

September 28, 2012 9:03 pm

# Why three is the magic number



By Simon Kuper

Money spent on early childhood yields higher returns than in any other phase of life. It can also reduce galloping inequality



In the 1980s, community health workers in Jamaica began making weekly visits to a group of poor mothers and infants. The children's growth had been stunted by infection and poor nutrition. They were given extra milk formula, and were lent books and toys made of junk. Then the mothers were coached in playing and chatting with their kids.

There is a science to this. A baby might start by

banging blocks together. Later he'd graduate to stacking them, and learn to separate big blocks from little blocks. Eventually, as a toddler, he could say things like: "I've got more blocks than you."

As the researchers tracked these children into adulthood, they found striking results. By their late teens, children stimulated in infancy had higher IQs, better mental health and lower rates of crime than their unstimulated peers, says Sally Grantham-McGregor, emerita professor of international child health at University College London, who led the research with Susan Walker of the University of the West Indies. Today, the previously stimulated infants appear to be earning higher wages than their peers.

The Jamaican research underlines what almost all experts on early childhood believe: the first three years of life are key to shaping the brain and much of a child's destiny. Recent neuroscience confirms this. Money spent on these years yields higher returns than in any other phase of life. It can also reduce galloping inequality. Yet societies seldom intrude on the under-threes. Typically, the infant is left to his family's mercy.

The phrase "recent neuroscience" is nowadays used to justify almost anything – including Naomi Wolf's claim that the "conscious vagina" is part of "the female soul" – so caution is required. I'll let Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child express the neuroscientific consensus: "In the first few years of life, 700 new neural connections are formed every second. Neural connections are formed through the interaction of genes and a baby's environment and experiences, especially 'serve and return' interaction with adults...

These connections build brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behaviour and health depend.”

The young child’s nutrition, sleep, relationships and nurturing experiences shape his brain. So do bad experiences. The baby *in utero* and until age one has little defence against toxins such as nicotine and pesticides. Violence, too, marks the brain. “The cortex – the part of the brain responsible for survival – overdevelops, and the frontal lobes – responsible for things such as higher cognitive function and empathy – underdevelop,” explains Michael Feigelson, programme director at the Bernard van Leer Foundation, which focuses on early childhood. “Their biology is preparing them to navigate a violent world.” (Disclaimer: Feigelson, Grantham-McGregor and I sit on advisory boards within George Soros’s Open Society Foundations. We met at a recent OSF meeting.)

Many fates are sealed before age three. The average American child of college-educated parents knows 1,200 words by her third birthday, says the Harvard centre. The average child of parents on welfare knows about 400. The gap rarely closes thereafter.

Clearly, societies should prioritise early childhood. James Heckman, the Nobel-winning economist, has drawn a famous graph to show that return on investment in a person’s life peaks in these years, before falling from preschool onwards and hitting bottom in adulthood. Heckman also notes that early-childhood investment entails no trade-offs: it boosts future health, productivity and equality, while also reducing crime. Nonetheless, societies scrimp on these years. Even the US’s Head Start programme generally takes children from age three.

...

Partly, it’s felt that parents are responsible for infancy. That’s fine for kids with responsible parents who know what to do. But some parents beat children. Others don’t stimulate them.

The professional classes mostly already bombard their toddlers with everything from violins to Mandarin. I see it around me, often *ad absurdum*. Indeed, the Jamaican research got me fretting about my own children’s block-playing abilities. But the biggest gains will come from reaching lesser-educated families. Grantham-McGregor says, “I found in Jamaica that the moment parents realise it matters, they become quite keen to do it.” Pakistan’s “lady health visitors” are achieving great results, she adds, largely because many infants were getting almost no intellectual stimulation. Now Peru is launching a similar programme. That beats spending fortunes trying to salvage ruined adult lives.

The importance of early childhood casts harsh light on Mitt Romney’s remarks about the “47 per cent” of Americans who supposedly “believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you-name-it”. His comments weren’t merely cruel and inaccurate. They also express the mistaken notion that everyone makes his own destiny. In fact, so much is decided for us before we turn three. Romney’s fellow Republican Condoleezza Rice rightly said, “I can look at your zip code and tell whether you’re going to

get a good education.” But even that’s too superficial: when a child starts formal education, it’s often already too late.

simon.kuper@ft.com

---

## You may be interested in

Fresh SA strike at Gold Fields

South Africa drifts under Jacob Zuma

High wage claims seen spreading in S Africa

AngloGold halts South Africa operations

Malema charged with money laundering

**Printed from:** <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/30ef660e-076c-11e2-92b5-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2012** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.