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HealthyPeople.gov



Early and Middle Childhood **New**

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, socio-emotional, and language development.¹
- Middle childhood (usually defined as ages 6 to 12) is a time when children develop foundational skills for building healthy social relationships and learn roles that will prepare them for adolescence and adulthood.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 early and middle childhood are extremely important for a child's healthy development and lifelong learning. How a child develops during this time affects future cognitive, social, emotional, language, and physical development, which in turn influences school readiness and later success in life.^{2,3,4} Research on a number of adult health and medical conditions points to pre-disease pathways that have their beginnings in early and middle childhood.^{3,5}

During early childhood, the human brain grows to 90 percent of its adult size by age 3.^{6,7} Early childhood represents the period when young children reach developmental milestones that include:

- Emotional regulation and attachment
- Language development
- Cognitive development
- Motor skills

All of these milestones can be significantly delayed when young children experience inadequate caregiving, 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.^{8,9,10}

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

- School success¹¹
- Health literacy
- Self-discipline
- The ability to make good decisions about risky situations
- Eating habits
- Conflict negotiation and healthy relationships with family and friends¹²

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Understanding Early and Middle Childhood



View HP2020 Data for:

[Early and Middle Childhood](#)

Midcourse Review Data
Are In!

[Check out our interactive infographic](#) to see progress toward the Early and Middle Childhood objectives and other Healthy People topic areas.

Related Topic Areas

[Access to Health Services](#)
[Adolescent Health](#)
[Blood Disorders and Blood Safety](#)
[Cancer](#)
[Disability and Health](#)

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

- Developmental and behavioral disorders
- Child maltreatment
- Asthma and other chronic conditions
- Obesity
- Dental caries
- Unintentional injuries

While typically nonfatal, these conditions affect children, their education, their relationships with others, 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 roles 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.

Prevention efforts in early and middle childhood can have lasting benefits.^{13,14} 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 home, schools, and communities
- 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.

Learn More

[CDC's Information for Parents Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health](#)

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