Why Childhood Matters: What 2,109 Students Revealed

Understanding the importance of developing foundational skills and habits during childhood

Sylvia Langford

Why focus on childhood?

Childhood is when kids start building the abilities that support learning, independence, and daily life. Over these years, they gradually develop attention, memory, language, reasoning, movement, social awareness, and emotional regulation. They also pick up habits that shape how they approach learning, deal with setbacks, meet responsibilities, and get along with the people around them.

These abilities grow through experience, through chances to learn, through guidance from adults, and through practice.

But what happens when children move through school without developing some of these foundational skills?

That question kept surfacing in Sylvia Langford's work as a psychologist and educator. Watching students learn-seeing their motivation, their behaviour-pushed her to look at what they could actually do on their own, rather than assuming that age, year level, or past instruction told the full story.

Investigating difficulties in older students

Sylvia documented an investigation of 2,109 students from Years 4 to 12 in government-subsidised private schools in Chile's Metropolitan and Biobío regions.

She wanted to look at students' development across four connected areas: cognitive, social, emotional, and motor.

The investigation combined timed mental calculation and written English vocabulary assessments with classroom observations.

She was trying to understand why some students kept struggling with learning, behaviour, motivation, and independence.

How students were assessed

Students completed assessments in addition and subtraction, multiplication, division, and written English vocabulary.

The maths assessments each had 36 operations to be done in two minutes. The English vocabulary assessment asked students to write the English names of 100 illustrated everyday items within 15 minutes.

The same tests were used across all year levels so results could be compared.

Performance level	Mental calculation	Written English vocabulary
Low	0-12 correct	0-25 correct
Medium	13-24 correct	26-75 correct
High	25-36 correct	76-100 correct

These categories were set up for the investigation to describe performance under test conditions. They weren't clinical classifications or standardised measures of intelligence.

The results

1. Addition and subtraction (2,089 students assessed)

School years	Low	Medium	High
Year 4	13.0%	51.8%	35.2%
Years 5-6	6.3%	31.6%	62.1%
Years 7-12	1.1%	15.1%	83.8%
Overall	3.8%	23.6%	72.6%

Addition and subtraction performance was stronger among older students. But in Year 4, only 35.2% reached the High level, while most sat in Medium or Low.

2. Multiplication (2,094 students assessed)

School years	Low	Medium	High
Year 4	39.5%	46.9%	13.6%
Years 5-6	18.1%	47.7%	34.2%
Years 7-12	5.9%	35.2%	58.9%
Overall	13.0%	39.7%	47.3%

The difficulties showed up more sharply in multiplication. In Year 4, only 13.6% reached High while 39.5% were in Low. Even among Years 7-12 students, 41.1% stayed in Low or Medium.

Multiplication feeds into many later operations. When students can't recall multiplication facts quickly, everything that depends on those facts gets harder.

3. Division (2,109 students assessed)

School years	Low	Medium	High
Year 4	71.9%	22.3%	5.8%
Years 5-6	48.8%	31.2%	20.0%
Years 7-12	20.3%	42.7%	37.0%
Overall	33.5%	37.5%	29.1%

Division produced the weakest results. In Year 4, 71.9% fell in Low and only 5.8% reached High. Among Years 7-12 students, only 37.0% reached High-meaning almost two-thirds didn't show fluent division under the test conditions.

Many students relied on counting strategies and had trouble recalling multiplication facts, which made division considerably harder.

4. Written English vocabulary (2,101 students assessed)

School years	Low	Medium	High
Year 4	96.1%	3.9%	0.0%
Years 5-6	83.9%	15.9%	0.2%
Years 7-12	69.1%	30.1%	0.8%
Overall	76.0%	23.5%	0.5%

The vocabulary results were stark. Students had to name familiar illustrated items-body parts, clothing, household objects, fruits, vegetables.

Of 2,101 students, 1,596 fell in the Low level. Only 12 students (0.5%) reached High.

Even among Years 7-12 students, 69.1% stayed in Low.

During the assessment, some students got frustrated at not being able to recall words they felt they knew. A common remark: “I knew this word, but now I can’t remember it.”

That points to something real: there’s a difference between having encountered a word and being able to pull it up when you need it.

What the classroom observations showed

Sylvia also watched how students handled classroom activities, followed instructions, dealt with difficulties, and managed everyday tasks. Several patterns stood out.

Following instructions: Expectations and rules weren’t always applied consistently. Some students needed repeated guidance before starting or finishing activities.

Self-control: Some students had difficulty managing impulses or respecting others’ concentration during class.

Independence: Students sometimes waited for adults to handle ordinary things for them-getting materials, sharpening pencils, or deciding what to do next.

Calm: Nervousness, impulsive reactions, and trouble staying settled came up during some assessment activities.

Willingness to act: Despite the difficulties, many students showed a genuine willingness to participate and try.

Practice: Maths and vocabulary performance raised questions about whether students had received enough systematic chances to practise and hold on to what they’d learned.

These were qualitative observations, not standardised measurements. They couldn’t tell us the causes of individual students’ behaviours. But they drew attention to the connection between academic abilities and the everyday habits that go with learning.

Wanting to learn isn't always enough

One of the most telling observations: students who were willing to participate but couldn't complete tasks successfully.

A student might want to learn maths but lack fluency in the operations needed for more advanced work. Another might want to communicate in English but be unable to retrieve the vocabulary. A student might understand an instruction but struggle to organise their actions and finish independently.

Those difficulties shouldn't be automatically read as a lack of motivation or effort.

They invite a look at what the student has already learned, what's still hard, and what chances are needed to develop what's missing.

Repeated difficulty may also affect how students see their own abilities. How do children stay motivated when they keep struggling to do what's expected of them?

Why developing capabilities during childhood matters

The investigation showed difficulties in foundational abilities among students who'd already been in school for years.

Results differed across year groups, but some difficulties were still visible among secondary students.

The assessment didn't follow the same students over time, so it can't say when the difficulties started or whether particular early experiences caused them.

But it does point to something worth paying attention to. As students advance through school, the content gets harder and they're expected to be more independent. If foundational skills remain shaky, new learning takes more effort.

That's one reason to pay particular attention to early and middle childhood. During those years, children can build abilities that support what comes later.

The goal isn't to rush academic achievement or expect every child to progress at the same rate. It's to give children real chances to acquire, practise, and get solid at foundational skills before the demands pile up.

From being taught to becoming capable

Teaching a child something doesn't automatically mean the child can do it independently. A child might understand an explanation of addition but still need a lot of help to complete calculations on their own.

Learning takes chances to move from understanding an activity to doing it, practising it, and gradually getting better at it independently.

Children start at different levels. A good learning experience recognises what a child can already do and introduces a reachable next step.

Clear instructions, demonstrations when needed, and well-designed activities help children understand what to do. Then they need time to try. Feedback and repeated practice let them strengthen what they're developing.

Some children need more time or repetition than others. The point isn't that everyone learns at exactly the same pace, but that each child gets the chance to make progress.

A capability gets stronger when something that used to require help becomes something a child can do more and more on their own.

Developing skills and habits together

Cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development are connected aspects of childhood.

Children learn through explanations, but also through participating in everyday activities, interacting with others, and practising what they're learning.

Following instructions, self-control, working independently, staying calm, showing willingness to act, and practising are habits that can develop through suitable learning experiences.

A short activity might require a child to listen to an instruction, stay focused, complete a task, and check the result. That kind of experience gives them practice with both the academic content and the habits involved in doing the work.

Adults have a real part to play in setting clear expectations, providing suitable materials, and creating a space where children can try things themselves. The long-term aim is to reduce unnecessary dependence on adults as children's capabilities grow.

An educational approach focused on prevention

The findings reinforced Sylvia's interest in looking at learning conditions before difficulties become entrenched.

Rather than waiting until students have gone through repeated frustration, a preventive approach gives them chances to develop foundational skills and habits during childhood.

This doesn't mean every learning, emotional, or behavioural difficulty can be prevented through education. Children differ in what they need, and some require specialist assessment, adjustments, or individual support.

But many foundational capabilities can be intentionally supported through clear instruction, appropriate challenges, consistent expectations, and regular practice.

An approach focused on developing capabilities recognises that learning is more than absorbing information. It includes becoming progressively able to understand, act, solve problems, take responsibility, and participate with others.

Final reflection: why childhood?

The main finding wasn't just that many students scored low.

It was that difficulties in foundational abilities remained visible across several school years, alongside classroom observations about independence, self-control, calm, and learning habits.

These results raised questions about how foundational capabilities are developed and strengthened during childhood.

They also pointed to the value of shifting attention from difficulties that are already entrenched towards the learning chances that can help children develop what they need.

Childhood is a good time to build foundations for learning, behaviour, and independence. Not because development ends there, but because these capabilities support the experiences and responsibilities that come next.

The educational challenge is to create conditions where children progressively develop what they can't yet do, building their capacity to learn and act with growing independence.

About the investigation: The assessment involved 2,109 students from selected schools in Chile, with slightly different participation numbers across subjects. The performance levels were defined for this investigation, and the timed tasks measured performance under specified conditions rather than overall intelligence or academic ability. The classroom observations were qualitative. The investigation identified educational concerns but did not establish their underlying causes or prove that earlier educational intervention would prevent them.