



LOOKING AHEAD: Research supports that early childhood provides a crucial opportunity to shape a healthy, happy and smart future.

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Get the early years right



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AS A community it is time we really understood the importance of the early years of life. If we can get these right then we will make a difference to life trajectories and build a strong, healthy, smart community of people.

There is so much research evidence that shows that what happens zero to five years affects future learning, and health and well-being outcomes.

The World Health Organisation states “the many challenges faced by adults, such as mental health issues, obesity, heart disease, criminality, and poor literacy and numeracy,

can be traced back to early childhood”.

It is critical then, that we value the first years of life. We must do all we can – as individuals, parents, teachers, family members, community members, and voters – to ensure young children, services, and families are supported. Commitments to children and healthy nurturing childhoods will bring about important societal benefits.

Early childhood provides a crucial opportunity to shape long-term trajectories. Once this opportunity has passed it is increasingly difficult (and typically more costly) to alter course.

Brain research is particularly compelling. In a child’s first three years of life the brain grows to 80-90% of the adult size. During these first three years, important connections between the brain’s nerve cells are developed and there is rapid growth in

cognitive, language and social and emotional development.

A child’s early experiences and environments shape how the brain develops and “hard-wires”. Brain development during these early years is greatly

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— Professor James Heckman

affected by environmental experiences and influences. Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child communicates how the early

years provide a significant opportunity for development, but negative experiences during this critical period can impact outcomes throughout life.

Parenting has an important influence on children’s healthy development and developing brain architecture.

As a community we need to find ways of supporting parents and families. As individuals we need to learn more about what it takes to be a responsive caring parent.

When parents engage in responsive interactions with their young children and build nurturing attachment relationships they are actually investing in the future.

Strong attachment relationships positively influence children’s thinking and language abilities, social and emotional development, physical and mental health, and skills and behaviours

into their adult lives.

Our politicians seem to think that all we care about is the economy. I am not sure this is true for most people. Nobel Prize-winning University of Chicago Economics Professor James Heckman believes there are great gains to be had by investing in the early years – which he says is the place where human potential is developed.

Professor Heckman says, “The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five. Starting at age three or four is too little too late, as it fails to recognise that skills beget skills in a complementary and dynamic way. Efforts should focus on the first years for the greatest efficiency and effectiveness. The best investment is in quality early childhood development from birth to five.”