

# U.S. Kids Are Falling Behind Global Competition, but Brain Science Shows How to Catch Up

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On vital measures that predict later success in school and life, small children in the U.S. [do worse than kids in comparable countries](#). This distressing information comes from an [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD) study of five-year-olds. For years the OECD has been examining the academic achievement of 15-year-old students from around the world, and recently it extended this work to the younger group. On average, American children had lower literacy and numeracy scores, poorer self-regulation skills, and engaged in fewer acts of cooperation, kindness and other prosocial behaviors than did children in England and Estonia, the other countries studied. Just about the only bright spot was that U.S. children were roughly equivalent to their international peers on some—but not all—social-emotional measures.

These findings did not get the attention they deserved, because they were announced in March 2020, a few days after the World Health Organization declared that [COVID had become a pandemic](#). But they did not come as a surprise—other recent research has shown that about [half of American children are not “on track”](#) in at least one critical area of school readiness. Because the OECD report looked at kids who were just starting school, it was a powerful reminder that we have lost sight of something basic: Learning begins on the first day of life—and not the first day of class. The earliest years of a child’s life are full of opportunity. A child’s brain will never be more receptive to experience, more plastic, than it is during this pivotal time. [Nearly 85 percent of brain growth occurs between birth and the age of three](#). During this period one million neural connections per second are formed.

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