

The effects of preschool education: What we know, how public policy is or is not aligned with the evidence base, and what we need to know ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Article in pdf ^[2]

Summary:

Two children enroll in publicly funded preschools that are within a mile of each other, but they may have vastly different experiences at the two schools. One child may attend preschool for 8 hours a day and be taught by a teacher with a bachelor's degree, while the other child may be in preschool for only a few hours a day, under the supervision of a teacher with a 2-year degree. Why is there so much variability, and are these programs meeting youngsters' potential and adequately preparing them for school?

A new report in Psychological Science in the Public Interest reviews the current state of publicly funded preschooling, discusses what scientific research tells us about early childhood education, and offers suggestions for improving the efficacy of these programs.

The programs that fall under the category of "publicly supported preschool education" (e.g., child care centers, Head Start, and state-funded pre-kindergarten centers) have such a wide variety of basic aims, funding, program models, and staff qualifications, that it seems as if no two preschool programs are alike. Despite these differences, numerous studies show that attending preschool improves the learning and development in young children, and that the benefits of preschool are long-lasting. Enrollment in preschool is associated with less grade repetition, higher rates of high school graduation, and improved social behavior.

However, the magnitude of the benefits depends on the quality of the program: On average, due to the prevalence of low-quality preschool programs, attending preschool in the United States narrows the achievement gap by perhaps only 5% as opposed the estimated 30% to 50% that research suggests might be possible on a large scale if all preschool programs were of high quality. While the term "quality" can refer to a number of factors, research indicates that the most important factor in determining the quality of preschool programs may be what teachers do when interacting with children, and how they do it.

Professional development of preschool teachers may result in improved interactions with students, which may in turn lead to considerable skill gains in children. However, professional development can take many forms, and public funds devoted to teacher development must be used in ways that are beneficial to students and teachers (as suggested by research), not in ways that are merely convenient to professional-development providers.

The authors show that to ensure publicly funded preschool programs adequately prepare every child for school, public policy and practice need to align more closely with research on what constitutes necessary early-childhood education. They conclude, "Increased public investment in effective preschool education programs for all children can produce substantial educational, social, and economic benefits, but only if the investments are in programs in which teaching is highly effective."

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: quality ^[4]

pre-school ^[5]

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