

Kindergarten skills pay off in big bucks ^[1]

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A surprising new bottom-line look at early learning suggests how much you learn in kindergarten - and whether you had a seasoned teacher - can help determine how rich and educated you will be as a grown-up, and even whether you will be married before age 30.

The Harvard-led study shows children, whether rich or poor, who were in top-scoring kindergarten classes back in the 1980s have grown up to earn about \$1,000 more a year than their peers in weaker performing classes. They have earned more college degrees from more tony campuses, own more valuable homes, are saving more for retirement, and are more likely to be married - to high-earning spouses.

"Overall, this study shows that what you do in kindergarten really matters," said co-author John Friedman, an economics professor with Harvard's Kennedy School, one of six economists who tried to peg a dollar figure on the benefit of a good kindergarten education.

"And it may be about more than just cognitive skills," Friedman noted. "It may be a good kindergarten teacher may instill things like patience or perseverance or even polite manners and qualities that stand a person in good stead later in life."

"But there has been a view that everything is determined by the time you're 4, by who your parents are and how much they read to you. This is direct evidence that what happens in your kindergarten class also makes a huge difference."

The team of six economists tracked down nearly 12,000 adults whose kindergarten scores had been measured back in the 1980s in a Tennessee study that concluded some classes do better for no other apparent reason than having a better teacher.

Part of that edge may be honed by experience, added Friedman, noting those whose teachers had more than nine years experience went on to earn \$900 a year more by the age of 27.

"We have to be careful how we interpret this; it may be more than just experience. These may be teachers who have chosen to stay teaching kindergarten because they're committed to this age group."

The study underscores the importance of the often undervalued kindergarten teacher, says education professor Linda Cameron of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

What makes a good teacher?

"Kids need a very clever teacher with a big heart, someone who helps kids believe in their own abilities to think and learn and be independent, which nurtures the creativity and soft skills in demand today," said Cameron, a former kindergarten teacher.

But while Ontario's curriculum claims to embrace play-based learning, Cameron said too many teachers feel pressured to "keep kids glued to their seats learning the pencil-and-paper skills that eventually will be measured by standardized tests."

Canada's early learning guru Dr. Fraser Mustard welcomed the Harvard study's focus on good kindergarten education, but warns it is important to stimulate children long before kindergarten, as suggested in educator Charles Pascal's blueprint for early learning in Ontario.

"You certainly want high quality staff in kindergarten, but you get even bigger gains if you start earlier," he said.

"Kindergarten does the bridging from home to the formal education system, but in a sense much of the brain development is all over by the age of 3," he said. It's a topic lacking in Ontario's teacher training programs.

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