

# [Making the Connection – How Parents Influence the Young Brain](#)

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“The first five years last a lifetime”

Did you know that between ages 0-3 years, your child’s brain grows from approximately 25 per cent to 80-90 per cent of its adult size? It is during these years that environmental experiences and influences have the greatest impact on brain development. Both positive and negative early experiences influence the formation of connections between neurons (brain cells), enriching or weakening innate potential, “laying either a strong or a fragile platform on which all further development and learning of the person, the body and the mind is built” (p 18). In early childhood, neural pathways are ‘hard-wired’ through repeated use, or lost through ‘pruning’.

As a parent, you play a crucial role in your child’s development and determining his or her long-term opportunities. Evidence shows that the quality of parenting and care and the resulting home environment has a greater influence on a child’s intellectual and social development than a family’s socio-economic status. You can have a positive impact on your child’s early learning through activities such as reading, teaching nursery rhymes and songs, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers and visiting the library. Another way to improve your child and family’s wellbeing and find informal social support is to build social connections: “families with rich social support networks have increased access to information, resources and friendship networks which assist them in their day-to-day lives and in the parenting of young children” (p. 258).

Babies develop their sense of self and security by developing relationships with parents, and this connection is heavily influenced by parent behaviours. When you tune into your baby’s facial expressions, sounds and movements and respond warmly, you are setting the foundation for secure parent/caregiver-child attachment. Attachment is the platform for emotional regulation, which is your child’s ability to manage and control emotions and behaviours. Children with secure attachment “function better across a range of domains including emotional, social and behavioural adjustment, as well as peer-rated social status and school achievement, in addition to having better physical outcomes” (p 29).

Poor parenting behaviours, including strict and erratic discipline, infrequent positive parental involvement, and inadequate monitoring and supervision, are linked to antisocial behaviour in children. Poor parental responsiveness is associated with a negative effect on language development. Caring and proactive parenting behaviours, such as praise, affection and boundary-setting, are linked to positive child self-esteem and high social and academic capabilities.

During the first five years of life, play is key to your child’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (see earlier article “Play School: Open Wide, Learn Inside (and Out)” for further discussion). Studies demonstrate that play “contributes to verbalisation, vocabulary, language comprehension, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation” (p 31). It also has

a strong positive effect on children's transition to formal education, especially when combined with high quality relationships.

For further reading, see [http://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download\\_file/id/274/filename/Better-systems-better-chances.pdf](http://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/command/download_file/id/274/filename/Better-systems-better-chances.pdf)



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