The healthy development of babies and toddlers is primarily determined by their parents’ ability to meet their needs – for nutrition, security, affection and play. This has wide-ranging policy implications, from antenatal classes to parental leave policies to home visits which help parents learn how to interact responsively with their children.

**1 Start early**

Starting shortly after conception, a baby’s brain develops through constant interaction between genes and the environment. Experiences during the first months and years of life have an especially powerful role: there are “sensitive periods” for development of various brain systems – from vision and hearing to language, emotion and cognitive control.

All future brain development, through later childhood and adulthood, builds on the foundations laid in early childhood. If the developing brain doesn’t receive what it needs during these sensitive periods, the effects can be lifelong.

What young children’s developing brains need above all is the sense of security that comes from the stable, consistent presence of a loving caregiver – and stimulating, responsive, playful interactions with the adults in their lives.

**2 Interventions can make a difference**

More than 200 million children are thought to be at risk of not reaching their developmental potential because of malnutrition and poverty. Studies show that children growing up in these circumstances are less likely to succeed in school and more likely to face difficulties with health and well-being in later life.

We can do something about this. Research suggests we should combine programmes that give at-risk young children nutritional supplements with support for parents to interact responsively with their children, helping their brains to develop.

For example, one study of 127 stunted children in Jamaica analysed the effects of interventions on nutritional supplementation and responsive interaction, plus a joint programme, against a control group. Each had benefits, but the group that received both interventions did best – catching up with non-stunted children. Subjects were still showing the benefits of responsive interaction at age 22.

**3 If you want to help children support parents**

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**Reaching out to fathers**

Research shows that boys raised by fathers who help out with chores and childcare are more likely to treat their own female partners respectfully when they grow up. Yet many home visitors and other professionals have traditional views about parenting roles, only addressing the mother even when the father is there. We need to change those attitudes – and challenge norms of masculinity that show fathers as violent enforcers.

**Parental support in times of war**

Millions of children growing up in conflict zones and refugee camps desperately need their parents’ support to build their resilience to trauma: routinely witnessing violence has comparable effects to directly experiencing violence on a child’s developing brain. Yet stressed parents are more likely to lose patience with their children. Interventions like the International Rescue Committee’s Families Make The Difference sessions have been found to greatly reduce physical punishment and improve parent-child bonding in conflict and post-conflict settings.