



The early years

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Is there a more exciting time in a young child's life than that first day of school.

It may be 'just' kindergarten to us, but to the child, they are finally 'big' enough to go to school. What a feeling! But are they ready for it?

The latest research on children entering school for the first time shows that up to a quarter of British Columbia children—from all socioeconomic backgrounds—are not ready for school. Many children reach school age without a strong foundation in language and cognitive development, and these are the very skills that will help them learn language and math, and to handle complex ideas and concepts.

Though school entry skills and abilities are very important, it is the concept of preparing children for life in our society underpins the idea. The importance of the early years for a child cannot be overstated. During the first five to six years of their lives, children are most receptive to learning, to absorbing ideas, language, but as they grow, this capacity diminishes. By the time a child has their sixth birthday, much of their character has already been established.

Knowing this means that investing in the early years can have a tremendous payoff. A child with the right nurturing, care and support is more likely to grow up as a strong, independent and capable adult. That child is also less likely to drop out of school, abuse drugs, engage in criminal activities, and will probably have better health, too. Research shows that for every dollar invested in early childhood development, at least two dollars are saved in later social

costs. Spend that dollar on an at-risk child, and the return on investment jumps to \$7 saved in the future.

Research in brain development has clarified that a person's highest capacity for learning is in his or her early years up to five or six. Over this period, the brain seems to be 'hard-wiring' in ways that affect its capacity for future learning, emotional patterns, lifelong attitudes and problem-solving approaches. The studies also show that good quality early child development programs can help break the generational cycle of disadvantage and dramatically improves a child's chances in the future.

It is not only parents that are involved in a child's early development. There are other family members and caregivers, daycares and preschools and others participating in a child's life. Communities can do their own part in helping during these critical years. Among the most successful and positive are the Success by 6 (SB6) programs now running in more than 350 communities in Canada and the US. The first SB6

program was created in Minneapolis in 1988 under the leadership of the United Way. It spread to Canada in the early 1990s, first to Edmonton and later, across the country.

In British Columbia, SB6 is an initiative of

the United Way which partners with the Credit Unions of BC and the provincial government. As the name expressly states, the development years of 0 to 6 are the focus of the organization's efforts. To learn more about Success by 6 in your community, contact SB6 or the United Way.

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