

Building the Future: Understanding Key Influences on Infant and Toddler Development in Nebraska

In this brief, findings from Kidsights Data highlight 3 key aspects of children's environments that impact the early childhood development of infants and toddlers. These findings can inform policy decisions to support Nebraska families with young children and improve developmental outcomes.

Evidence is clear that the first three years of a child's life are critically important. The foundation for future learning, health, and behavior is constructed within these early years. While all children move through a similar process, child development is largely affected by different factors that influence whether they will have a strong or weak foundation. Until 2023, there had been no form of measurement that offers a population view into how Nebraska's children ages birth to three are developing. Kidsights Data at the University of Nebraska Medical Center changed that deficit with data collected in the 2022-2023 Kidsights Data statewide survey in Nebraska. This data is the first of its kind in the state and provides evidence on child development that generalizes to the population of Nebraska children, aged birth to three. Through the data, we can ask and answer important questions like, "What factors influence child development in Nebraska?" The following brief summarizes different factors affecting child development using data from the 2022-2023 Kidsights Data statewide survey.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

In Nebraska, 1,174 parents with a child under 3 years old responded to the Kidsights Data statewide survey, representing 71 counties. Within the sample, 83% of parents reported being married, 49% had a 4-year college degree or higher, and 83% of parents who responded were female. About thirty percent of children were Black, Hispanic, Asian, or of some other race, and 70% were white only. Seventy-two percent of parents reported living in an urban area.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

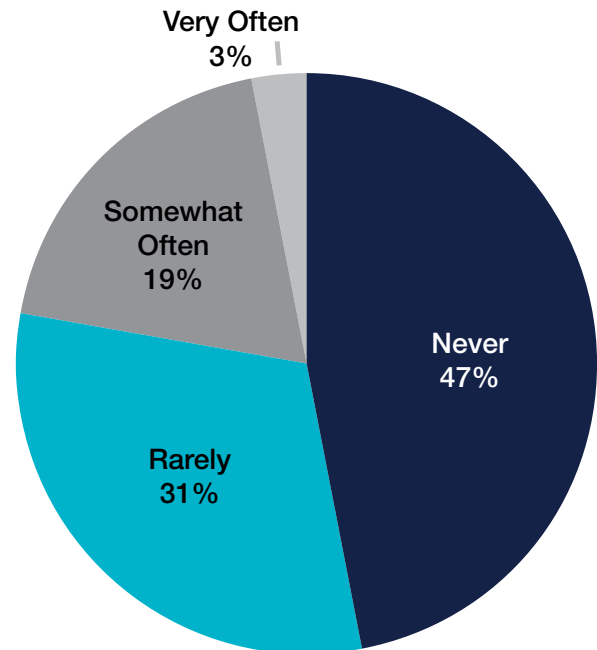
Families with infants and toddlers are more likely to have difficulty covering basics at home. Fifty-three percent of parents of infants and toddlers reported some degree of difficulty accessing the basics, like food and housing, since their child was born.

Additionally, **38% of families reported some level of food insecurity**. Both food insecurity and difficulty accessing the basics are related to lower child development. These results are in line with a large body of research noting the effect of food insecurity and housing insecurity on child development outcomes.

“Kids can’t develop right when they are hungry.”

-Nebraska Parent

HARD TO COVER THE BASICS, LIKE FOOD AND HOUSING, ON THE FAMILY'S INCOME SINCE THE CHILD WAS BORN



Policy recommendation: Nebraska should ensure that every eligible family is enrolled in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program to meet the nutritional needs of pregnant mothers and children under the age of five. In Nebraska, only 58.2% of eligible families are enrolled in WIC.

CHILDCARE

Fifty-six percent of parents reported their child receiving care for more than 10 hours a week by someone other than their parents. When asked about childcare, **16% of families reported that someone in their family had to quit a job, not take a job, or greatly change their job** because of problems with childcare in the past year. While only about 6% of families with infants and toddlers reported receiving childcare subsidies, these families were almost twice as likely to report having trouble finding childcare that led to changes in employment as families who did not receive childcare subsidies.

“As a working parent without familial support, childcare concerns is a cloud that always hangs over you until your child is of school-age.”

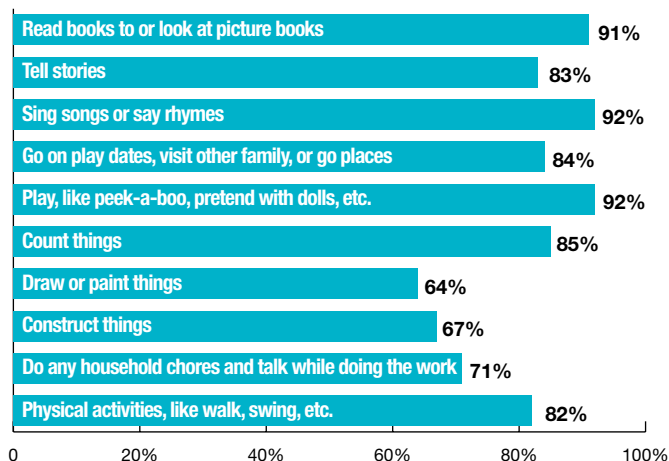
-Nebraska Parent

Policy recommendation: Nebraska should ensure that all families have access to high-quality early care and education, regardless of income or geographic location. Policymakers should support public investment in early care and education to make sure that Nebraska continues to be a great place to work and raise a family. Currently, Nebraska has some public investment in childcare through the childcare subsidy, Sixpence, and the childcare tax credits, but more work is needed to improve access to quality care.

HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Home learning environments can play an important role in supporting the development of children, especially for those children from families facing different challenges. Having different materials in the home, such as toys or household objects, for the child to play with and engaging the child in more activities with older children and adults, such as singing, coloring, and counting, is related to better child development outcomes. Ninety-seven percent of families have books in the home and 91% reported having read to their child in the past 3 days. **Having books for older children and adults in the home and seeing others in the home reading is associated with higher child outcome scores.**

ACTIVITIES FAMILIES ENGAGED IN WITH THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN



“Interactions at home gave me some reassurance that I’m hopefully doing the right thing by my child.”

-Nebraska Parent

Policy recommendation: Voluntary home visitation programs connect families with young children to trusted, trained professionals who provide parents with support and activities designed to encourage child development and bonding. Policymakers should increase state investments to ensure that every family in Nebraska is offered these free, voluntary services when their baby is born and during their first three years. Currently, home visitation programs are available in most, but not all counties in the state, but typically, a family must meet certain criteria and be referred to the service. The one exception is Lancaster County, where all families are offered free, voluntary home visitation when their babies are born.

For more information, please contact kidsightsdata@unmc.edu or info@firstfivenebraska.org.

About Kidsights Data

Kidsights Data is an initiative to build demand for and generate population-level data that tracks the development of children from birth to five in the United States using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. This tool is the first population-based measurement tool of a core set of child development skills for children birth to age five in the United States. For more information about Kidsights Data, located in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, visit www.kidsightsdata.org.

About First Five Nebraska

First Five Nebraska (FFN) is a non-partisan public policy organization established in 2011 to strengthen the state's early childhood system as a key driver of social, educational and economic opportunity for all Nebraskans. FFN works with officials in local, state and federal government, business and economic leaders, early childhood professionals and other stakeholders to identify, research and promote well-informed, fiscally responsible policies and solutions addressing the care, education and healthy development of young children at home or in out-of-home settings. For more information, visit www.FirstFiveNebraska.org.