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EXCERPTS

Some will cry and clutch at their mothers' skirts, others will trot off without a backward glance. That is as it always has been. But over the past few years, the four-year-olds starting school each autumn have changed in one important respect: the amount of money that taxpayers have spent on readying them for the big day.

According to Beverley Hughes, the minister for children, the government has spent more than £21 billion on new schemes for pre-school children since coming to power in 1997. One such is Education Action Zones, a programme launched in 1998 that provides extra money to improve education in poor areas, including support for pre-school children. Another is Sure Start, which was set up in 1999 to help poor children and their families and offers everything from breast-feeding support to baby massage and advice on out-of-work benefits. The largesse has not been restricted to poor children. Since 1998 all pre-schoolers have been entitled to some free nursery care once they turn four, and in 2004 that entitlement was extended to three-year-olds.

Yet a big independent study published on August 28th has found no evidence that children are starting their education any better prepared than they were before. Every autumn for the past six years, researchers from Durham University have given a 15- minute test to around 6,000 four-year-olds just after they have started school. This assesses such matters as a child's ability to write his name, and to listen to three words and pick out the one that rhymes with a fourth. Previous research has shown that the test is useful for predicting later school performance.

Despite a 40% rise over the period in the number of children attending nursery before starting school, there has been no perceptible change in the number who do well on the test, and the gap in attainment between rich and poor children is as wide as ever. Both findings are puzzling, given strong international evidence that pre-school care can ease the process of starting school and improve educational results, particularly for poorer children.

One possibility is that the extra spending has indeed provided more care, but of dubious quality. On August 29th Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, published its annual report on the standards of pre-school care. It found that only 57% of child-care providers offered a service that was good or outstanding. Another 39% were merely "satisfactory" (which in Ofsted jargon means not good enough) and 4% were "unsatisfactory" (which means terrible).

Another possibility is that the money is not reaching the intended target. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, even though Sure Start centres, for example, are located in poor areas, their offerings are taken up enthusiastically by middle-class families living nearby. "The Durham research may point to continuing problems in ensuring that poorer children get the early-years care and education they're entitled to, rather than to a failure of early-years education to deliver educational benefits," says Maxine Hill of the Daycare Trust, a child-care charity.

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Supporters of pre-school education urge the government not to be blown off course. Benefits may be more apparent as programmes become established and hard-to-reach families most in need of help get drawn in. But the findings challenge the notion that providing extra facilities in poor areas is enough. A more targeted approach may well be needed.

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