AT A GLANCE

Why Early Matters

Learn why a child's earliest years are so important for health and development, and find practical, actionable strategies to support children and caregivers in your community.

Science Snapshot: What We Know

When it comes to development, it's not just *what* happens that matters, but *when*. Beginning before birth, the exposures and experiences that children have early in life—when their developing biological systems are most sensitive to environmental influences—can have powerful and lasting effects on their development, with lifelong implications for their health and well-being.

Early foundations shape a child's future.

- Brains are built over time, from the bottom up, through an ongoing process that begins before birth. The connections that form early provide either a strong or weak foundation for the connections that form later, shaping all future learning, behavior, and health.
- Responsive exchanges between a young child and a caring adult—known as serve and return interactions—support the development of early language and social skills that serve as a foundation for more complex cognitive abilities that form later in life.
- Experiences and exposures during the earliest years affect the development of many interconnected biological systems—not only the brain, but also the immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems, with implications for lifelong health.

Timing matters.

- We are all sensitive and responsive to our environment. But timing matters: the sensitivity of developing biological systems to exposures and experiences is typically *greatest* in the prenatal period—when the brain, heart, lungs, and immune system are developing rapidly—and decreases over the course of childhood.
- That means that early experiences and exposures—everything from temperature to toxins to relationships—can have a powerful impact on children's health both now and well into adulthood.
- The good news is that, just as negative experiences and exposures are more likely to be harmful in early childhood, anything we do to protect children during that time is likely to have significant beneficial effects—in childhood and beyond.

Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity.

- Many of the most prevalent, chronic, and costly diseases of adulthood—including diabetes, dementia, cancers, and depression—are rooted in early experiences and exposures, beginning during pregnancy.
- A child's biological systems adapt based on experiences in their environment. When children experience significant adversity, leading their stress response systems to activate at high levels for long periods of time, these systems can become set on permanent high alert. Over time, this can lead to greater risk for stress-associated diseases—such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and mental health disorders—well into the adult years.
- Efforts to prevent many chronic diseases in adults can be more successful if we start during the prenatal period and early childhood. By creating safe, supportive developmental environments free of hazards and rich with opportunity, we can help ensure our children have what they need to thrive in childhood and beyond.

Solutions Snapshot: What We Can Do

Practical, actionable strategies already exist to help ensure our children have a healthy start, surrounded by supportive relationships, positive experiences, and developmental environments that support their health and well-being.

A new era of policy and program solutions must focus on pregnancy and the earliest years—and prioritize what's good for children across a wide range of policy sectors, while also addressing disparities across our communities. Policymakers and community leaders can take a variety of approaches, including:

- **Support caregivers:** Policies and programs that assist caregivers—such as expanding access to paid parental leave and financial assistance programs—can help reduce caregiver stress and promote stable relationships in the critical months after birth.
- **Prioritize the places where people spend the most time during pregnancy and early childhood:** For example, monitoring and improving indoor air quality and testing and filtering water in childcare facilities, schools, camps, and offices can reduce exposure to air pollution, lead, and other toxic contaminants during pregnancy and early childhood.
- **Promote safe, stable housing:** Policies and programs that boost housing availability and reduce evictions can strengthen housing stability for young children. Housing developers and policymakers can also prioritize locating high-quality, affordable childcare facilities within housing environments that support healthy development in pregnancy and beyond.
- **Expand access to health care during pregnancy:** Creative solutions like mobile maternal health units—particularly in rural areas—can help meet families where they are, reduce barriers to care, and ensure that prenatal care is available to everyone.