



part 1 of 2—

Thriving in the First Five Years of Church

by Brenda Dixey, Ph.D.

Associate Professor / Department Head, Early Childhood and Reading Education,
Valdosta State University, Valdosta, Georgia

The Brain and the First Five Years

Until recently, scientists believed the structure of the brain was genetically predetermined before birth. Current research, however, supports the theory that experiences—good or bad—during the first five years of life actually influence how the brain is physically wired, dramatically impacting how a person thinks, responds, and behaves throughout life.

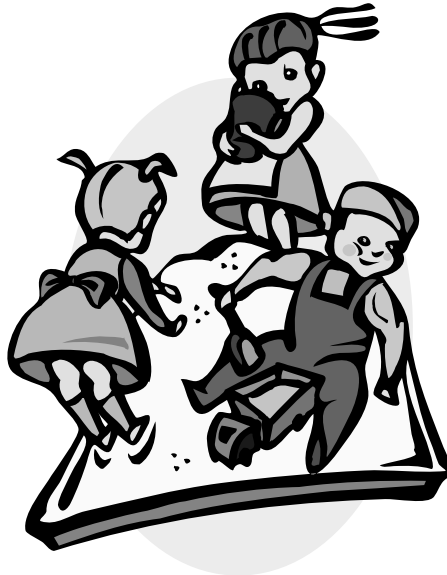
As we learn more about the brain and its development, we realize we are indeed “wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

The Window of Opportunity

Because of the brain's rapid growth, infants can learn and acquire an incredible amount of knowledge in a short span of time. In fact, the most profound learning in a person's life takes place between birth and age five. This is often referred to as the “window of opportunity”—a time when the greatest influence can be made in a child's life. Yet it is often in this period when the least attention is given to the development of children.

Children learn by interacting with their environment. Their exposure to and interaction with

others influence what children learn and how they develop. For young children, learning revolves around their daily lives. Simple activities like talking, singing, playing music, showing pictures, reading, and playing with them promote development.



Helping Children Thrive Spiritually in the First Five Years

The earth is flat. The sun revolves around the earth. Babies can't learn.

Technology and research have proven that all three of these statements are false. While the first two statements may not impact children's

ministry, the third definitely does.

Little ones are smarter than we think. Not only do they learn to talk, walk, and care for themselves during the first five years of life, they also build attitudes, character, and brain patterns that affect them for the rest of their lives.

Train Up a Child

Early childhood experiences and relationships can change intelligence by 30 percent and interpersonal skills by 50 percent. In one study, 15-year-olds that had received intentional help and guidance during the first five years of life had a 16 percent lower juvenile delinquency rate than their peers. In fact, some researchers believe that early childhood relationships and experiences are so powerful they can completely change the way a person turns out.

Recent research is changing how educators and government leaders shape early childhood policies. What does this research mean for children's ministries? As church leaders, we need to respond to the new research in light of Proverbs 22:6:



“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

We must stop viewing early childhood ministries as mainly baby-sitting. Instead, we need to view these ministries as our best hopes for nurturing future Christian leaders. We need to search out strategies and become more intentional about how we disciple young children.

This new research supports what the Church has always

believed—positive family interactions, unconditional love, godly adult examples, and a strong value system produce men and women who are stable, contributing members of society. For example, a child in an environment that fosters faith and belief in Christian principles will learn to think and act differently from a child in an environment that

promotes complete and total self-reliance. Children imitate the behaviors and responses of adults, whether or not they are appropriate examples.

As we prayerfully invest church resources to nurture the birth of faith, we will help children thrive spiritually—not only in their first five years, but also for the rest of their lives.

Questions for Further Study—

1. When is the best window of opportunity for influencing a person's life?
2. Are babies capable of learning? In what ways?
3. How should the local church view early childhood ministries?
4. What factors determine whether a person will grow to be a stable, contributing member of society?

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The Role of the Pastor

The senior pastor is often the most influential person in shaping the role and attitude of the church toward children. The importance of nurturing faith in young children must be conveyed and modeled by the pastor. New, expensive programs aren't necessary; recognizing and promoting children is the key.

For example, the senior pastor can promote a family-oriented philosophy by including a story time, puppet skit, an object lesson, or a short reading during the adult service. Adults also enjoy these vignettes, and the illustrations can help them build Christian attitudes and principles.

The Role of the Church

The role of the Church should begin before a child is conceived. Young married couples need guidance in and exposure to effective parenting methods. This will help them understand the importance of establishing a family unit built on godly principles.

Include child development topics in the young marrieds classes.

Encourage young couples to become involved with children's programs—especially at the birth to age five levels. Pastors, prospective parents, and children's workers will benefit from



elective Sunday School classes and seminars that teach the importance of becoming involved with their children's spiritual experiences—especially during the first five years of life.

Pastors can encourage parents to model godly principles before their children. The parents in your congregation need to be encouraged to become involved in ministry through family proj-

ects, such as volunteering in a soup kitchen, participating in church clean-up days, providing food for a family, and visiting the elderly or shut-ins. These family activities make lasting impressions on children. Fun family outings are also essential for children to develop and build relationships.

Promote Play

Other ways the church can ensure children will thrive in their formative years are through education and curriculum, attending to the physical environment of children, and promoting play. Play is important in the life of every child. When play is used as a strategy for providing learning experiences, children can learn organizational skills, develop language skills, and learn to communicate with others.

Select Appropriate Curriculum

Children are not passive receivers of knowledge; they are active participants in their learning. It is important that curriculum presents God's principles in ways that keep children motivated and eager to learn. A child must be actively involved in learning. When children are primarily expected to sit and listen,

