

Good Start, Grow Smart: President Bush's Plan to Strengthen Early Learning

President Bush has made the education of every child in America among his top domestic priorities. To that end, he signed the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which proposed reforms expressing his confidence in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* is important because it ensures that public schools are teaching students what they need to know to be successful in life. It also draws attention to the need to prepare children before they start school. What children learn before coming to school is vital to their success. The first five years of a child's life are a time of tremendous physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth. Children enter the world with many needs in order to grow: love, nutrition, health, social and emotional security, and stimulation in the important skills that prepare them for school success. Children also enter the world with a great capacity to learn. It should be our goal as a Nation to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to learn the fundamental skills needed to be successful in school.

The Importance of Early Childhood Cognitive Development

Early childhood generally refers to the period from birth through age 5. A child's cognitive development during early childhood, which includes building skills such as pre-reading, language, vocabulary, and numeracy, begins from the moment a child is born. Developmental scientists have found that the brain acquires a tremendous amount of information about language in the first year of life even before infants can speak. By the time babies utter or understand their first words, they know which particular sounds their language uses, what sounds can be combined to create words, and the tempo and rhythm of words and phrases.

There is a strong connection between the development a child undergoes early in life and the level of success that the child will experience later in life. For example, infants who are better at distinguishing the building blocks of speech at 6 months are better at other more complex language skills at 2 and 3 years of age and better at acquiring the skills for learning to read at 4 and 5 years of age. Not surprisingly, a child's knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten is one of the most significant predictors of what that child's tenth grade reading ability will be.

When young children are provided an environment rich in language and literacy interactions and full of opportunities to listen to and use language constantly, they can begin to acquire the essential building blocks for learning how to read. A child who enters school without these skills runs a significant risk of starting behind and staying behind.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Young children are cared for in a wide variety of settings. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 38 percent of children age 5 or younger receive care on a regular basis from parents only. The remaining 62 percent of children are in one or more arrangements,