



BRIEF

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Healthy Child Development Through Prevention Science

National Prevention Science Coalition To Improve Lives

The best way to improve the American workforce in the 21st century is to invest in early childhood education, to ensure that even the most disadvantaged children have the opportunity to succeed alongside their more advantaged peers. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

Early childhood education is but one of many prevention strategies that can help the U.S. ensure the health and well-being of all its children, in the context of family, school, neighborhood, and community. Prevention science is one of the best avenues to promote the healthy development of children through the implementation of evidence-based policies and solutions. A comprehensive report by the Institute of Medicine entitled [Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities](#) makes a case for the critical role that prevention science needs to play in healthy child development.

What is prevention science? The broad multidisciplinary field of prevention science has two main goals: (1) to better understand the origins and development of behavioral and physical health problems as well as positive outcomes; and (2) to develop, test, refine and scale prevention strategies (practices, interventions, and policies) for better life outcomes. Over many decades, [prevention science](#) has identified the most influential factors at many levels that can contribute to problem development as well as those factors that can buffer children from ill effects.

What are major influences for child development? Conditions that not only lead to poor child development, but further arise as more severe problems in adolescence and adulthood, include: poverty and related adversity, poor parenting skills, family dysfunction, neighborhood and community disorder and decay, discrimination/racism, and inadequately equipped schools. Although prevention science cannot completely eliminate all of these negative conditions, it has been shown to reduce their severity and prevent the adverse consequences for child development to some extent. The good news, however, is that the brain's sensitivity to the environment provides us with windows of [opportunity to intervene](#) and provide supportive services that will insulate children from adversity, and ultimately improving brain development and function, and increasing the odds that children will thrive.

Why is prevention essential to healthy child development? The social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health of children strongly predicts many later [outcomes](#) in adolescence and adulthood, such as mental health status (e.g., depression, suicide); substance abuse; high school graduation; employment; delinquency and criminality; the quality of partner and family relationships; obesity; and major health problems (e.g., cardiovascular, diabetes, cancer). In this way, the fiscal soundness of evidence-based prevention strategies has been well documented in terms of [return on investment](#).

What is needed for healthy child development? Revitalizing impoverished neighborhoods, supporting families, and providing healthy opportunities and experiences for children have long-standing effects on child development. Coordinating services in the community to provide children with these proven positive experiences can create a new generation that is ready to learn, able to self-regulate emotion, and exhibit prosocial behavior, thus improving conditions for the entire community. Selecting evidence-based programs and other strategies is necessary but policy-makers need to also ensure through [high-quality implementation](#) that evidence-based programs have intended full impact.

Here is a sampling of evidence-based prevention strategies (policies, programs, other solutions):

- High-quality programming in [preschools](#) for all children but especially for children in poverty
- [Effective parenting](#) practices supporting healthy child development
- Public health strategies to prevent [child abuse and neglect](#)
- Strategies for promoting well-being in the [child welfare system](#)
- [Juvenile justice and delinquency prevention](#)
- [Prevention of school violence](#)
- Prevention of [cyberbullying](#)
- Prevention science applied to [poverty](#) issues
- Prevention of youth [substance abuse](#) via [integrative strategies](#)

Here are two examples of specific policies that have the potential to impact healthy child development.

- 1) Given that children in elementary school engage in too much sedentary behavior and not enough moderate-to-brisk physical activity, evidence-based policy for [school physical activity](#) has the potential to improve child health and reduce childhood obesity.
- 2) A stronger policy for high-quality and accessible [early childhood education](#) contributes to [substantial benefits](#) in terms of children’s development of attentiveness, impulse control, persistence, cognitive skills, and teamwork, reductions in costs associated with remediation, social services, and criminal justice, and increases in adult work productivity.

There are many policy-based strategies that have accumulated evidence. These references describe several policies across many areas pertinent to children’s healthy development.

[Komro and colleagues \(2013\): Beyond the clinic: Improving child health through evidence-based community development. BMC Pediatrics, 13, 172-180.](#)

Towards the end of this article, there are two extensive tables: “Policy-relevant community strategies by level of evidence” and “Policy briefs for strategies by level of evidence”

[Preventing Poverty's Impact and Persistence](#)

[AEI/Brookings Working Group on Poverty](#)

Prevention science offers many tested strategies in terms of program, policies and other solutions that can contribute cost effective ways to promote healthy child development throughout the nation. The National Prevention Science Coalition To Improve Lives stands ready to assist policy-makers and other leaders in formulating plans to make optimal use of prevention.

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