

Developmental Disparities Can Emerge Early

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Recent research has found that developmental disparities can emerge early, even before preschool. This section highlights some key research findings that, taken together, underscore the importance of starting early to address developmental disparities.

- **Early childhood disparities exist across race/ethnicities and across income levels** in the areas of health, social-emotional development, and cognitive development.
 - **Health:** Low-income and minority children are more likely to be obese and to suffer from asthma.
 - **Social-emotional development:** Low-income and minority children are more likely to have mental health problems; their mothers are also more likely to suffer depression, which can interfere with engaging in warm and supportive parenting.
 - **Cognitive development:** Low-income and minority children have lower levels of school readiness at kindergarten entry.[7]
- **Poverty experienced in early childhood has greater negative impacts on development than poverty experienced later in childhood.** Poverty experienced when children were ages 0 to 5 had a greater impact on years of completed schooling and high school completion than poverty experienced when children were ages 6 to 10.[4]
- **At-risk children benefit more from high quality child care than children who are not at-risk.** Children in low-income families and children of mothers with low levels of education benefitted the most from high-quality child care. These benefits are found across social and cognitive measures of children's development.[6],[8],[9]
- **For at-risk children, the cognitive benefits of center-based child care (such as pre-kindergarten) are stronger than for children not at-risk.** Increasing access to center-based care for disadvantaged children may be particularly important for reducing disparities.[8]
- **High quality early childhood programs can significantly reduce early disparities in cognitive outcomes.** Programs targeting at-risk children that are intense (full day) and begin very early (in infancy) have clear and strong impacts on young children's cognitive outcomes, their later academic achievement, and even their adult outcomes, such as earnings.[1],[2],[3],[10]
- **Income disparities in child outcomes (cognitive, social, behavioral, and health domains) are evident at 9 months and grow larger by 24 months of age.** Children from low-income families (defined as below 200% of the poverty threshold) score lower on cognitive assessments, are less likely to be in excellent or very good health, and are less likely to receive positive behavior ratings at 9 and 24 months of age. Nearly half of all infants and toddlers – approximately 1.5 million children – are in low-income families.[5]
- **The most consistent and prominent developmental risk factors for children are low family income and low maternal education.**[5]
- **Cognitive disparities are evident at 9 months, and increase by 24 months, across the following groupings of children:** minority vs. white children; children of mothers with less than a high school diploma versus mothers with a Bachelor's degree, and children whose home language is English versus another language.[5]

- **Interventions to support young children should start (very) early in life.** Given that differences in development are being detected as early as 9 months and grow by 24 months, there is a need to intervene early in children's lives to address disparities. Interventions should be high quality, comprehensive, and continuous.[5]

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