

Ed Policies Ignore Science On How/When Kids Learn

by Lisa Guernsey,
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Our education system starts at age 5, pays little attention to children's development and achievement until third grade, and is strewn with remedial programs to get older children back on track.

Meanwhile, studies keep pouring forth that highlight the importance of children's earliest years – birth to age 8 – in developing the mental capacity that enables life-long learning.

In short, our education policies don't align with the latest science on how and when children learn. American public education is out of whack.

Two new books drive home this point: *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills All Children Need* and *Britain's War on Poverty*.

A third piece of reading -- [A Landmark Study](#) -- in the journal *Child Development* published this spring – also makes the argument for getting smarter about policies that affect young children and their later achievements in school.

Now, I don't mean to get too heavy. I know summer is for beach reading about the girl with the dragon tattoo, not education and child policy. So let me summarize as quickly as I can:

[Mind in the Making](#) is, in essence, a parenting book. But author Ellen Galinsky, the president and co-founder of the nonprofit [Families and Work Institute](#) in New York City, doesn't talk about diapers and baby food. She bases her arguments on dozens of experiments on how and when children form ideas about the way the world works and what they need to learn.

The science makes clear that children need adults in their lives who recognize that abilities are not preordained by genetics. When parents and caregivers engage in one-on-one conversations with toddlers, for

example, they help children develop the language skills needed to succeed at reading, writing and communicating in their later years.

[Britain's War on Poverty](#), by Jane Waldfogel of Columbia University, is a book for policy wonks. It tells the story of a country getting it right. In 1999, the United Kingdom pledged to halve the poverty rate among the nation's children. At the time, 26 percent of children lived in poverty – a number that was higher than any other European country and mortified many Brits.

Ten years later, the rate is 12 percent, while the rate in the U.S. is on track to hit 22 percent, according to recent data from the nonprofit [Foundation for Child Development](#).

How did Britain do it? Waldfogel goes into rich detail about the multitude of policies that were changed to help families with young children. These included generous paid maternity leave, better benefits for single parents on welfare, improvements in the quality of child care, universal access to preschool and improvements in elementary schools.

[The Child Development article](#), led by Greg Duncan of the University of California at Irvine, showed that babies, toddlers and preschoolers who grow up in poverty are more harmed by its effects than older children. Other studies have shown that the effects of poverty on brain development are linked to cognitive ability in later years. But Duncan demonstrates that the impact of being poor is still evident, 37 years later, in incomplete schooling and jobless rates.

The harm starts at birth, with poverty elevating the stress parents feel, which can cause an increased likelihood of harsh parenting practices. These have the greatest impact during the early childhood years when the mother-child relationship serves as the foundation for a child's ability to regulate his emotions.

That regulation, in turn, has an effect on children's achievement, behavior, and health. Meanwhile, with little money to spare, parents cannot afford to financially support emergent literacy with books and high-quality child care or preschool.

All three readings lead to one conclusion: It's beyond time to give all

American children – especially those in poor circumstances -- exposure to language-rich and cognitively stimulating environments in their earliest years. This doesn't mean just increasing access to preschool, though that would help.

(More than 5 million children under age 6 live in poverty, according to [Kids Count](#), a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Head Start, the federal preschool program for poor kids, is available to about a million children birth to age 5. State-funded pre-k, where it's available, covers another million. That means we're leaving more 3 million children out – and that's not including families with moderate incomes who still find preschool and child care unaffordable.)

An education system aligned with the latest science would help poor parents increase their incomes so they can provide for their children. It would create better parental leave and “extended time off” policies to help parents find time to care for their children and learn along with them. And it would offer a comprehensive early childhood system with effective teachers who help children develop and learn, starting at birth and including preschool if parents wish, and extending all the way up through the early grades of elementary school.

Yes, the recession and the federal budget deficit make this difficult. But there's no better time to revamp public policies to match up with our new understandings.

Cognitive and social development starts in the womb and requires sustained, high-quality nurturing throughout childhood. We can keep waiting for more books that make us feel like we live in a backward country. Or we can start transforming policies to revise our education system with children's earliest years in mind.

*submitted by Valerie Strauss, Washington Post staff writer,
August 2, 2010; 6:00 AM ET*