

Purpose: Resource for local leaders when considering what questions they should ask and supports they can provide to support early learning.

Connection to the myFutureNC Strategic Plan: Academic Readiness

A STRONG START FOR FUTURE ATTAINMENT: ON-TARGET EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Why Early Development Matters and What Families and Communities Can Do to Support It

Why On-Target Early Development Matters for Success in High School and Beyond

Much of the architecture of the human brain is built very early in life. Millions of neurons connect through billions of synapses, recording, coding, and storing information about experiences in the world around them. By the age of six, ninety percent of a child's brain has been formed.¹ During these early years, children begin to develop the skills they will need for later success in school and afterward as citizens and employees. These include attention, persistence, self-regulation, emotional balance, strong interpersonal abilities, curiosity, and critical thinking.

Differences in young children's math and language development also appear very early—sometimes as early as birth,² as well as at the age of three when children enter Head Start³ or preschool—and these differences often are important predictors of later academic success.⁴ Just as building a solid house requires a solid foundation and structural integrity for each floor above it, success in school, at work, and in life depends on solid early development, with knowledge and skills added and practiced at each period of a child's growth.

What We Know about On-Target Early Development

Early Developmental Milestones

The skills and behaviors we expect to see at various ages are called “developmental milestones,” and they occur across four domains:

- Social and emotional development
- Language and communication
- Cognition (learning, thinking, problem-solving)
- Physical development and movement

As examples, by their third birthday, children typically can point to objects when they are named, use two-to four-word sentences, play simple make-believe games, and follow two-step instructions. By their fifth birthday (when most enter kindergarten), children typically like to sing and dance, want to please their friends, know their address, tell simple stories, draw a person with at least six

¹ A comprehensive resource online library of brain development resources is available at the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard. New resources are added regularly. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/re-envisioning-ecd/>

² Artiga, S., Pham, O., Orgera, K., and Ranji, U. Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: An Overview. Kaiser Family Foundation, November 2020 <https://www.kff.org/report-section/racial-disparities-in-maternal-and-infant-health-an-overview-issue-brief/>

³ A good proxy measure for on target development for lower-income children is the annual, fall Teaching Strategies Gold assessment conducted by Head Start program teachers for children entering the program. Since children may enter at the age of three, aggregate results of these assessment present a picture of the how many children enter with on-target develop at the age of three.

⁴ Duncan, G., Clessens, A., Huston, A., Pagani, L., Engel, M., Sexton, H., Dowsett, C., Magnuson, K., Klebanov, P., Feinstein, L., Brooks-Gunn, J., and Duckworth, K. School Readiness and Later Achievement, *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 6, 2007 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18020822/>

body parts, count ten things, copy shapes, write some letters, and navigate swings and climbing equipment.⁵

Positive Adult-Child Interactions Support Early Development

Young children learn from the people who care for them. Early caregiving is not just about ensuring that children have diapers, food, and protection from injury; more and more, we are learning that infant and toddler brain growth also is hugely influenced by the nature of the relationships between children and the adults who provide their care during the first weeks and months of life.

While these adults are often parents and extended family members, childcare providers and preschool teachers also are primary contributors to young children's on-target development and school readiness. When these interactions are frequent, reciprocal, responsive, and positive, children's health and wellbeing grow along with their bodies.

Adult and Societal Challenges Impact Early Development

When adult-child interactions are negative or inconsistent, or when children's attempts at interaction with the adults in their lives are simply ignored, early development can be affected, and early childhood developmental milestones are not met at expected ages. There are several factors that can impact an adult's ability to provide the positive adult-child interactions upon which early brain development depends. These include:

- Postpartum depression
- Lack of knowledge about early child development
- Stresses related to solo parenting
- Stresses related to juggling employment, economic, and health challenges
- Lack of critical social supports, including extended families, neighborhood friends, faith-based groups, and even online networks
- Substance abuse and addiction
- Chronic discrimination related to a person's race, language, or culture

In addition to the factors above, adversity and trauma—whether experienced directly by them or by the adults in their lives—can impact how children grow, especially in early childhood. Adverse Childhood Experiences can include physical or emotional abuse or neglect, family violence, or deaths in the family. Twenty-five NC counties offer supports for adults and children alike through the [North Carolina PACES \(Protective and Adverse Childhood Experiences\) website](#).

Ways to Support On-Target Early Development

High-Quality Early Childhood Programs

Consequently, many children do not demonstrate expected knowledge and skills at entry to kindergarten. One way to improve these early developmental outcomes is through participation in high-quality early education and learning programs that support the developmental milestones and positive adult-child interactions noted above.⁶

For example, children living in lower-income circumstances who attend high-quality preschool and whose families receive home visits by teachers or other trained professionals are “less likely to be enrolled in special education classes; more likely to become good junior high school students; and far more likely to graduate from high school.” Positive outcomes continue into adulthood, with these

⁵ Developmental Milestones, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved February 2022 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>

⁶ High Quality Early Care and Education, North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation. Retrieved February 2022 <https://buildthefoundation.org/issue/high-quality-early-care-and-education/>

preschoolers more likely to earn a living wage and less likely to require public welfare or to become involved in criminal justice systems.⁷

Measurement and Tracking of Early Development Progress

In addition, attending well child visits with a pediatrician is the most regular way to monitor a child's development. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed a recommended schedule for infants through the age of five. For example, for infants, the Academy recommends five visits, with a formal development screening included when a child reaches nine months of age.

Age of Child	Well Child Visits	Developmental Screening
Birth to age 1	Five visits: Months one, two, four, six, nine and 12	At the 9 th month well child visit
Age 1 to Age 2	Three visits: Months 15, 18 and, 24	At the 18 th month well child visit
Age 2 to Age 3	Two visits: Months 30 and 36	At the 30 th month well child visit
Ages 4 and 5	One visit per year	At the annual well child visit

In addition to well child visits, there are easily accessible tools to help parents know what to expect at different ages and how to keep track of these accomplishments in real time. [Sparkler](#) is a free mobile phone app that tracks developmental milestones from birth to age six. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also provides several tracking tools in its [Learn the Signs, Act Early](#) developmental monitoring program, including a [free milestone tracker app](#). All are available at the Apple App Store or on Google Play.

Actions Families Can Take to Support Early Development

1. Track Developmental Milestones and Share with Your Pediatrician

Download and regularly use a screening app like the ones described above. If you see a disconnect between your child's development and expected developmental milestones, the [NC Infant-Toddler Program](#) can help refer you to a local early intervention service. This program also offers free resources to families, in English and Spanish, including a [resource directory](#) and a [developmental milestones chart](#). In addition, there are 17 [Children's Developmental Service Agencies](#) across the state that support families at the community level.

2. Make Time for One-to-One Interactions with Your Child: Reading, Counting, Singing, and Playing

A free web video series, [The Basics](#), provides many examples of ways parents can promote early brain development through intentional interactions with their infants and toddlers. The website also includes tips and resources for parents and community members. For example, you can start to read to your child soon after birth with a target of 15 minutes each day. Sign up with the [Dolly Parton Imagination Library](#) and [Reach Out and Read Carolinas](#) to receive free, age-appropriate books for you and your baby.

3. Use Technology Sparingly

Early brain development requires regular, positive human interaction with engaged adults. The [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) recommends using technology not as a babysitter but instead as a shared reading, picture, and music tool with an actively engaged parent or other adult present. If your infant or toddler is cared for in either family or center-based childcare, be sure that the approach to childcare emphasizes holding, reading, singing, counting, outdoor play, and other adult-child interactions instead of TV time.

⁷ Early Childhood Education Matters: The Science Says It Does. Buffet Early Childhood Institute, November 2020. <https://buffettinstitute.nebraska.edu/news-and-events/early-years-matter/early-childhood-education-matters-the-science-says-it-does>

4. Learn about North Carolina's Kindergarten Readiness Expectations

Explore [Let's Get Ready: A Family's Guide to Supporting Kindergarten Readiness](#), available from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction online and at local libraries.

5. Enroll Your Child in NC PreK

Only about half of eligible four-year old children (53%) are enrolled in the NC PreK program. [myFutureNC's goal](#) is for each county to enroll 75% of eligible children by 2030. To date, only 43 of North Carolina's 100 counties have met this goal. Contact your local [Smart Start partnership](#) to see if your child is eligible. Eligible children may be accepted throughout the year upon reaching their fourth birthday.

Once you are enrolled, meet with your child's teachers at the very beginning to understand how they assess children's strengths at entry and how they will tailor the learning experience to build on these strengths and address developmental challenges. Then meet half-way through the year and again at the end (in person, when possible) to learn how your child has progressed.

Actions Community Leaders Can Take to Support On-Target Development

1. Partner with North Carolina Smart Start in Your Community to Engage Families with Young children and All Who Support and Care for Them

[Eight in ten voters](#) believe it is very important for state and local governments to improve opportunities for *all children* to get a strong start in life, but authentic engagement with families on creating community strategies for supporting on-target early development often requires sensitivity. Contact the NC Smart Start Partnership site that [serves your county](#) for help. Smart Start has developed a [Family Engagement and Leadership Action Guide and Toolkit](#) to help with local knowledge development, action, and advocacy for the wellbeing of all children in a community.

2. Lead an Effort to Map Your Community's Early Childhood Assets and Challenges

The national *Strengthening Families* initiative has identified five "protective factors" essential to early development: parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; concrete support in times of need; and children's social and emotional competence.⁸ Alongside other local leaders and community members, use the *Strengthening Families* framework to map what is and is not working to support families and children in your community. The NC Department of Social Services leads this work and has produced a useful *NC State Profile*⁹ for communities. Grants and coaching are available along with online community-building guides.¹⁰

3. Explore a Children's Funding Project

The national [Children's Funding Project](#) provides a portfolio of useful resources and technical assistance to jurisdictions interested in increasing public funding focused on children. These include:

- [Fiscal Mapping](#): This framework supports mapping federal, state, county, and local funding directed at meeting children's needs. In North Carolina, Buncombe County, and the NC Early Child Funding Project have competed fiscal mapping initiatives.
- [Local Dedicated Children's Funds](#): Local dedicated funds, approved by voters in a community, support a specific purpose and cannot be "reallocated or preempted." Dedicated

⁸ Protective Factors Framework, Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2021. <https://cssp.org/our-work/projects/protective-factors-framework/>

⁹ Strengthening Families North Carolina: State Profile, Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2021. <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/North-Carolina-Profile-2021.pdf>

¹⁰ Community Building Publications and Resources, Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2021. Online at: <https://cssp.org/publications-resources/?foc=building-strong-communities>

local children's funds have been established in communities across ten states, although not North Carolina.

4. Join with NC Businesses Already Advocating for Childcare Improvements

A 2019 report, *Want to Grow North Carolina's Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis*,^{11,12} documented the sobering impact of insufficient child care on parents, workers, businesses, and the economy. In November 2021, three leading NC business executives called for expanded investment in early care for NC families and, importantly, in the NC child care and early education workforce.¹³ Membership in the Council for a Strong America (one of the sponsors of the 2019 report) is open to businesses of all sizes, and \$800 million in COVID 19 funds to stabilize and redesign early childcare are now available for North Carolina initiatives.¹⁴ In addition, the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation's [Family Forward NC](#) initiative helps businesses learn how to make workforce investments that support children's healthy development and a competitive business environment.

5. Support the Priorities of the Think Babies™ NC Alliance

The *Think Babies™ NC Alliance* has identified [policy priorities](#) in three areas that can help families raising infants and toddlers: Healthy Beginnings (e.g., *adopt workplace accommodations for pregnant employees*), Supportive Families (e.g., *adopt paid family medical leave for employees*), and Early Learning (e.g., *increase childcare subsidy funding*). In addition, the national chapter supports strategic communications, annual public events, advocacy, and funding for organizations in partner states (15 counties in NC benefit from these grants).¹⁵

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¹¹ Council for a Strong America, 2021. <https://www.strongnation.org/>

¹² *Want to Grow North Carolina's Economy? Fix the Child Care Crisis.*, Ready Nation, 2019. <https://www.nearlyeducationcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ReadyNation-NC-Report-March-2019.pdf>

¹³ *North Carolina Leaders Call for Greater Child Care Support*, Ready Nation, 2021. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1778-north-carolina-leaders-call-for-greater-child-care-support>

¹⁴ An \$805 million investment in NC child care amid COVID, NC Health News, October 2021. <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2021/10/08/an-805-million-investment-in-nc-child-care-amid-covid/>

¹⁵ Think Babies™ NC Community Partners, 2020. <https://nearlyeducationcoalition.org/think-babies-nc/think-babies-nc-community-partners/>