AT A GLANCE

The Developmental Environment

Learn how conditions in children's environments influence their development—and find practical strategies to support children and caregivers in your community.

Science Snapshot: What We Know

What surrounds us shapes us. A wide range of conditions in children's environments affect their developing brains and other biological systems, with impacts on lifelong health and well-being.[1] The **developmental environment** consists of the full range of experiences and exposures that children have in the places where they live, grow, play, and learn.

The developmental environment includes influences from a child's:

- **Social environment**, such as relationships with parents and caregivers
- **Built environment**, such as housing and neighborhood conditions
- **Natural environment**, such as air quality and temperature

Every developmental environment is infused with a combination of potentially beneficial and harmful influences:

- **Beneficial influences** that can **fuel healthy development** include:
  - Access to safe, stable housing
  - Access to nutritious food
  - Availability of clean drinking water
- **Harmful influences** that can **derail healthy development** include:
  - Exposure to toxins and extreme weather events
  - Lack of high-quality health care
  - Lack of economic opportunities

Whether beneficial or harmful, children's experiences and exposures impact their development in significant ways, shaping their learning, health, and well-being across the lifespan.[2] These influences are not distributed equally. The qualities of children's developmental environments vary greatly across communities in the United States, shaped by public policies and social history. But just as places have been designed over time, we can *redesign* them to create places free of hazards and rich with opportunity for all children.

Solutions Snapshot: What We Can Do

Strategies and solutions to create healthy developmental environments for our children must extend beyond traditional "children's issues" to include a wide range of policy domains that shape children's environments—from housing and urban planning to economic security and climate readiness.

Policymakers and community leaders can take a variety of approaches, including:

- **Strengthen economic support:** Policies and programs that boost families' financial stability—like expanded child tax credits, health insurance, and "cash prescription" programs—can help address disparities and reduce caregiver stress, supporting their ability to provide responsive care.
- **Promote clean air and drinking water:** For example, removing lead pipes, ensuring adequate water filtration, and installing high-quality air filters in places where people spend the most time during pregnancy and early childhood—such as early education centers and offices—can reduce exposure to air pollution and toxic contaminants.
- **Expand green space:** Access to safe green spaces—such as parks and playgrounds—is associated with improved physical and mental health.[3] Planting trees can also help reduce the impact of extreme heat[4] and air pollution.[5]
- **Promote safe, stable housing:** Boosting housing availability for families, reducing evictions, and increasing resilience against the impacts of climate change can help ensure young children and caregivers have a safe, healthy, and consistent place to live.

Learn more and discover ways to take action in your community with our Resource Guide on The Developmental Environment—including related working papers, InBriefs with key takeaways, Solutions Spotlights with actionable strategies, and more.

To learn more about some of the specific influences shaping developmental environments, explore these additional guides:

- A Guide to Air Quality and Early Childhood Development
- A Guide to Extreme Heat and Early Childhood Development
- A Guide to Water and Early Childhood Development
- A Guide to Stability

For a complete list of references, please see below.