opportunities. Increasing social mobility for families helps decrease children’s exposure to stressful experiences (e.g., abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction) that are powerful determinants of mental and physical health across the lifespan.

The private sector also stands to gain from investing in early childhood. Providing telehealth and in-person prenatal and parenting support, developing high-quality onsite childcare, and providing flexible working hours to accompany the schedules of working parents are examples of cost effective investments that help companies recruit talented employees, reduce turnover, and increase employee productivity and engagement.^{12,13}

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Endnotes

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