

Connecting the science of child development to public policy ^[1]

Author: Huston, A. C.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to suggest some ways in which researchers can make their work more useful to policymakers. Policy research is more than "applied" research. It is designed to answer questions about what actions will or will not be effective in dealing with the problem studied, not just to understand the antecedents or consequences of development. A policy researcher asks what conditions that we can affect with public policy produce a change in development, and how do we bring about those conditions? Good policy research is based in theory. When strong theory and conceptual frameworks help to frame the questions, the results can be generalized beyond a particular program or issue, and they can contribute to our general knowledge about developmental phenomena. I am not arguing that other types of investigations lack value for policy - quite the contrary. Policymakers need knowledge about the conditions that affect children's development to decide which aspects of behavior and which environments may be especially important to target. But this information is not enough. Policy research should also be concerned with identifying and studying policy actions. The policy research lens focuses investigators' questions on actions that policymakers can take to address social problems; it usually crosses disciplines; it includes assessment of costs, benefits, and efficiency; it leads investigators to use a range of rigorous methods (including, but not limited to, random assignment experiments) with particular attention to issues of causal direction and potential errors; and it frames questions and answers in terms that policymakers can use and understand. It makes us cautious about overinterpreting our data. Investigators doing policy research try to reach the people making policy decisions with a plethora of research reports, press releases, public briefings, and personal contacts. More effective, but less frequent, are forums for two-way communication in which policymakers tell researchers what questions they want answered, providing guidance for research design as well as whetting policymakers' appetites for learning about the results. Increases in graduate and postdoctoral training in policy research have brought more developmentalists into governmental and nongovernmental policy positions where their expertise can infiltrate science and research into the policy process. Although we operate in a political and social zeitgeist that defines a limited set of policy options, scientists need to maintain some independence from current political agendas. Policy discussions in the US often use a discourse of investment in children, with the "profits" to come from their future economic productivity. As scientists concerned about child development, however, we have a responsibility to frame research and policy debates around the broad goals we consider important for children's welfare - quality of life, having children who are healthy, happy, and free of want - and to be ready with good data when the window of opportunity opens for our science to inform policy decisions.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: child development ^[4]

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