

UNIT 1: INTRODUCTION

In this unit students will:

- Identify what every child needs to grow well during the first five years of life;
- Articulate their memories of being age five.

Lesson 1: In this one-lesson introductory unit students are asked to think about the first five years of a child's life. This unit starts by introducing students to the importance of a child's first five years and explains that these years lay the foundation for all later development. Some information on early brain development is provided. Secondly, students will spend some time thinking about what every child needs in order to reach his or her potential during the first five years of life. Finally, students will be asked to think about the first five years of their own lives, recalling what they liked to do and what made them feel special and important as five-year-olds.

 **Tip:** While this unit was designed to be taught over two to three consecutive days, feel free to customize it to fit your specific curriculum schedule.

National Standards Unit 1

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS — Grades K-12

Standard 1: Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment.

Standard 5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

SCIENCE

Science Content Standards — Grades 5-8

Content Standard C: Life Science

As a result of activities in grades 5-8, all students should develop understanding of structure and function, as well as regulations and behavior of living systems.

HEALTH

Health Education Standards — Grades 6-8

Standard 8: Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family and community health.

UNIT 1:

Lesson 1: The First Five Years of Life

Suggested Class Time: 60 Minutes

Objectives:

- Inform students about child development in the crucial years — birth to age five;
- Help students to understand how the brain develops during these critical periods;
- Connect students with other five-year-olds by having them describe their personal experiences at age five.

Session Plan:

- Why Are the First Five Years So Important? 15 minutes
- What Every Child Needs: 20 minutes
- Looking Back: When I Was Five: 15 minutes
- Wrapping Up: 10 minutes

Materials Needed:

- Handout 1: Ten Things Children Need Before Age Five
- Handout 2: Off to a Good Start

Background:

The first five years of life are a period of incredible growth in all areas of a baby's development. A newborn's brain is about 25 percent of its approximate adult weight. But by age three, it has grown dramatically. The brain grows by making hundreds of trillions of connections, or synapses, between brain cells. As the brain continues to grow during childhood, parents and caregivers can do a lot to help children establish healthy patterns for life-long learning.¹

Think of what an amazing process early development is. Between birth and age five, babies learn to sit, crawl, stand, walk, and run. They learn to talk, rhyme, sing, and communicate their feelings. They are fascinated by the world around them and try to discover how things work. They make friends and show concern for others' emotions.²

But development doesn't happen in the same way, at the same time, for all children. Some children will develop certain skills (like walking or talking) faster or slower than others. These differences are normal.

¹Zero to Three: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_brain

²Zero to Three: http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=key_childdevt; and http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents/4_5.htm

Why Are the First Five Years So Important?

Directions

1. Review the background information on brain development in the first five years of life.
2. Before students come into the classroom, draw three stick figures (small, medium, and large) on the chalk board and label them "birth to five years old; six to twelve years old, and thirteen to nineteen years old." Below the figures write the following question: At which of these stages of life is the brain most flexible and ready to learn?
3. Invite students to answer the question orally, and then reveal that the correct answer is birth to five: "The first five years see the most rapid changes of all of life due to the connections being made between brain cells. These connections are dependent on the quality and quantity of the child's interaction with people and things. The more work the brain does, the more work it is capable of doing. At this time, the brain is most flexible and prepared to learn."³
4. Ask students: What are some of the skills most children have learned by the time they are five? *(Answers should include crawl, stand, walk, run, talk, rhyme, sing, recognize and relate to other people, make friends; tie shoelaces, button shirts, use scissors, and draw recognizable figures.)*

What Every Child Needs

Directions

1. Distribute Handout 1 and read aloud the "Ten Things Children Need Before Age Five," discussing any unfamiliar words or concepts.
2. Ask for students' reactions to this list of essentials. Ask: What surprised you about this list? What else would you add to the list?

 **Tip: You can also introduce the items in Handout 1 by dividing the class into five groups and making each group responsible for presenting two of the items on Handout 1. Allow 10 minutes for the groups to discuss their assigned items and prepare to present them to the class and 5 minutes for the presentation. Students could remain in the same groups to complete Handout 2.**

3. Distribute Handout 2. Have students work in small groups to list items to include in the backpack on Handout 2. Explain that items can be tangible, such as toys and books; or intangible, such as "loving parents" or "health and safety."
4. Have groups write or draw pictures completing Handout 2 and then explain the contents of their backpacks to the class.

³ Early Brain Development, <http://www.educarer.com/brain.htm>.

Looking Back: When I Was Five

Directions

1. Invite students to imagine that they are five years old about to start kindergarten.
2. Now ask students to write their answers to these questions:
 - What did you like to do when you were five?
 - What do you remember about your first day at school?
 - What made you special?
3. Ask student volunteers to share their written responses.

Wrapping Up

1. Ask students to think about some of the factors that prevent children from getting what they need to grow and thrive during the first five years of life.
2. Inform students that the next unit will focus on the survival challenges that face young children and their families around the world.

Extension Activities: Child Development

1. The Amazing Brain — Internet Research. Assign a group of students to research the development of a child's brain and report to the class. A recommended website for information on Early Brain Development is <http://www.educarer.com/brain.htm>.
2. Hold a class Essay/Poster Contest: "The First Five Years of Life." Challenge students to write an essay or create a poster informing families about the growth and development of children during the first five years.
3. Creative Writing. "Child Survival has a Face." Choose a picture of a child from *Child Survival: A Global Challenge* and focus on that child. Imagine you are writing a letter to her or him. What knowledge would you share? What would you want her or him to know about you? What would you say about your childhood? What would you say about the things you love to do now? Now write the letter and include a paragraph describing what you wish for her or him and for other children.

Ask student volunteers to read their letters to the class. Alternatively, have students work in pairs and read and comment on each other's letters.

Ten Things Children Need Before Age Five

- 1. Interaction:** Interactions with people and objects are vital nutrients for the growing and developing brain. They are as necessary to a baby from birth as protein, fat, and vitamins are. Different experiences cause the brain to develop in different ways.
- 2. Touch:** Touch is critical to development. Touch sends signals to the brain telling it to grow (make connections). Of all the sensory experiences, touch is how the infant first knows he or she is loved. It is the source of comfort. Holding reassures children.
- 3. Stable relationship:** Studies have found that infants need a loving, nurturing adult to act as the interpreter of life experiences, otherwise they have no meaning. An early secure relationship can prevent difficulties in handling stress later in childhood.
- 4. Safe, healthy environment:** Keeping children safe includes preventing exposure to lead. Lead poisoning directly affects the brain. Children can be exposed to lead through products containing lead paint. Learning difficulties are symptoms of lead poisoning. Children can be tested for lead poisoning. If caught early enough, this condition is treatable.
- 5. Self control:** The root of all emotional feeling is in the brain stem. It takes nearly one-and-a-half years for a child to learn how to control feelings. How well a child does this depends solely on the parents or other adult caregivers. Children mirror what is around them.
- 6. Communication:** A child's ability to communicate begins at birth. By six months of age a child can duplicate the sounds he or she hears. The child's brain is ready to learn language. All the circuits are in place. They just need to be connected. The more words the infant hears, the more connections are made.
- 7. Play:** Play is essential to a child's development. Play is linked to mental development. Everything is learned through play. The experience of playing, not any particular toy, helps the brain to grow.
- 8. Music:** From birth, children are attracted to music. Parents and children should make music together, not just listen to it. Infancy is not too early for a child to experience music as a form of recreation.
- 9. Sleep:** There is a strong connection between the amount of sleep a child gets and normal brain development. It is necessary for the brain to have deep, uninterrupted rest in order to process all of the day's experiences.
- 10. Being Read To:** When a child is read to, connections are made in the brain. The more a child is read to, the more connections are made. Hearing the same book read over and over helps a child make connections between the written page and the spoken word.

Source: Adapted from "Early Brain Development" (<http://www.educarer.com/brain.htm>)

HANDOUT 2

Off to a Good Start



Directions: Imagine you can fill a backpack with 10 things every child needs to grow in mind and body before age five. What would you include? Write a description of each "item" on the lines below. (Not every item must actually fit in the backpack.)

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.