

An early start on education; Experts agree on importance of helping young children develop, but not on best way -- or time -- to do it [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Vicki Wallace, principal of Bryns Darden Elementary School in fast-growing Clarksville, Tenn., knows what a child's first year of school is like and knows many sad reasons why some children are not ready for it.

"I have seen children come to kindergarten not knowing how to carry on a conversation, not knowing colors, not knowing you read a book from top to bottom and left to right, not knowing any counting or how to write their names, not recognizing adult authority, not knowing how to accept responsibility or take directions," she said.

With many new programs, American communities are trying to catch such children long before they reach kindergarten, in some cases before they are even born. The recent White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development dramatized the interest of President Bush and first lady Laura Bush in the issue. The federal government is spending \$350 million a year on the Early Head Start program to help the low-income families whose children are most likely to lack the needed skills.

But research on the subject is thin, only 3 percent of low-income families are served by Early Head Start, and disagreements on how to help such children are frequent and sharp. For instance, choices must often be made between training parents to give their children early care and stimulation, or bringing the children into special programs where teachers can do the job.

School administrators usually say they try to do both. "I don't think either way is a better way," said Cora Harper, principal of Graham Road Elementary School in Fairfax County. Her school's Head Start program takes low-income children as young as 3 but also encourages their parents to learn new techniques. "You really need to look at the family and what the needs are and what the children's needs are and decide which approach would work best," she said.

The research, unfortunately, indicates that speeding the cognitive development of small children by training their parents is likely to be no more successful than teaching algebra to eighth-graders by enrolling their mothers and fathers in the class. Focusing on the parents "has been a resounding failure, despite its many adherents," said Vanderbilt University education professor Dale C. Farran, who has been researching early intervention for children in poverty for more than 25 years. The method "is much cheaper," she said, but usually the lessons don't stick and the children don't get what they need.

Matthew Melmed, executive director of the Washington-based nonprofit advocacy group Zero to Three, said that "for programs to be effective, what seems to matter is the child's direct involvement in the services." Georgetown University political scientist Patrick J. Wolf said "the odds of a particular parent responding effectively to a training intervention" were "pretty low," but he also noted that if a way could be found to reach the parents, "the educational payoff for their children could be both great and permanent."

It is hard, many experts acknowledge, to advise parents on how to help their small children when the subject is so complex.

"Kids need a lot of things, and they need them at different ages," said Robert C. Pianta, a professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. As infants, he said, they need to know that if they are uncomfortable, they can cry and be soothed. At the end of their first year, they need to exchange language with a partner. At age 2, they need to explore their world, but with firm limits. Eventually, "they need to be exposed to print," Pianta said. "Someone needs to read to them, show them how information and enjoyment are extracted from print."

Karen Willoughby, coordinator of Fairfax County's Center for Promoting Family Learning and Environment, said she is still experimenting with ways to help more parents do this right. In the center's pilot program for early literacy in Spanish-speaking families, parents are told not to worry about speaking or reading to their children in the native tongue. "If they are going to learn a second language," she said, "it is better if they are well-versed in their first language."

One possible approach is to encourage more parent volunteers in preschool classes. The Dallas-based TI Foundation has tried to engage

parents in early child development activities in poor neighborhoods. "If parents participate in their children's school, it affirms for the child the importance of education," foundation director Ann Minnis said. "If Mommy is here, this must be a good place, they would think. We could capture a whole lot more parents and children with mandated volunteerism."

Once they reach the school, the parents may be confused to hear that the experts have yet to agree on what to do with their children. The Summer 2001 issue of the Hoover Institution journal *Education Matters* featured conflicting articles by scholars David Elkind, professor of child study at Tufts University, and Grover J. Whitehurst, chairman of the psychology department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Elkind said preschoolers should explore the world at their own pace. He cited research indicating that too-early emphasis on numbers and the alphabet will only make them anxious. Whitehurst said his research showed that "children who had begun to learn about print, sounds, and writing during the preschool period were . . . more likely to be reading successfully in elementary school."

Pianta called this debate "a false dichotomy that distracts people." He said "children need both forms of input -- they need to be shown certain things and they need to have the freedom to learn for themselves." Farran said the dispute might fade if developmental psychologists who study how children grow cooperated with educational practitioners who help them learn. "Right now," she said, "the two groups barely talk to each other."

But while scholars argue, more parents seem to have heard the message that early learning of some kind is important. "When we first offered programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, we literally had to hunt down children," said Rosemarie Young, principal of Watson Lane Elementary School in Louisville. "We now have a waiting list. I believe that parents have come to realize that the programs are beneficial and are sometimes amazed at what their children can do."

- reprinted from the Washington Post.

Tags: poverty ^[2]

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