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Early and Middle Childhood New

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Goal

Document and track population-based measures of health and well-being for early and middle childhood populations over time in the United States.



Overview

There is increasing recognition in policy, research, and clinical practice communities that early and middle childhood provide the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional foundation for lifelong health, learning, and well-being. Early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence represent the 3 stages of child development. Each stage is organized around the primary tasks of development for that period.

- Early childhood (usually defined as birth to year 8) is a time of tremendous physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.¹
- Middle childhood (usually defined as ages 6 to 12) is a time when children develop skills for building healthy social relationships and learn roles that will lay ground work for a lifetime.¹

Healthy People 2010 addressed the earliest stages of childhood through goals for Maternal, Infant, and Child Health, but the early and middle childhood stages of development were not highlighted in this initiative. To address this gap, the Early and Middle Childhood topic area was included in Healthy People 2020.

Why Is Early and Middle Childhood Important?

Evidence shows that experiences in the 1st years of life are extremely important for a child's healthy development and lifelong learning. How a child develops during this time affects future cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, which influences school readiness and later success in life.² Research on a number of adult health and medical conditions points to predisease pathways that have their beginnings in early and middle childhood.³

Related Topic Areas

- ▶ [Nutrition and Weight Status](#)
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During early childhood, the human brain grows to 90 percent of its adult size by age 3.⁴ Early childhood represents the period when young children reach developmental milestones that include:

- Emotional regulation and attachment
- Language development
- Motor skills

All of these milestones can be significantly delayed when young children experience environmental stressors and other negative risk factors. These stressors and factors can affect the brain and may seriously compromise a child's physical, social-emotional, and cognitive growth and development.⁵

More than any other developmental period, early and middle childhood sets the stage for:

- Health literacy
- Self-discipline
- The ability to make good decisions about risky situations
- Eating habits
- Conflict negotiation⁶

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Understanding Early and Middle Childhood

Although early and middle childhood are typically healthy ages, it is during this time that children are at risk for conditions such as:

- Asthma
- Obesity
- Dental caries
- Child maltreatment
- Developmental and behavioral disorders

While typically nonfatal, these conditions affect children, their education, and the health and well-being of the adolescents and adults they will become.

Emerging Issues in Early and Middle Childhood

The keys to understanding early and middle childhood health are recognizing the important role these periods play in adult health and well-being and focusing on conditions and illnesses that can seriously limit children's abilities to learn, grow, play, and become healthy adults.

Emerging issues in early and middle childhood include implementing and evaluating multidisciplinary public health interventions that address social determinants of health by:

- Fostering knowledgeable and nurturing families, parents, and caregivers.
- Creating supportive and safe environments in schools, communities, and homes.
- Increasing access to high-quality health care.

A stronger and more robust surveillance system is needed to provide the data to understand and plan for the health and well-being of children.

References

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⁵Sander LW. A 25-year follow-up: Some reflections on personality development over the long term. *Infant Ment Health J.* 1987 Autumn;8(3):210-20.

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