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The Importance of Early Childhood Development and Learning

Young children's brains begin to develop even before they are born and they start learning long before they start elementary school. A high-quality experience in these earliest years - both at home and at child care or preschool - can help make sure that young children get the healthy and strong start they need to begin school ready to learn and grow. This fact sheet will explain some key information about early childhood development and learning.

What does a high quality early childhood experience look like?

Providing a high quality early childhood experience is not rocket science. Babies and young children need love, support, and a chance to explore and learn about the world around them in a safe environment so that they can grow up healthy and prepared for school. Parents can make this happen by talking to, playing with or reading to their children on a regular basis. It is also important for them to make sure their children feel safe and loved at all times! Many parents are not able to be with their children all day, every day however. They often have to go to work, sometimes several jobs, or take care of other family members. When parents cannot be around, young children can benefit from being in a safe environment with another caring relative or adult and friends their age - especially when they have the opportunity to read and learn and play games! Sometimes it's in a home and other times in a center or school. Can you think of a place like that? Maybe Freedom Schools?

What are some things you can do to help young children in your family and community develop and learn and get ready for school

- Offer to read to or play with your younger brother or sister and any other young children in your neighborhood - even babies! Even if they cannot talk yet, their minds are working hard all the time and when you interact with them you are helping them grow.
- Ask your parents if you can set aside a few nights a week to play games or read as a family. Spending time together as a family is a great way to make learning fun!
- Do not hit or yell at your younger siblings when you want them to stop doing something. Sometimes it's easy to lose patience with younger brothers and sisters, especially when they're crying or throwing a temper-tantrum. But snapping at them does not help them to learn how to behave correctly and can actually do more harm than good. Instead try to be patient and calm them down with loving words or by trying to figure out what's wrong. Often when babies cry they are just trying to tell us something is wrong and don't have the words to explain it!

How do we know that high quality early childhood experiences are so important for young children?

Scientists have been studying the way young children's brains work for a long time and most of them agree that positive experiences in early childhood, both inside and outside the home, are very important and provide lifelong benefits for children!

- Research studies comparing young children who go to high quality preschool programs to those who do not often find that children who go to preschool are more prepared for kindergarten than those who do not.
- Some studies even show that these benefits follow children throughout their entire lives! Children who go to high quality preschool are more likely to go to graduate high school, go to college and find a good job than those who do not. (Although you shouldn't think that if you didn't go to preschool you won't be able to do these things - remember we can all make a difference in ourselves, regardless of how old we are!)
- Important economists - including a winner of the Nobel Prize - believe that if we get more children to go to high quality preschools and have good experiences in the home when they are young, our country will get richer and more fair as a whole. Everyone wins when young children learn!

Who supports early childhood development and learning?

Sadly, not all young children get to have a high quality early childhood experience. The government provides some support for early childhood through Head Start and other programs (which some of you might have attended), but less than half of the children who could benefit from these programs get to because there is not enough money to serve them. Many different groups of people want the government to spend more local, state and federal money on early childhood because they know how important it is!

- Military leaders want more children to have quality early childhood experiences because too many teenagers and young adults are not allowed to join the armed forces due to a lack of education, health problems or trouble with the law.
- Business leaders support high quality early childhood experiences because they want their future workers and leaders to be better educated and they want more people to be able to afford the products they make.
- Voters of both political parties say they want politicians to spend more money on quality early childhood programs. The Strong Start for America's Children Act would do just that!