

## Why the Early Years Matter

By Rebekah L. Dorman, PhD

A child is born full of potential, but what determines whether that potential is fulfilled? Is it a person's genetic makeup or environment that shapes their destiny? Philosophers and psychologists have pondered this issue for centuries, in an ongoing argument dubbed the "nature versus nurture" debate.

Very recently, advances in brain research have demonstrated that "nature" and "nurture" are closely intertwined in a manner never before imagined. As such, the early years of a child's life are a crucial time in their development. New research shows that "nurture,"

connections are formed every second! These connections in the brain are being shaped by the infant and young child's interactions with the world that surrounds her. While genetics provides the basic blueprint, how our brains are ultimately wired comes from interactions with our environment. The single most important environmental influence on the brain's architecture is the adults that interact with and care for an individual when they are an infant and a young child.

When children are cared for by parents or other caregivers in a manner both stimulating and sensitive to their needs, brain architecture is created that prepares them for lives of learning, productivity, and positive relationships with others. When children do not receive that type of developmentally supportive care, the impact is apparent very early on. Depression and attachment disorders can be observed even during infancy. By three years of age, children with college educated parents or caregivers have vocabularies two to three times greater than children whose parents did not complete high school.

Understanding brain development explains why programs that focus on the early years have documented such significant impact extending into adulthood. Helping parents interact with their children in a sensitive, yet stimulating manner, and participation in high

quality early childhood education programs are literally building better brain connections. Investing in these programs is an investment in developing brains: and what better investment can one find?

or the world around the developing child, actually shapes "nature," in the form of the young child's developing brain.

We now know that during the early years of life there is amazing growth within the brain: 700 new neural



### About the Author



Dr. Rebekah Dorman is a Cornell University-trained developmental psychologist. She has spent her career helping children and families in the academic, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. She is currently the *Director of the Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood* and *Invest in Children*, the public/

private partnership that focuses services, resources and advocacy on the early childhood period. Dr. Dorman is the author of two books published by the Child Welfare League of America, and numerous articles. She serves on Ohio's Early Childhood Advisory Council and is a member of the Steering Committee for groundWork, Ohio's nonpartisan advocacy group focused on early childhood.