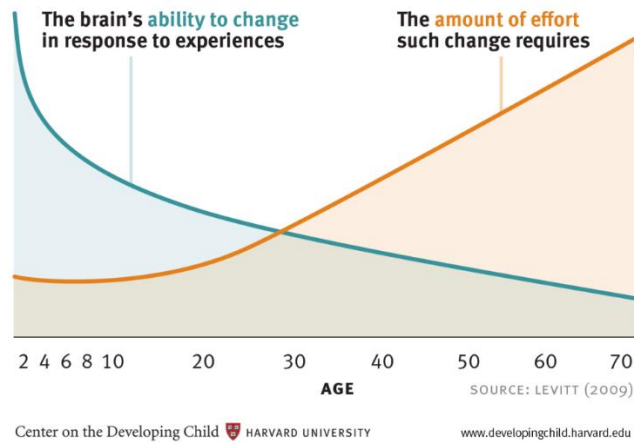


Important Considerations for Early Childhood Learning

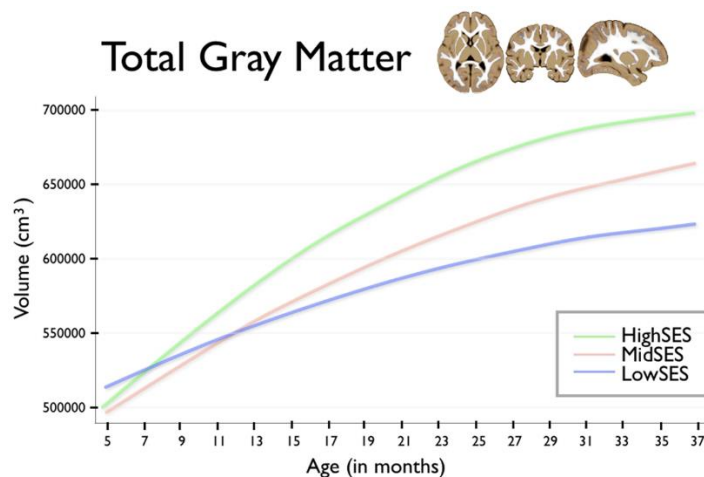
Tracey Sparrow, Ed.D.

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It's important to shift the conversation away from early childhood education, which implies some sort of formal teaching, to early learning, which recognizes that children are learning from the moment of their birth, through the relationships they have with people in their world. The quality of relationships and experiences in the earliest years have strong implications for future success. The term "early childhood education" is also often equated with four – year old kindergarten, but since the core structures of the brain are 85% complete by age three, four year old kindergarten is too late! The chart below illustrates the importance of early experiences:



Other research from UW- Madison has found that living in poverty is associated with brain volume, which has implications for future learning and confirms the urgency of supporting brain development in the earliest years, particularly for children living in poverty.



Some things to consider:

1. New research from Harvard University indicates that infants are forming 1,000,000 new neural connections per second! We need to encourage building these neural pathways to lay a positive foundation for future learning. Most of these connections form in the context of relationships and develop through what scientists call “serve and return” interactions. We must take advantage of this fact by understanding how to build strong neural pathways to support language and literacy skills, as well as a strong emotional foundation. We can encourage everyone involved in a child’s life to provide these interactions through **talking, reading and singing** to them.
2. Children develop in the context of their families, so it is critical that we support families by building their knowledge base around child development and reducing their stress. **Supporting the caregivers** will support the child. Stress, if it is consistent and unrelenting, will actually constrain the growth of a child’s brain so any initiative that makes a difference must attend to stress reduction. And, we know now that stress takes residence in a child’s body and leads to the likelihood of future health issues in adulthood, including cancer and heart disease.
3. Children learn best through **play and exploration**. According to Zero to Three, “Through play, children are learning how things work, how to use their bodies, how to solve problems, and how to get along with others. Play is an avenue through which children can express their emotions, build relationships with others, and master difficult experiences.”
4. Social emotional development is more predictive of long term success than academic skills in the earliest years. We need to lay the foundation for **social emotional competence** in the first years – again through supportive and consistent relationships.
5. Language development is key to future academic success. Vocabulary is built through experience and through hearing and using many different words. We need to ensure that **families know how to access experiences and that they are reading a wide variety of books** to their child – every day!
6. We must ensure **caregivers (in home and outside of the home) understand what young children need and know how to provide it**. They must understand the importance of consistent, supportive caregiving to mitigate the effects of toxic stress, as well as the interconnectedness of language development to strong relationships.