Decades of rigorous research show that children’s earliest experiences play a critical role in brain development. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has summarized this research:3,4

- Neural circuits, which create the foundation for learning, behavior and health, are most flexible or “plastic” during the first three years of life. Over time, they become increasingly difficult to change.
- Stable relationships with caring and responsive adults, safe and supportive environments, and appropriate nutrition are key elements of healthy brain development.
- Early social/emotional development and physical health provide the foundation upon which cognitive and language skills develop.

These findings underscore the critical importance of intervention in the earliest years. Positive early experiences are essential prerequisites for later success in school, the workplace, and the community.

What are the Benefits?

High quality early intervention services can change a child’s developmental trajectory and improve outcomes for children, families, and communities. Services to young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays have been shown to positively impact outcomes across developmental domains, including health,4 language and communication,5-9 cognitive development10,12 and social/emotional development.8,10,11

Families benefit by being able to better meet their children’s special needs from an early age and throughout their lives.10,12 Benefits to society include reducing economic burden through academic success3,10,13 and a decreased need for special education.11

continued on next page
Unmet Needs in Early Intervention

There is a high need for good quality Part C early intervention programs.

- More children are in need of services than are currently being served. In 2009, 2.67% of the general population of children birth to 3 received early intervention, while research indicates that as many as 13% have delays that would make them eligible under criteria states commonly use.

- Research also indicates a need to serve children earlier. At 9 months of age, only 9% of children have delays that would make them eligible actually receive services; at 24 months of age only 12% receive services. IDEA requires referral to Part C for any child under the age of 3 who is identified as affected by illegal substance abuse, or is involved in a substantiated case of child abuse or neglect.

- Approximately 10-11% of all newborns have prenatal substance exposure, a risk factor for poor developmental outcomes. An estimated 90-95% of these infants are sent home at birth without being identified or referred for services.

- In 2009, 702,000 children experienced substantiated abuse or neglect; 40% of these children received no post-investigation services; one third were under age four, and infants under the age of 1 were the most likely to be victims. These young children often have high rates of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, relational and psychological problems.

Take Home Message

- High quality early intervention programs for vulnerable infants and toddlers can reduce the incidence of future problems in their learning, behavior and health status.

- There is an urgent and substantial need to identify as early as possible those infants and toddlers in need of services to ensure that intervention is provided when the developing brain is most capable of change.

- Intervention is likely to be more effective and less costly when it is provided earlier in life rather than later.

References