

Preschool education and its lasting effects: Research and policy implications^[1]

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Executive summary:

Over the last several decades, participation in center-based preschool programs has become much more common, and public support for these programs has grown dramatically. Nevertheless, participation remains far from universal, and policies vary across states, as well as across options such as private child care, preschools, Head Start, and state pre-K. Since policy makers typically have more alternatives than money, they face key questions about the value of preschool education, whom it should serve or subsidize, and which program designs are best. This brief reviews the research regarding the short- and long-term effects of preschool education on young children's learning and development. A detailed and comprehensive assessment of evidence yields the following conclusions and recommendations:

Conclusions

- Many different preschool programs have been shown to produce positive effects on children's learning and development, but those effects vary in size and persistence by type of program.
- Well-designed preschool education programs produce long-term improvements in school success, including higher achievement test scores, lower rates of grade repetition and special education, and higher educational attainment. Some preschool programs are also associated with reduced delinquency and crime in childhood and adulthood.
- The strongest evidence suggests that economically disadvantaged children reap long-term benefits from preschool. However, children from all other socioeconomic backgrounds have been found to benefit as well.
- Current public policies for child care, Head Start, and state pre-K do not ensure that most American children will attend highly effective preschool programs. Some attend no program at all, and others attend educationally weak programs. Children from middle-income families have least access, but many children in poverty also lack preschool experiences.
- Increasing child care subsidies under current federal and state policies is particularly unlikely to produce any meaningful improvements in children's learning and development. Given the poor quality of much child care, it might instead produce mild negative consequences.
- Increasing public investment in effective preschool education programs for all children can produce substantial educational, social, and economic benefits. State and local pre-K programs with high standards have been the most effective, and such programs need not be provided by public schools. Public schools, Head Start, and private child care programs have produced similar results when operating with the same resources and standards as part of the same state pre-K program.
- Publicly funded pre-K for all might produce a paradoxical but worthwhile effect in terms of educational gains. Disadvantaged children benefit (in comparison to their gains with targeted programs), but so do more advantaged children. Accordingly, while such universal programs may result in higher levels of achievement for the disadvantaged, they might leave a larger achievement gap. If a universal preschool program substantially increased the enrollment of disadvantaged children, however, the achievement gap might also be reduced.

Recommendations

- Policy makers should not depart from preschool education models that have proven highly effective. These models typically have reasonably small class sizes and well-educated teachers with adequate pay.
- Teachers in preschool programs should receive intensive supervision and coaching, and they should be involved in a continuous improvement process for teaching and learning.
- Preschool programs should regularly assess children's learning and development to monitor how well they are accomplishing their goals.
- Preschool programs, in order to produce positive effects on children's behavior and later reductions in crime and delinquency, should be designed to develop the whole child, including social and emotional development and self-regulation.

•Because an earlier start and longer duration does appear to produce better results, policies expanding access to children under 4 should prioritize disadvantaged children who are likely to benefit most. More broadly, preschool education policy should be developed in the context of comprehensive public policies and programs to effectively support child development from birth to age 5 and beyond.

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