



Backgrounder

Early support helps parents give children a good beginning.

Too many Australian children still do not have a good beginning in life because of the wide range of difficulties many parents face during children's early years.

Any parent can find themselves needing help due to everyday challenges such as: going through family conflict, separation or divorce; working extended hours to make ends meet; being isolated from close family or friends; coping with their own or a child's mental or physical health problems; having limited education or parenting knowledge; struggling with a financial crisis or poverty; or dealing with domestic violence, abuse or imprisonment. With unemployment on the rise in Australia and with parents facing increasing pressures, it is even more important to support parents in giving their children a good start in life.

The goal of Good Beginnings is to address risk factors and emerging difficulties and strengthen protective factors to improve the chances of a good outcome for children and their families.

All Good Beginnings' parenting and early childhood programs are based on evidence that proactive assistance during a child's early years has profound benefits, and that one way to provide good outcomes for children is to support and empower mums and dads to be the best parents they can be. In practice, this may include:

- free group activities such as parenting education programs, supported playgroups, fathering initiatives or literacy and numeracy programs, often with schools as community service "hubs"
- at-home volunteer support visiting for parents with babies or young children
- targeted support groups or intensive extended support for vulnerable or at-risk families with complex needs, from parents in prison to families involved with child protection services.

Why are the early years so important?

Early experience literally shapes a child's brain architecture. When a baby is born it has all its brain cells but it not the connections or synapses between these cells. If a child has a safe, loving, nurturing environment, these connections increase at a great rate, so that when a child is three it has a healthy brain architecture that provides a strong foundation for learning, behaviour and good health. If, however, a baby is raised in a stressful environment, or an environment that does not respond favourably to the baby's attempts at interaction, these connections do not happen; brain development is disrupted, predisposing the child to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour and physical and mental health.

Research shows that the early childhood years – from birth to eight – is the time of most rapid learning and development. Children's experiences and the nurturing and care they receive during these years have a profound, cumulative impact on their future social, physical, emotional and cognitive achievement.

On an educational level, for example, the far-reaching benefits of early childhood development programs include: improved educational outcomes; higher levels of verbal, mathematical and intellectual achievement; higher IQs; reduced need for special education; lower drop-out rates; and higher enrolment in tertiary education.

Children are a worthy investment

Growing international and local evidence supports the fact that investments made in the first few years of life have substantial benefits for children, their families, and society. Creating the right conditions for early childhood development is likely to be more effective and less costly than addressing problems at a later age. The earlier support is provided the better – children’s development and education begins at birth, not when they start school.

Research shows that good quality early childhood programs addressing parenting and early learning experiences for children provide life-time returns on investment of 17 per cent every year.¹

The benefit-cost ratios are highest when interventions are conducted with at-risk children, and may also be particularly high for specific population groups, such as Indigenous families. For example, quality early childhood learning can reduce educational disadvantage for the most vulnerable children.

According to Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman: “Once a child falls behind, he or she is likely to remain behind. Remediation for impoverished early environments becomes progressively more costly the later it is attempted in the life cycle of the child. The track record for criminal rehabilitation, adult literacy and late teenage public job training programs is remarkably poor...Impoverished early environments are powerful predictors of adult failure on a number of social and economic dimensions.”

The more children (and their parents) are supported and encouraged, the better equipped they will be to deal with life’s inevitable ups and downs, and the more likely they are to develop into well adjusted, healthy, productive, caring adults.

About Good Beginnings

Good Beginnings is a national not-for-profit organisation that provides practical, community-based parenting programs and support to ensure children get the best start in life. It offers 80 programs at 29 sites around Australia, where more than 100 Good Beginnings staff and 600 trained volunteers support, educate and encourage parents to provide them with the knowledge, practical skills, community networks and confidence to raise their children well.

For further information on Good Beginnings, visit www.goodbeginnings.net.au

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¹Karoly, L, Kilburn, M, and Cannon, J, 2005, *Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results*, Future Promise, RAND Corporation