



Center on the Developing Child  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

# What Surrounds Us Shapes Us:

An Expanded Story of Early Childhood Development

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Wicked Problems  
Institute 2026

**Find Us:** Center on the Developing Child at Harvard



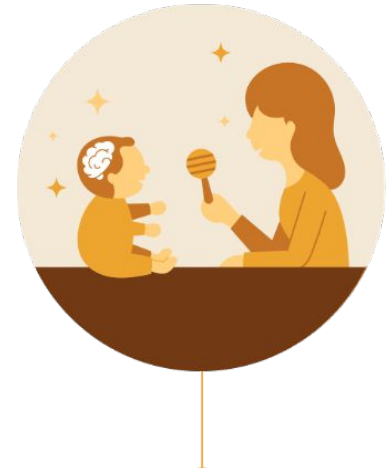
## Three Core Concepts of Early Childhood Development



**Brain Architecture**

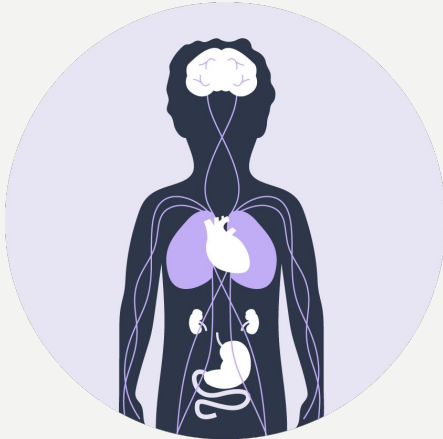


**Toxic Stress**



**Serve and Return**

# The Foundations of Lifelong Health



- Developing biological systems (neural, immune, metabolic) in the body **interact with each other**
- These systems **adapt to the contexts** in which a child is developing—for better or for worse—with lifelong consequences for physical and mental health

## Timing and critical periods



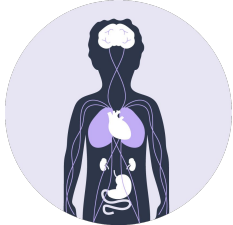
- **Sensitivity** is highest before birth and in early childhood, and decreases into adulthood.
- **Early experiences**, both harmful and protective, can have especially strong effects on development.
- Experience also interacts with **gene expression**, influencing whether and when genes are turned on or off.



# Principles to Improve Outcomes



Start early to support brain development and life-long health.



Remember that timing matters.



Build responsive relationships



Reduce sources of stress.



Consider the full range of experiences and exposures that affect development

**Thank you!**

[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

