

The
BALANCED
VIEW:

Research-based
information on
timely topics

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**WESTCHESTER
INSTITUTE
FOR HUMAN
SERVICES
RESEARCH**

7-11 South Broadway
Suite 402
White Plains, NY 10601
914/682-1969
FAX: 914/682-1760
E-mail: westins@idt.net

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Part 1: What The Research Tells Us

What Is Early Childhood Education?

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a term applied to an array of programs that differ widely in their goals, service delivery strategies, and the ages of children served. Some ECE programs offer children a rich menu of educational activities, while others merely “baby-sit” children when their parents are at work. These programmatic differences have led to markedly disparate conclusions about the effectiveness of ECE. To put research findings into perspective, therefore, it is important to understand the primary ECE designs.

The research, generally, classifies ECE programs into two clusters, child-focused and family-focused approaches. **Child-focused** approaches are further divided into 1) preschool programs including Head Start and prekindergarten; and 2) child care programs.

Preschool programs typically are part-day and part-year

interventions that serve 3-5 year-olds in center or school settings. Some offer an educational program only, while others provide comprehensive educational, health, nutritional, social, and supporting services. Most of the preschool programs are designed to promote child development and improve school readiness. Publicly funded preschools generally are designed for economically and otherwise disadvantaged children, while private preschools serve children from all backgrounds.

Child care or day care programs, in contrast, typically offer full-day services to children from birth to school-age. This care can be provided either in a center setting or a caregiver’s home. Most child care programs aim to promote child development, while enabling working parents to meet their child care needs. Child care services can be purchased from a wide variety of nonprofit and for-profit providers. In addition, public fund subsidies are available to help low-income parents pay for child care

while they work or attend school.

Family-focused approaches also can be divided into two categories, 1) parenting programs; and 2) two-generation programs. *Parenting* programs, often called family support programs, attempt to affect children's development indirectly by strengthening their parents' skills. Most of these programs serve families with very young children—usually under the age of three. Typical services include home visits, life skills/parenting classes, parent support groups, drop-in centers, counseling/crisis intervention, and auxiliary support services such as emergency food or clothing.

Two-generation programs, the newest type of ECE program, are designed to assist both children and their parents through a single integrated approach. These programs typically combine three elements, a) an early childhood program; b) a parenting education program; and c) an adult education, literacy, or job skills training component. Two-generation programs primarily target low-income families, and often use a case manager to perform wide-ranging functions including brokering available community services. The main goal

of a two-generation program is to help young children get the best possible start in life and, at the same time, to help their parents become economically self-sufficient.

Both parent education and two-generation programs generally rely on funds from public agencies or private foundations to support services.

Why Is ECE Important?

Significant economic and social trends over the past decade have propelled early childhood education to the top of legislative agendas across the country. The trends include increased global economic competition, a shifting economic base, changing demographics, and an influx of mothers into the workforce. Welfare reform also has created increased interest in ECE, as thousands of additional young children will need child care while their parents are required to work. Further fueling policy interest in ECE is research that links early learning experiences with later school achievement, adult productivity, and a sound future economy—research that says the earlier you start, the bigger payoff you have.

Currently, millions of young children spend a significant amount of time in early childhood programs at an

annual public cost exceeding \$10 billion. Still, many other children—including 65% of poor children—do not receive a preschool experience. For this reason, organizations such as the National Governors' Association, the Committee for Economic Development, and the National Association of State Boards of Education have called for additional investment in early childhood education. In response, many states have increased ECE programs, especially for low-income families. What was once a local matter confined to the domains of human service or education, has now become a vital public issue with important implications for families, business, private philanthropy, and government.

What Does The Research Say About ECE?

Countless studies of ECE programs have been conducted over the past three decades. For the most part, these studies fall into two streams of research, one focusing on immediate and short-term effects of ECE, and the other centering on long-term program impact.

Immediate and Short-Term Effects of ECE Programs

A. Child-focused Programs
Studies of child-focused ECE have concentrated either on

ordinary day care for children of all backgrounds, or preschool programs that target disadvantaged children. The *day care* research, including new findings from an ongoing seven-year study, offers reassurance for working parents: day care, by itself, is not harmful to the intellectual development of children. Variation in the quality of child care, however, is an important determinant of impact. High-quality day care, where adults respond and speak frequently to children, is associated with better cognitive and social development both while children are in day care and during their first few years of school.

The research on *preschool* programs for disadvantaged children, including large scale efforts such as Head Start, generally indicates the following short-term effects:

- IQ gains of about eight points immediately after program completion;
- Achievement gains of a similar magnitude to IQ; and,
- Somewhat smaller effects for socioemotional outcomes such as self-esteem, motivation, and social behavior.

On average, these effects persist until the children enter school, but diminish as

they progress through the early grades. Effects are much larger and last longer for well-designed, intensive ECE programs.

B. Family-focused Programs

Generally, the research on family-focused programs shows that “pure” *family support approaches* (i.e., parent education without a child development or adult education component) produce short-term positive effects on parental knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. There is little evidence, however, that the changes in parents result in improved child outcomes. The weak child effects have led researchers to conclude that “stand-alone” parenting programs, while important, are not sufficient to impact children’s development.

There is not yet a long history of research findings on the effects of *two-generation* programs. And the evidence that is available is mixed. As currently designed, two-generation programs have small or no short-term effects on child development.

Similarly, they have scattered effects on measures of parenting including time spent with child, expectations for child success, attitudes about child-rearing, and parent-child interactions. The exception is GED attainment, where two-

generation programs have produced large short-term effects; but the GED results have not been accompanied by increased income, or improved employment status.

Long-Term Effects of ECE Programs

In the ECE literature, as in most involving the study of long-term effects, there is considerable variability in the quality of the research design. However, the results of the methodologically strongest studies indicate that ECE programs can have substantial effects on disadvantaged children’s lives years after their involvement in the program.

Effects on School Performance. The weight of the evidence establishes that ECE can produce large effects on IQ during the early childhood years and sizable consistent effects on achievement, grade retention, special education placement, and high school graduation. The evidence for effects on grade retention and special education is especially powerful. Similarly, the data on high school graduation is strong but based on a small number of studies. Evidence is weaker for persistent achievement effects, although they have been found through the junior high school years in two

scientifically rigorous studies of ECE – the *Perry Preschool Study* and the *Carolina Abecedarian Study*.

Effects on Socialization.

Although the primary focus of long-term ECE studies has been on children's cognitive development and school performance, socialization has received some attention in the literature. The Perry Preschool Study provides the longest and most intensive follow-up concerning the effects of ECE on socially accepted values and behavior. The researchers found that program participants, at age 27, in comparison to the control group, averaged significantly fewer criminal arrests, better relationships with friends and neighbors, greater adult economic success, higher rates of home ownership, and, for women, increased marriage and fewer out-of-wedlock births.

Cost Benefits. The Perry Preschool Study also involved a systematic analysis of costs and benefits of the preschool program. With most participants attending the program for two years, the average cost was a little over \$12,000 per participant. The program returned to taxpayers nearly \$90,000 per participant, based on savings due to the following:

a) reduced need for special

education, b) higher taxes paid by program participants because of their higher earning, c) reduced welfare assistance, and d) reductions in costs associated with criminal activity and prison. Thus, the program provided taxpayers a *return on investment* of more than \$7.00 on the dollar – better than most other public and private investments.

In summary, the research suggests that high quality, intensive early childhood programs can make an important difference in the lives of young children. For poor children, especially, ECE can mean the difference between failing and passing, regular or special education, staying out of trouble or becoming involved with crime and delinquency, and dropping out or graduating from high school. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that ECE works best when services are aimed directly at children; there is little evidence that children can benefit by programs directed at parents.

What Is The Status Of ECE In New York State?

In New York State, two competing plans for early childhood programs have been introduced by the State legislature. A \$110 million

Senate bill would double the number of slots available in the State's Prekindergarten Program for disadvantaged children to 40,000 over a five-year period. A more ambitious proposal in the Assembly calls for spending \$1 billion over the next five years to make prekindergarten available for every 4-year old in the State, regardless of income.

According to a soon-to-be released report from the Children's Defense Fund, New York ranks 10th in the amount of money spent on prekindergarten programs per child. Currently, 40% of the State's 3- and 4-year-olds are in ECE programs, which leaves about 320,000 children without a formal preschool education.

For More Information:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education <http://www.ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/>

Part 2 of the Early Childhood Education *Balanced View* will focus on the quality of ECE and the costs associated with quality programs.

Please e-mail us or send us a FAX with any comments or questions.