

The Achievement High-Five

FIVE EARLIEST-LEARNING INTERVENTIONS FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

BY [BARI WALSH](#), ON NOVEMBER 6, 2014 4:54 PM



Eliminating the persistent inequities that constrain the potential of poor and minority students will take more than just school-based improvements, says [Ronald Ferguson](#), the director of the [Achievement Gap Initiative](#) (AGI) at [Harvard University](#). Research indicates that a gap in language, gesturing, and other developmental markers begins to open by age 2, Ferguson says — even though there are virtually no racial or social class differences in the mental abilities of infants before age 1. “So we need to get started well before school,” Ferguson says. “We need to start in the crib.”

With his new project, [Seeding Success](#), Ferguson has developed a set of guidelines for parents and early caregivers that seek to influence parenting behavior and affect outcomes far down the road. Ferguson and his AGI colleagues, working with a national advisory committee, have surveyed the literature about early childhood development and how parents affect achievement. From this, they created five simple strategies for parents of children ages 0 to 3 — approaches to parenting that enhance bonding and support growth. He is planning a community-outreach campaign — starting in Boston and ultimately becoming national — to spread the message about the “Fundamental Five” through an easy-to-use resource guide to be distributed at doctors’ offices, community agencies, daycare centers, and other places where parents turn for care and assistance.

THE FUNDAMENTAL FIVE: ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT EARLY-CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

1. **Maximize loving responsiveness and minimize stress**, beginning at birth and especially later. Responsive parenting — reacting consistently and promptly to an infant’s needs, cues, and verbalizations — is a significant predictor of healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development.
2. **Talk, sing, and gesture a lot**, beginning at birth. Use real talk more than baby talk, from the very beginning, and encourage children to gesture during word learning, pointing to objects that you’re naming. Gaps in language development, well documented between more and less advantaged children, tend to predict later gaps in literacy and school success.
3. **Use number games and rhythm** to lay the foundations for numeracy. Mathematical knowledge and skills begin to emerge early, as do gaps in skills. Parents may tend to prioritize language-related activities, but research suggests that math activities that build understanding of early concepts like matching, sorting, cardinality, comparing, and ordering is key to later achievement.
4. Enable and **encourage three-dimensional competencies** — skills at maneuvering (crawling and walking) in cluttered spaces and manipulating three-dimensional objects.
5. **Cultivate a love of learning** through conversations during book reading and travel; interact with your child to remember, explain, and anticipate together. Research has begun to show the importance of “mind-body” connections — or embodiment — in the development of young children, and that motor development corresponds with a child’s explorations of objects and spaces.

* The AGI began convening the **AGI Parent Leadership Network** in September 2008. Researchers and parent leaders from communities in several states have met four times at Harvard to learn about relevant research, trade ideas, coach one another, and share examples of their own leadership. Presentations and discussions have covered topics ranging from home-learning lifestyles, to ways of helping schools and holding them accountable. The AGI Parent Leadership Network's main purpose is to equip parent leaders with ideas and energy for helping others in home communities to help ALL our children succeed. An aspiration is to organize both action and research projects spanning a number of the participating communities. Participants in the Parent Leadership Network have found it both inspirational and helpful as a source of ideas.

Seeding Success: an **AGI Projects on Parenting

Seeding Success: The Seeding Success project aims to influence early childhood parenting and caregiving practices. It builds upon a two-day conference on parenting the AGI held in the summer of 2011. Prominent researchers presented on the most important insights from their work regarding how parents affect achievement. Following the conference, the AGI assembled a national advisory committee and began to design a project to reach parents of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds. The focus is on five fundamental parenting behaviors for children ages 0 to 3 that support multiple domains of early childhood development. In collaboration with community-based partners, the AGI is working to pilot the intervention with a quasi-experimental assessment design. "Boston Basics" is the Seeding Success pilot in Boston.

Read the "Review of the Science Behind the Seeding Success Zero-to-Three Initiative: Evidence for the Fundamental Five Early Childhood Parenting Behaviors".

The “**Love-to-Read Survey**” was inspired by a participant in the AGI Parent Leadership Network, seeking reading suggestions for his children. Using survey responses from students at Harvard and other universities, the AGI has begun compiling annotated booklists from which teachers, parents, and children can select books that helped inspire a love for reading. A particular emphasis was to identify works that help adolescents better understand issues of racial, gender, and social class identity. The initial report from the Love to Read project has been well received by parents associated with the Parent Leadership Network. Possibilities for an expanded version and wider dissemination are under consideration.