

Targeting early childhood care and education: Myths and realities

Gillian Doherty

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Childcare Resource and Research Unit
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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.

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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.