

What
Grown-Ups
Understand
About **Child**
Development:

A National Benchmark Survey

Researched by DYG, Inc.



Introduction

For most parents, raising a child is one of life's most miraculous and rewarding experiences. And typically, the responsibility extends beyond the family to society as a whole: A neighbor keeps an eye on the kids next door, a company sets a family leave policy, a senior citizen votes for legislators who support spending on child care. In both tacit and explicit ways, all Americans affect the lives of kids.

But how much do adults actually know about children and their development? And how does their knowledge or misinformation affect the lives of young kids?

What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development: A National Benchmark Survey is a landmark study of 3,000 American adults (including 1,066 parents of children aged newborn to six) conducted in June and July of 2000. The fundamental purpose of the survey was to measure the level of accurate knowledge American adults have about child development issues — with particular emphasis on the intellectual, emotional and social development of children (aged newborn to six). Secondly, the purpose of the survey was to understand what the general public thinks about selected policies that impact children and families.

Three organizations dedicated to improving the lives of children partnered and commissioned DYG, Inc. to conduct the survey. The partners include:

- CIVITAS,[®] a national, non-profit communication group that creates tools to help educate and support adults who take care of young children.
- ZERO TO THREE,[®] a non-profit organization, and the nation’s leading resource for knowledge and expertise regarding young children’s development.
- BRIO[®] Corporation, whose financial support made this study possible, a leading toy company whose products focus on play, development, imagination and fun.

DYG, Inc., which conducted the research, is an internationally respected social and marketing research firm, headed by Daniel Yankelovich.

The remainder of the Executive Summary is divided into four sections

- 3 Overall key survey findings
- 4 Where adults show significant information gaps regarding child development
- 5 Key findings by topic area
- 15 Differences among subgroups

Overall Key Survey Findings

The survey indicates that while adults are well informed about many areas of child development, there are other important areas in which there are significant information gaps — gaps that carry with them very real implications for how we raise and interact with our children in America today.

The survey also indicates that subgroups of respondents show significant differences in their knowledge levels. For example, parents of young children who have four-year college degrees know more about child development than less educated groups, and dads showed greater knowledge gaps about child development than moms. The survey also indicates that there are gaps of knowledge between generations. Finally, the study shows that “future parents” (those who have no children yet, but plan to soon) show the highest level of confusion and misinformation among subgroups.

Notable is that while informational gaps exist about how children develop, there is widespread support by parents and non-parents alike for various policies that support young children and their families.

Where Adults Show Significant Information Gaps Regarding Child Development

The survey shows that there are many important areas of child development where significant information gaps exist – gaps that carry with them very real implications for how adults raise and interact with children in America today. The following areas and select examples show some of the greatest levels of misunderstanding for parents and other adults.

A Child’s Ability to Sense What is Going on Around Her

Parents of young children and other adults...

- ...do not understand when children begin to “take in” and “react” to their world.
- ...are confused about when young babies begin to sense and be affected by the mood of others.
- ...believe that a baby six months old or younger has no long-term memory and hence will not suffer any long-term effects from witnessing violence.
- ...do not understand that young babies can be depressed.

Most Beneficial Forms of Play

Parents of young children and other adults...

- ...place value on some forms of play that are less beneficial to a two-year-old’s intellectual development (the strong emphasis on flashcards is a key example).

Expectations of Children

Parents of young children and other adults...

- ...believe a child’s behavior can be based on revenge at too young an age (before, according to developmental research, they are truly capable of such motivations).
- ...believe a six-year-old who shoots and kills a classmate can comprehend the ramifications of his actions.

Discipline and Spoiling

Parents of young children and other adults...

- ...do not understand that very young children cannot be spoiled.
- ...believe that it is appropriate to spank a child as a regular form of punishment. However, most parents of young children and adults do acknowledge the negative consequences of spanking, such as that children who are regularly spanked are more likely to deal with their anger with physical aggression.

Interesting findings related to policies that impact children and families:

Policy

- The majority of all adults support paid parental leave.
- The majority of all adults support government assistance to help families pay for quality childcare.

Key Findings By Topic Area

The following section provides a topic-by-topic overview of the main findings.

When and How Children Develop

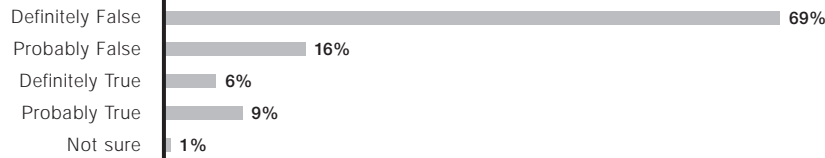
How do early experiences impact a child's development? Recognizing that children are active participants in the world from day one is critical for supporting a child's development. The survey explores what adults know about how various factors and experiences affect early development.

What adults understand:

- Children's capabilities are not predetermined at birth.

Children's Capacities: Predetermined or Not?

Statement: "Children's capacity for learning is pretty much set from birth and cannot be greatly increased or decreased by how their parents interact with them."



Shown: All parents of children aged 0-6

Note: According to child development research, "definitely false" is the most appropriate answer.

- 71% of all adults understand that brain development can be impacted very early on (prenatal/right from birth) and 76% of adults realize that experiences in the first years of life have a significant impact on abilities that appear much later in children's lives.
- 96% of all adults clearly realize that there is a relationship between emotional closeness and a child's intellectual development.

What adults don't understand:

- Most adults (including parents of young children) do not understand when children begin to “take in” and “react to” their world. While child development research shows this happens in the first days of life, 62% of parents with young children believe it does not occur until a child is two months old or older.
- 61% of all adults, and 55% of parents with young children, do not know when young babies begin to sense and be affected by the mood of others. This is crucial because child development research shows that if a caregiver is particularly anxious or depressed, it can have a detrimental effect on a baby’s development.
- Parents of young children do not realize that babies can experience depression at a very young age. According to developmental research, children can actually experience depression as early as four months of age. However, many parents of young children believe children cannot experience depression until they are three years old or older.

Depression in Children

Question: “At what age do you think a child can experience real depression?”



Shown: All parents of children aged 0-6

Note: According to child development research, six months or younger is the most appropriate answer.

- 26% of all adults, and 23% of parents of young children believe that a child as young as six months will not suffer any long-term effects from witnessing violence. Child development research shows it can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on social and emotional development and the developing brain.

Supporting Children in Their Development

Parents spend a lot of physical and emotional energy, as well as financial resources, in an effort to encourage their child's healthy development. Are they channeling their energy and resources where it counts? Mostly, yes — although there are some information gaps.

What adults understand:

- Parents of young children and other adults see the activities below as critical in promoting intellectual development in young children.
 - Reading with child (95% of all adults)
 - Talking with child (92% of all adults)
 - Providing a sense of safety and security (86% of all adults)
 - Feeding them a healthy diet (84% of all adults)
 - Providing them with quality childcare (69% of all adults)

What adults don't understand:

- Most parents of young children and other adults place too much emphasis on activities that developmental research shows are less beneficial to intellectual development. However, a large number of adults rated the following as very beneficial.
 - Flashcards (65% of all adults)
 - Educational TV (64% of all adults)
 - Solitary play on the computer (45% of all adults)

The Importance of Play

Parents and other adults clearly see the importance of play in child development. They usually see the benefits of various types of play, from sorting leaves to pretend tea parties to art projects.

Parents of young children, though, are more likely to think play is more important for older (five years old) than younger children (ten months old). However, developmental research shows that play is of crucial importance to children of all ages.

Importance of Playing: By Children's Age Groups

Statement: Very important for a child's healthy development that a _____ spend time playing.



Shown: % of parents of children aged 0-6 rating 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale from "not at all important" (1 rating) to "crucial" (10 rating)

Note: For all three age groups, play is extremely important for healthy development (according to child development research).

Parents of young children are more likely to see play as beneficial to social development than they are to see play as beneficial to intellectual or, especially, language development. The numbers: 93% of parents of young children see a strong link between play and social development, while 88% see a strong link between play and intellectual development, and 80% see a strong link between play and language skill development. In fact, child development research shows that play forms the foundation for developing not just social skills, but also for language and for mastering important intellectual concepts and thinking skills.

Expectations of Young Children

The expectations adults hold for young children directly impact how they interact with and respond to them. When these expectations are unrealistic, it can lead adults to respond in ways that can have a detrimental impact on a child's development.

What adults don't understand:

- 30% of parents of young children incorrectly believe a six-year-old who shoots and kills a classmate can truly comprehend what he did — meaning, fully understand that he took a life and that it can never be undone.
- Most parents of young children expect toddlers to share before (according to developmental research) they are able to do so.

Expectations: Regarding Sharing

Question: "Should a 15-month-old be expected to share her toys with other children, or is this too young of an age to expect a baby to share?"



Shown: All parents of children aged 0-6

Note: According to child development research, 15-month-olds should not be expected to share.

- More than one in four parents of young children expect a three-year-old to be able to sit quietly for an hour, yet child development research shows that they are not developmentally ready to do so.
- Almost 40% of parents of young children are likely to believe that a child's behavior is based on revenge at too young an age.

Spoiling

How adults define spoiling is directly related to the expectations they hold for children. For example, if a 15-month-old refuses to share, a parent might inappropriately reprimand the child instead of using this opportunity as a learning experience.

- The majority of parents of young children believe a six-month-old can be spoiled.

Spoiling Very Young Children

Question: “Some people say a six-month-old, because he is too young, cannot be spoiled, no matter how much attention his parents give him. Others say that a six-month-old can be spoiled. Which do you agree with more?”



Shown: All parents of children aged 0-6

Note: Child development research suggests six-month-olds are too young to be “spoiled.”

- There is also confusion about what activities are and are not spoiling.
 - 44% of parents of young children incorrectly believe picking up a three-month-old every time he cries will spoil a child.
 - 45% of parents of young children incorrectly believe that letting a two-year-old get down from the dinner table to play before the rest of the family has finished is spoiling.
 - 30% of parents of young children incorrectly believe that letting a six-year-old choose what to wear to school is spoiling.
 - According to child development research, all of the above activities are appropriate (non-spoiling).

Discipline

Making decisions about discipline — how to teach a child right from wrong and to help them develop self-control — is one of parenting’s greatest challenges. In order to better understand adults’ views on discipline, we asked specifically about their thoughts on spanking.

- 61% of parents of young children and 62% of all adults condone spanking as a regular form of punishment.
- 37% of parents of young children think it is appropriate to spank children age two or younger as a regular form of punishment.

This finding is surprising, given that while many parents condone spanking as a regular form of punishment, many also understand that this can lead to children acting more aggressively, and that it will not lead to better self-control.

Adult/Child Relationships

Child development unfolds in the context of the close relationships children have with their primary caregivers. Thus, the nature and quality of these relationships have a profound impact on a child's development. It is critical then, to understand what experiences adults believe impact a child in the early years.

What adults understand:

- Roughly three-quarters of all adults realize that since children need time to form bonds with caregivers, constant change of caregivers has a negative impact on children. It's notable that (according to *Worthy Work, Unlivable Wages, The National Child Care Staffing Study, 1988-1997* published by the Center for the Child Care Workforce) the rate of turnover for all providers in childcare centers is a significant 31% per year.
- Most adults (three-quarters or more) also understand that dads who are active in their children's lives have a powerful impact on their children.

What adults don't understand:

- A large majority of adults (61% of parents of young children and 67% of all adults) incorrectly believe that working parents cannot develop a bond with their children as strong as that of stay-at-home parents.
- Many adults are misinformed about the effects of not always responding to a three-month-old crying baby.

Preparation for Parenthood

How competent a parent feels can be a major factor in the parent's support of their child's development. Here is how parents report on their preparation for parenthood:

- Only one-third felt very prepared for parenthood
- One-third felt somewhat prepared for parenthood
- One-third felt very unprepared for parenthood

Interestingly, non-parents think the vast majority of today's parents were not at all prepared when they had their first child.

With this in mind, once adults become parents, where do they turn to for information on parenting and child development?

- Moms and dads of young children turn most frequently to:
 - each other
 - their own mothers
 - their pediatricians
- About four in ten adults log onto the Internet each month to find child development information.

What Adults Think About Selected Policies That Impact Children and Families

Since children are very much affected by policies set by government and employers, some relevant policy questions were included in the survey to capture the general direction of the public's *goals* and *ideals* regarding family leave and childcare policies.

The findings were:

- More than 60% of parents of young children think that neither government nor employers are doing a very good job making changes in the workplace to meet the needs of workers with very young children.
- 88% of parents of young children and 80% of all adults support paid parental leave.
 - Support is strongest among moms, lower income parents and future parents.
- Expanding disability or unemployment insurance as a vehicle for paid family leave is also supported by 89% of parents of young children and 84% of all adults.
- There is no overall agreement about the “ideal” parental leave for mothers. Among parents of young children, about 4 in 10 say three months or less, a quarter believe four to eleven months, while almost a third suggest at least a year.
- 60% of parents of young children believe that the ideal parental leave for fathers should be three weeks or more — which is three times or more than what most fathers currently take.
- 73% of parents of young children and 65% of all adults support government financial assistance to help family pay for quality childcare.

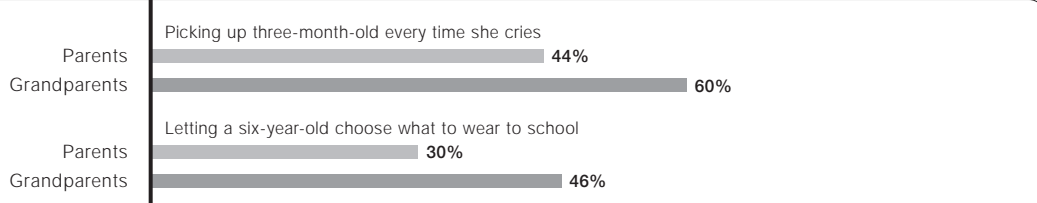
Differences Among Subgroups

Levels of knowledge regarding childhood development vary significantly among subgroups.

- **The Education Factor:** Among parents of young children, a four-year college degree is the single largest differentiator between those who know more about child development versus those who know less. Parents with a high school education or less need more information on child development.
- **Dad’s Viewpoint:** Dads generally know less than moms about child development. For example, moms have more realistic expectations of their children’s abilities. Also, dads are often misinformed about the benefits of specific forms of play. For example, dads are much less likely than moms to see the developmental benefits of pretend play.
- **The Generation Gap:** There are significant generational differences between parents of young children and grandparents regarding “spoiling.” Grandparents are more likely than current parents of young children to view appropriate caregiving activities as spoiling.

Spoiling: The Generation Gap

Question: “Please tell me if you would rate the following behavior, on part of a parent or caregiver, as appropriate OR as something that will likely spoil a child if done often?”



Shown: % say the following will spoil the child if done too often / All parents of children 0-6, All grandparents
Note: Child development research suggests both activities listed in the chart are appropriate (non-spoiling).

Grandparents are a particularly important subgroup to examine; according to the study, more than one in four grandparents take care of children weekly. A very important fact learned is that they’re also a primary source of advice and information for parents on child-rearing.

- **The Income Factor:** As with educational attainment, household income is a factor that differentiates those who know more and those who know less about child development issues. Parents whose household income is above the median know more about child development.
- **“Future Parents” Need A Lot of Guidance:** “Future parents,” adults who have no children but plan to have a child in the next few years, show a lack of knowledge in many areas of child development. In most areas surveyed, they show much more confusion than parents or grandparents. Interestingly, they tend to believe that they are well prepared for parenthood.

Summary of Methodology

CIVITAS,[®] ZERO TO THREE[®] and BRIO[®] Corporation commissioned DYG, Inc. to conduct this survey. A total of 3,000 telephone interviews were conducted from June 12 to July 5, 2000. The sample was nationwide and statistically projectable. Interviews lasted, on average, about 26 minutes — and were conducted in either English or Spanish. Among the total sample of 3,000 respondents, sampling error is +/- 1.8%. Among the 1,066 sample of parents the sampling error is +/-3.1%

The full survey report can be downloaded on the following Web sites:

- www.civitas.org
- www.zerotothree.org
- www.briotoy.com

Three organizations dedicated to improving the lives of children partnered and commissioned DYG, Inc. to conduct the survey.

CIVITAS® is a national, non-profit communication group that creates tools to help educate and support adults who take care of young children.

Civitas Initiative
1327 West Washington Boulevard, Suite 3D
Chicago, Illinois 60607
312.266.6700
www.civitas.org

Suzanne Muchin, Chief Executive Officer

ZERO TO THREE® is a non-profit organization and the nation's leading resource for knowledge and expertise regarding young children's development.

ZERO TO THREE
National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families
734 15th Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
202.638.1144
www.zerotothree.org

Matthew E. Melmed, Executive Director

ZERO TO THREE wishes to acknowledge the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation for its support of our work on this survey.

BRIO® Corporation, whose financial support made this study possible, is a leading toy company whose products focus on play, development, imagination and fun.

BRIO Corporation
N120 W18485 Freistadt Road
Germantown, WI 53022
262.250.3240
www.briotoy.com

Peter Reynolds, President

DYG, Inc., which conducted the research, is an internationally respected social and marketing research firm, headed by Daniel Yankelovich.

DYG, Inc.
36A Padanaram Rd.
Danbury, CT 06811
203.744.9008
www.dyg.com

Daniel Yankelovich, Chairman and Founder

What Grown-Ups Understand About Children: A National Benchmark Survey

Researched by DYG, Inc.

www.civitas.org

www.zerotothree.org

www.briotoy.com