

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION PROGRAMS: WHAT DO WE KNOW? Janet Currie, 2000

Overview

This paper was commissioned as a part of an effort to find more effective ways of improving the life prospects of children, especially the most disadvantaged. The author does not have a background in education, but rather in economics. This allows for the paper to have a non-biased emphasis on the hard economic facts of early education outcomes. Moreover, the author shows how just the short-term benefits of Head Start already pays back much of the cost of the program.

The Goals of Early Intervention Programs

Short-term goals such as providing a secure, stimulating environment or nutritious food to children who lack these essentials are obvious objectives. Because it is often difficult to track long-run outcomes of early intervention, evaluations generally focus on intermediate goals, such as producing children who arrive at school "ready to learn." Such students are thought to be more likely to succeed in school, and hence to have better long-term outcomes as well.

Improving School Readiness

In a survey (conducted by the Carnegie Foundation in 1991) kindergarten teachers reported that only 65% of their students were entering kindergarten 'ready to learn'. When asked to name the most important determinants of readiness to learn the teachers said:

1. Being physically healthy, rested, and well-nourished
2. Being able to communicate needs, wants, and thoughts verbally;
3. Enthusiasm and curiosity in approaching new activities
4. Taking turns
5. Knowing how to sit still and pay attention.

Direct Benefits of Early Education Programs

- Dramatic reductions in use of special education at age 12 (5% of the treatment group compared to 29% of the controls).
- More likely to be immunized (8 to 9% more likely) than siblings who did not attend any preschool.
- Contributions to school readiness (in the short term) in terms of improving verbal skills and health, and perhaps social skills.
- Positive effects on both verbal test scores and measures of social adjustment such as impulse control with Head Start children who were followed into second grade

Conclusion

Particularly in this era of welfare reform when most mothers of young children are expected to work the importance of early education programs cannot be emphasized enough and suggest that these shorter term benefits could easily offset 40 to 60% of the costs encompassed by K-12 in the early elementary years.

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