

Targeting early childhood care and education: Myths and realities

Gillian Doherty

July 2001

Childcare Resource and Research Unit
Centre for Urban and Community Studies
University of Toronto

Targeting early childhood care and education: Myths and realities

Gillian Doherty

Childcare Resource and Research Unit

Centre for Urban and Community Studies

Occasional Paper 15

July 2001 *viii*, 138 pp.

ISBN 1-896051-16-2

Childcare Resource and Research Unit

Centre for Urban and Community Studies

University of Toronto

455 Spadina Avenue, Room 305

Toronto ON M5S 2G8, Canada

TEL: 416-978-6895

FAX: 416-971-2139

E-MAIL: crru@chass.utoronto.ca

WEBSITE: www.childcarecanada.org

Cover design: Opus House

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gillian Doherty

Targeting early childhood care and education: Myths and realities

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-896051-16-2

1. Early childhood education. 2. Child care. 1. University of Toronto.

Childcare Resource and Research Unit II. Title.

LB1139.23.D64 2001

372.21

C2001-902107-0

About the author

Gillian Doherty has a Ph.D. in child/clinical psychology from York University, Toronto. She has been involved in child and family issues for over thirty years in a variety of roles including those of clinical psychologist, university and college instructor in child development and Director of Policy Services for the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. Currently, Dr. Doherty is a consultant and researcher in the early childhood field and an adjunct professor in the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. She is the author of *Zero to six*, a report that summarized the data on children's development prior to age six. Dr. Doherty has written two books and many policy and research articles related to early childhood development and early childhood services.

Acknowledgements

This is the second paper of three that consider early childhood education and care within the context of a National Children's Agenda. The first, *More than the sum of the parts: An early childhood development system for Canada*, was released in 2000. The National Children's Agenda falls within the social policy context of the Social Union Framework Agreement signed by the provinces (except Quebec) and the federal government in February 1999.

This paper's contribution to public education and to the policy process has been made possible by Child Care Visions, Human Resources Development Canada, whose support we gratefully acknowledge. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of HRDC.

We very much appreciate the contributions of Maureen Emanuel, Michelle Turiano and Sinead Rafferty at the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. Thanks also to Jane Beach for her insightful comments.

Contents

Preface and acknowledgements	iii
Executive summary	iv
Chapter 1: Supporting the development of Canada’s children	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Early Childhood Development Initiative: An opportunity for action	1
1.3 Meeting the challenge	2
1.4 The purposes of this paper	3
1.5 The organization and content of this paper	3
1.6 Issues when using research evidence to inform policy	10
Notes	12
Chapter 2: Identification of vulnerable children	
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 Specific types of parenting styles	14
2.3 Living with a parent who is stressed	15
2.4 Living with a parent who is depressed	16
2.5 Living in a dysfunctional family	17
2.6 Lack of linguistic and/or cognitive stimulation	17
2.7 Comparisons of children from families at various income levels	18
2.8 Comparison of children from single- and two-parent families	20
2.9 Community mapping as a mechanism to identify children who are at risk for developmental problems	21
2.10 Summary and conclusions	22
Notes	23
Chapter 3: Targeted child-focused programs	
3.1 Introduction	27
3.2 Single-site research projects	28
3.3 Large scale multi-site programs	35
3.4 Summary and conclusions	42
Notes	43

Chapter 4: Targeted parent-focused programs

4.1	Introduction	45
4.2	Single-site research projects	46
4.3	Large scale multi-site programs	49
4.4	Discussion	61
4.5	Conclusions	62
	Notes	63

Chapter 5: Two-generation programs

5.1	Introduction	67
5.2	Four representative two-generation programs	68
5.3	Discussion	80
5.4	Conclusion	82
	Notes	83

Chapter 6: Universal programs

6.1	Introduction	85
6.2	At-risk children in ordinary community group programs	86
6.3	Universal parenting education programs and at-risk children	91
6.4	Conclusions	95
	Notes	96

Chapter 7: Policy implications

7.1	Introduction	99
7.2	Children's environments	102
7.3	The impact of targeting	107
7.4	Cost/benefit analysis	109
7.5	Summary	113
	Notes	114

	References	117
--	------------	-----

Tables

2.1	The effect of family income level on factors known to influence development in early childhood, cycle one, NLSCY, 1994/95.	18
2.2	Frequency of psychosocial problems among children by adjusted annual family income, cycle one, NLSCY, 1994/95.	19
2.3	Rates of problems for children from single-mother families compared with those from two-parent families, cycle one, NLSCY, 1994/95.	20
3.1	Evaluation findings from the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies projects.	28
3.2	Evaluation findings from the Perry Preschool and the Abecedarian projects.	31
3.3	Comparison of average scores on standard tests of academic achievement at age twelve, Abecedarian project.	33
3.4	Means of outcome variables by Head Start status and gender, <i>Into adulthood: The Effects of Head Start</i> study.	39
4.1	Evaluation findings from three combination parent-focused and children's group program projects.	48
4.2	Outcomes: Better Beginnings, Better Futures project.	55
4.3	Proportion of children receiving a high junior kindergarten teacher rating, <i>Toronto Parenting and Family Literacy Centres</i> .	57
4.4	Proportion of children at the lowest thirtieth percentile as measured by the Early Development Instrument (EDI) when in senior kindergarten, <i>Toronto Parenting and Family Literacy Centres</i> .	58
4.5	Evaluation findings for the New York HIPPOY program.	60
5.1	Characteristics of four representative two-generation programs.	70/71
5.2	Evaluation findings from four representative two-generation programs.	78/79

Executive summary

There is growing acknowledgement that optimal early childhood development is crucial not only for the health, well-being, and competence of the individual but also of society at large. This paper focuses on the period from birth to age six and uses research from Canada and other countries to examine the following questions:

- What are the known threats to young children's optimal development?
- Can children whose development is at risk be identified reliably and at an early age?
- Which types of targeted programs (programs restricted to children/families who meet certain criteria) promote the development of vulnerable children and under what circumstances?
- To what extent and under what circumstances do non-targeted programs that are open to all children/families promote the development of children at risk for developmental problems?
- To what extent is the current approach to targeting early childhood programs consistent with what we know about what is required to promote young children's development?
- How can we promote the healthy development of the largest number of children?

Canadian research supports the belief that there is a higher incidence of vulnerability to developmental problems among children living in poverty and/or living with a lone parent. However, it also demonstrates that most children living in these circumstances are **not** at risk. Other known variables that put children's development at risk are:

- Certain types of parenting styles.
- Living with a parent who is stressed.
- Living with a parent who is depressed.
- Lack of adequate linguistic and/or cognitive stimulation.

These variables occur in both lone- and two-parent families and across all income levels. Since the majority of children live in two-parent and middle-income families, **numerically** the largest number of at-risk children are not living in poverty or with a lone-parent. Restricting special developmental programs for at-risk children to neighbourhoods with a

high proportion of low-income and/or lone-parent families inevitably means the exclusion of many at-risk children living in other communities.

The earliest we can be sure that all children will come into contact with an adult who is able to identify developmental or behavioural problems is when they enter the formal school system. As a result, we cannot identify individual vulnerable children easily nor at an early age.

The research evidence from evaluations of three categories of programs intended to promote the development of at-risk children is discussed. The three categories are:

- **Child-focused programs** that solely or primarily provide a centre-based educational experience for the children. Such programs work directly with the children.
- **Parent-focused programs** that provide one of or more of: (1) parenting education, (2) the provision of information about child development, and (3) parental support, for example, assisting parents to obtain other services. Some parent-focused programs include a children's component such as a parent/child drop-in program or a part-day centre-based group program for the children. Parent-focused programs hope to promote children's development indirectly through changing parenting style and/or the home as a learning environment.
- **Two-generation programs** that combine children's programs and parent-focused services with efforts to improve the parent's employability and thus the family's financial situation.

The research evidence clearly demonstrates that the most effective way of enhancing the development of at-risk children is through centre-based, group programs. The research evidence shows that the development of at-risk children is **not** promoted by programs that are solely parent-focused or by two-generation programs.

The effectiveness of centre-based group programs in promoting the development of at-risk children depends upon their quality — that is, the extent to which the program involves adults who understand child development and how to promote it, are not responsible for too many children, and provide appropriate levels and amounts of linguistic and cognitive stimulation. At-risk children do not benefit from poor quality group programs. The research also indicates that high quality centre-based group programs are most effective for children at risk for developmental problems when they begin prior to age three and are provided on a full-day rather than a part-day basis.

The research also clearly illustrates that non-targeted, ordinary high quality community child care centres are effective in promoting the development of both at-risk children and children not deemed to be at risk. Again, quality matters. Living in a family that is supportive of children's development does not protect the child from the negative effects of poor quality child care.

The current approach of providing centre-based group programs for at-risk children, such as targeted pre-kindergarten programs on a part-time basis starting when the child is age three or four is inadequate to meet the children's needs. Mastery of the developmental tasks faced by the child at age three and four depends heavily on a scaffold of competencies developed at an earlier age. If these competencies have not been adequately developed, the child's ability to develop new skills is compromised.

As noted above, there is growing evidence that full-day programs are more effective than part-day programs. In the U.S., the traditional Head Start program for preschoolers has been supplemented by an Early Head Start for children under age three and many Early Head Start and Head Start centres now provide a full-day program.

Part-day delivery of programs for at-risk children also limits parents' ability to engage in activities that might make them more employable or to engage in full-time employment and thereby improve their family financial situation. Poverty puts children's development at risk through factors directly related to the family's low income such as poor nutrition and living in sub-standard housing. Assisting parents to engage in work that pays a decent wage is an effective way of addressing poverty and reducing the incidence of children at risk for developmental problems.

Many young children spend nine hours a day, five days a week in child care often starting when they are infants. This reflects the high workforce participation of mothers with young children and the tendency for them to return to work within six months of giving birth. Research from Canada and other countries consistently reports that conditions supportive of children's development are more likely to be found in regulated child care. However, 62% of children under age five receiving regular child care receive this care in unregulated situations. This is often because their parents cannot afford or cannot find a regulated child care space. This reality means that the development of many of Canada's young children is put at risk, regardless of their home situation. All the evidence suggests that the need for child care will continue.

As noted above, high quality, ordinary community child care programs can promote the development of at-risk children as well as protect the development of children not deemed to be at risk. Given our inability to reliably identify the majority of at-risk children through easily observed 'markers' such as neighbourhood socio-demographic characteristics, and the current high use of child care for young children, high quality, affordable child care for any child whose parent wishes to use the service is the most effective way to assist vulnerable children. At the same time, it would protect the development of children not deemed to be at risk but whose development is jeopardized when they are placed in poor quality child care.

A cost/benefit analysis by two University of Toronto economists illustrates that Canada would obtain financial benefit from a universal, publicly-funded, high quality child care system with parent fees geared to income. The first benefit would accrue through costs not incurred for remedial education or as a result of grade repetition. The second benefit would result from increased parental employment and the associated increase in government revenue from taxes. A third benefit would accrue through a more productive workforce both now and in the future with a resultant greater economic growth.

In summary, restricting access to early childhood care and education programs either explicitly through targeting children/families in neighbourhoods with certain socio-demographic characteristics or de facto through restricting access to fee subsidy for regulated child care is neither in the best interest of at-risk children nor other children. Canada is paying a high price for the current situation in terms of:

- High rates of school drop-out.
- Failed attempts to reduce dependency on social assistance due, in part, to lack of reliable, affordable child care.
- The restriction of parental ability to engage in paid work.
- Reduced employee productivity related to problems with child care.
- Failure to reduce child poverty.

Provision of high quality, publicly-funded, universal child care is affordable and sustainable. It is also necessary to reduce the price being paid by society for the current situation of actual and de facto targeting of early childhood care and education programs.