

# What Children Lose When Their Brains Develop Too Fast

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The great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget used to talk about “the American question.” In the course of his long career, he lectured around the world, explaining how children’s minds develop as they get older. When he visited the U.S., someone in the audience was sure to ask, “But Prof. Piaget, how can we get them to do it faster?”

Today it’s no longer just impatient Americans who assume that faster brain and cognitive development is better. Across the globe, as middle-class “high investment” parents anxiously track each milestone, it’s easy to conclude that the point of being a parent is to accelerate your child’s development as much as possible. Both parents and policy makers increasingly push preschools to be more like schools.

A wave of new research shows, however, that this picture is far too simple. A slower, longer, more nurturing childhood may actually be the best way to prepare for adulthood. Developing grown-up skills also matters, of course, but a long childhood is itself one key to a flourishing adult life.

In 1998 a landmark series of studies at the Kaiser Permanente Medical group looked at the long-term effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, on children growing up in California. ACEs include physical or emotional neglect or abuse; poverty; divorce; and violence, addiction or mental illness in the home. Since the original studies, there have been hundreds of similar ones done across the world.

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