



Early Neglect Alters Kids' Brains

Until the 1990s, the orphanages of Romania were notorious for their harsh, overcrowded conditions. Those perceptions have been borne out in new research that finds growing up in such an environment can change the brain for good.

"Infants and young children expect an environment in which they are going to interact and receive nurturance, not only food, but psychological nurturance, from adult caregivers," Fox told LiveScience. The finding adds to evidence that early childhood experiences can have lasting impacts on the brain, with one recent study showing that child abuse may shrink regions in the brain's hippocampus.

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Institutionalization in early childhood can alter a child's brain and behavior in the long run, the research finds. Fortunately, early intervention can stave off the effects.

The study, conducted with children growing up in Romanian orphanages, reveals changes in the brain composition of kids who spent their first years in institutions versus those who were randomly assigned to foster care. The findings point to a "sensitive period" in the brain for social development, said study researcher Nathan Fox, a child development researcher at the University of Maryland.

(Source : <http://www.livescience.com/21778-early-neglect-alters-kids-brains.html>
by Stephanie Pappas, Live Science Contributor | July 23, 2012)