

Voices for VI Children

Daily News Column

Judith Richardson, columnist

March 2006

Good Early Care Can Set Children's Lifelong Learning Abilities

The first five years from birth to age five are now known as the most dynamic learning years in children's lives. During this time, high quality care-giving is extremely important to babies and young children.

Here in the US Virgin Islands where 69% of young children are cared for outside the home, parents struggle to find affordable daycare for their preschool-age children. While all daycare services provide working parents with "babysitting" services, too few provide the nurturing and stimulation that children need to thrive and become active learners -- ready to succeed in kindergarten and in life beyond.

It's hard to find affordable daycare that's also of high quality. But high-quality childcare is what this community needs. High quality programs strengthen children's school achievement and likelihood of successful employment as adults, and decrease involvement with the criminal justice system. High quality programs for young children are staffed by competent, licensed caregivers, who know how best to provide young children with age-appropriate interactions and opportunities to explore, experience challenges and accomplishments, learn through play, and develop a love of learning.

Infants, toddlers, and all children ages birth to five, are actively learning how to connect to the world. During these "window of opportunity" years, children are able to learn how to regulate their emotions, to respect, trust and share with others, to cope with stress, and to express and understand language. Indeed, by age five when children enter kindergarten, they have already developed the basic learning patterns and abilities on which they'll build the rest of their lives.

Decades of research show that negative or low-stimulating environments cause the young brain to actually slow down -- or even stall -- in forming its intricate circuitry or "wiring." This can have a long lasting, negative impact on the child's ability to learn and succeed.

In poor-quality early care settings, typically with few opportunities for physical and intellectual growth, young children are more likely to spend much of their time unoccupied, tuned out and unengaged socially. In these settings, which offer minimal nurturing, children are less likely to trust or be attached to their care-giving adults. The children display more aggression toward other children and adults. Significantly, these children are delayed in their cognitive and language development, pre-reading skills, and other age-appropriate behaviors.

Simply said, the quality of care they receive affects children's ability to learn.

Voices for VI Children met with April Munroe-Phillips, Primary Grades Coordinator for the VI Department of Education, to get her input on the territory's early childcare environment. Her job is to administer services to VI children attending kindergarten through third grade in the territory's public schools.

"Screening shows children are months or even years below developmental entry levels for kindergarten," Ms. Phillips stated. Her department has found that 28% of VI children entering kindergarten are below their appropriate age in expressive language (how they express their thoughts). Meanwhile, 60% are below their age in receptive language (what they understand). "We see many who have not yet been encouraged to experiment, to try new things, to maximize or develop their learning abilities," said Ms. Phillips. In other words, these children have not yet learned to be successful as learners.

What our youngest children learn today will determine how they behave as members of their future neighborhoods, workforces and communities. We as a community need to decide whether we want to invest in success now, or pay for failure later.

It's time to raise our voices. It's time to acknowledge a shared responsibility to create a safe, nurturing place for USVI children to absorb the skills of learning -- and the values of interconnection, nurturance and community. It is not a matter simply of whether our children learn letters, shapes, numbers and colors, but whether they learn how to connect to their world, and how they can make meaningful contributions to society.

It's time to speak up for children, even the youngest. A non-partisan children's advocacy group is *Voices for VI Children*, started through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands in response to the data reported annually by the *USVI KIDS COUNT Data Reports*. Open to all, its only agenda is to advocate for children, especially children at risk, in the territory. To add your support – and voice – call 774-6031.

Next time: The early childcare "Trilemma"... how can we provide quality childcare, with adequate staff compensation, and affordability?

