

Five principles for closing the learning gap in babies



When it comes to improving learning and increasing brain development in children, the earlier we involve infants, the better.

Sociologists are talking a lot about something called “the learning gap.” This is a gap in knowledge and ability seen between different groups of children. These groups can vary based on race or socioeconomic status.

The key is identifying ways to close, or even eliminate, this learning gap in children. Closing the learning gap is a passion for Harvard professor Dr. Ron Ferguson. He was stunned to be able to identify a learning gap in children as early as age two. As he has stated, “Kids aren’t halfway to kindergarten, and they’re already well behind their peers.”

Brain development techniques can be implemented by caregivers well before any formal learning programs, like preschool, begin. Even more encouraging is that these techniques are mainly low cost or free.

In a recent interview with NPR, Dr. Ferguson said, “Things that we need to do with infants and toddlers are not things that cost a lot of money. It’s really about interacting with them, being responsive to them.”

So he developed a plan to help eliminate the learning gap in kids. It is a series of five principles that all

caregivers can implement to increase early childhood development significantly. He calls these principles “The Boston Five.”

His goal is to introduce “the Five” to the Boston area and then across the country. According to a recent report on NPR.com, the “Boston Five” principles are:

1. **Maximize love, manage stress.** Babies pick up on stress, which means moms and dads have to take care of themselves, too. It’s also not possible to over-love or be too affectionate with young children. Research shows feeling safe can have a lasting influence on development.
2. **Talk, sing and point.** “When you point at something, that helps the baby start to associate words with objects,” Ferguson explains. Some babies will point before they can even talk.
3. **Count, group and compare.** This one is about numeracy. Babies love numbers and counting, and there’s research to show they’re actually born with math ability. Ferguson says caregivers can introduce their children to math vocabulary by using sentences that compare things: “Oh, look! Grandpa is tall, but grandma is short,” or “There are two oranges, but only three apples.”

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4. **Explore through movement and play.** “The idea is to have parents be aware that their children are learning when they play,” Ferguson said.
5. **Read and discuss stories.** It’s never too early to start reading aloud—even with babies. Hearing words increases vocabulary and relating objects to sounds starts to create connections in the brain. The Basics also put a big emphasis on discussing stories: If there’s a cat in the story and a cat in your home, point that out. That’s a piece lots of parents miss when just reading aloud.

Maximize love and manage stress, principle number one, is related to a previous article I wrote on minimizing insecurities and maximizing success (“A good childhood can prepare us for a good life,” March 21, 2018 *MN Spokesman-Recorder*). Evident and crucial situations involving food, housing, and family insecurities can have devastatingly adverse predictive effects on children.

For many people, this new understanding can open doorways to addressing and overcoming obstacles that can be life-changing. In a recent CBS news segment related to the issue of adverse traumatic childhood events and the way they affect subsequent human behavior, the correspondent, Oprah Winfrey, commented that this new way of looking at and understanding human behavior was “absolutely life-changing and will influence all of her future relationships.”

Principle number four must include music and art. These are essential for the developing brains of infants, too. Studies have evaluated the social,

intellectual and emotional outcomes of young children who participated in art forms such as music, art, dance, theatre/acting, drawing and painting. Emerging research supports the intimate involvement in these activities and a positive influence on brain and intellectual development in children.

Dr. Ferguson has decided that the best way to spread the word on these early learning techniques is to teach them where the babies and parents are. This teaching includes hospitals, community centers, social service organizations, pediatric clinics, barbershops and hair salons, and churches.

When it comes to closing the learning gap in babies, they need love and attention. The more interactions we have with little ones, the better. Their brains are like super-sponges. They soak up everything that comes their way.

Learn and use Dr. Ferguson’s Boston Five principles. Use them as soon as your baby is born. By doing so, you will put your child in the best position to enjoy a happy, successful life.

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