

Children's Early Education and Care

GLOSSARY

At-risk children

Children whose circumstances (e.g., poverty, abuse, neglect) suggest that they may have future difficulty in school, in personal and societal relationships, and so on.

Early childhood

Birth to age five.

Early-childhood education and care (ECEC)

The education and care received by children from birth to age five (1) from their parents/caregivers and (2) in child care, Head Start, preschool, nursery school, school-readiness, or enrichment programs.

Early intervention

A wide range of efforts to promote healthy development; includes such programs for children and caregivers as immunizations and nutritional supplements for children, child care, preschool programs, and parenting education and support.

Literacy

Being literate—that is, possessing language, reading, and writing skills.

BACKGROUND

Research in the last two decades confirms that early childhood, the period from birth to age five, is critically important in brain development. Later experiences also can influence one's brain capacity but in the early years, particular types of activities are necessary for certain essential aspects of brain growth. In early childhood there are several remarkably brief periods of opportunity that lay the foundation for emotional control, mathematical and language abilities, and the capacity to form social attachments. When these periods end, developing the capacity for learning in these areas becomes more difficult.

The brain grows not by adding new cells but rather by generating new connections among the cells that are present at birth. These new connections are shaped by what a child experiences: physical touch and comfort, nutrition, language, and play, among others. The good news is that most parents intuitively talk and play with young children in ways that foster their child's development.

The bad news is that neglect, stress, and trauma also affect brain development. Such experiences compromise development by affecting how the brain releases and modulates stress hormones, lowering the threshold at which one's brain activates fear and anxiety. Repeated exposure to stress usually programs a child's brain to expect and seek similar situations. Chronic stress and neglect can create a constant state of anxiety and anger that becomes a permanent trait in a child, which leads to many learning and behavior problems. Thus, early-childhood education and care has implications not only for parenting and the education field but also for the fields of health, mental health, law enforcement, and others.

Early-Intervention Research

Research is generating information about the experiences and types of care and early intervention (efforts to promote healthy development) that help children and benefit society.

- A University of North Carolina study (1999) that followed a group of children from preschool to second grade finds that the better the care center that a child attended, the better were his/her language and math skills, classroom behavior, and social skills, both in preschool and elementary school.
- The longest and most extensive evaluation of an early-childhood program is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program (Ypsilanti). High/Scope has been following a group of individuals who had attended the preschool program when they were aged three and four. At age 27, they have higher income, fewer arrests, and less welfare participation than do members of a control group that did not participate in the program. Beyond the direct benefits to the children, every dollar invested in the program returned \$7.16 to the public in reduced costs of crime, welfare, and remedial education (1993 data).
- The Chicago Longitudinal Study follows the education and social development of more than 1,500 low-income children born in 1980 who were served by the Chicago Child-Parent Center. At age 21 the participants, when compared to a peer

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group who did not receive the center's services, have a 29 percent higher rate of high-school completion, a 42 percent lower rate of juvenile arrest for violent offenses, 41 percent fewer special-education placements, and 51 percent fewer allegations of child abuse and neglect. Every dollar invested in the program returned \$7.10 to the public in reduced costs of crime, welfare, and remedial education (2001 data).

- The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) reports that children at risk of school failure who participate in the Michigan School Readiness Program are better prepared when they enter school and after five years are continuing to do better than at-risk children who do not. They score higher on the reading and math tests of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program than their classmates of similar background who were not in the readiness program, and 35 percent fewer need to repeat a grade, saving the state an estimated \$11 million a year (2002 data).

Brain research shows that the young children warranting the greatest concern are those who (1) fail to get adequate nutrition; (2) do not receive physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation; and (3) are emotionally or physically neglected or abused. Fortunately, research also demonstrates that children have a remarkable capacity to recover from the devastating effects of early deprivation and maltreatment if a nurturing environment is provided as early as possible.

Public Attention

Newsweek's 1997 special edition on early-childhood development became the most widely distributed issue in the magazine's history, translated into Japanese, Korean, and Russian and becoming the first foreign-language edition of an American magazine to appear in China. The magazine described the once-unknown link between experience and brain development, explaining that experiences stimulate electrical activity in a child's brain, which in turn "wires" the brain's circuitry to establish the structures of thought and emotion. Even vision, long thought to be genetically "hard-wired," we now know depends on visual experiences between birth and 10 months.

In 2000 *Newsweek* published another special edition on young children, presenting the continuing breakthroughs in neuroscience and genetic research, particularly the strong influence that parenting has on a child's personality. This edition also notes the explosion of parenting information available on the World Wide Web.

Michigan Initiatives and Programs

In 1999 a number of Michigan leaders from fields outside of early-childhood education and care (ECEC) attended

a summit funded primarily by the state and a number of Michigan-based foundations. Out of this grew the Michigan Ready to Succeed Partnership. The goal of the partnership is to have young children enter kindergarten "ready to succeed" in school and in life.

Outcomes of the partnership's efforts since 1999 include a parent survey to learn how young children currently receive early education and care, community forums across the state to engage the public and private sectors in the effort and generate strategies to shape public policy regarding early childhood, and a Web site presenting information to the public. In 2001 participants formed an umbrella organization, the Michigan Ready to Succeed Partnership, which created the state's first public-awareness campaign on early childhood, *Be their Hero from age Zero*.[®]

Michigan's FY 2000–01 budget contained significant new public investment in early childhood. The MDE, Family Independence Agency, and Michigan Department of Community Health budgets had new and expanded programs for families with young children.

- The new All Students Achieve Program—Parent Involvement and Education (ASAP–PIE) received \$45 million annually for three years to provide services that help families to get their children ready to succeed in school.
- Full-day school-readiness programs for at-risk four-years-old received \$25 million, up from \$5 million.
- Reading and literacy program funding received \$50 million.
- Secondary-prevention programs, which serve families with children aged 0–3 who are at risk of abuse or neglect, received \$2 million.
- Licensed daycare providers serving children aged 0–2 received a rate increase totaling \$17 million.
- T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps[®]) was established to (1) help child-care providers working in regulated early-childhood programs obtain additional education and (2) help the programs increase the compensation of providers who have engaged in continuing education.

At this writing, economic circumstances may put some of this funding at risk of being reduced or eliminated in the current state budget, but many observers expect early-childhood programs to receive increased public support in coming years.

DISCUSSION

We know more than ever about the benefits of high-quality early education and care, both for young children and for society. But knowing the benefits and making them accessible for all families are different sides of the coin.

Most people agree that experiences play a large part in how children develop in their earliest years, and the adults in a child's life determine greatly what those experiences will be. Yet there is disagreement about what, if anything, should be done to shape these experiences. These disagreements play out in how Michigan and the nation devise and fund early-childhood education and care programs.

Nationally, families provide half the financing for early-childhood education and care. Government, mostly state and local, provides 45 percent from a tangle of federal, state, and local sources. The private sector provides 5 percent (one percent from business and the balance from philanthropy).

In Michigan, payments by families to caregivers, teachers, and programs (which vary widely in quality, content, and relationship to public schools) account for the largest expenditure for early-childhood services: \$741 million annually. The combined public and private investment in children aged five and under is less than one-third of what just the public investment is for school-aged children: the annual, per child averages are \$2,200 and \$7,200, respectively.

Bringing brain-development research into play in public policy is challenging. Some say that it must begin with recognizing the realities of life for today's families with young children: An ever-increasing number of parents rely on other caregivers so they can go to work. Almost half (46 percent) of Michigan children under age five spend time in the care of someone other than a parent. Of those children, 47 percent are in someone else's home, and 47 percent are in a child-care center, Head Start, preschool, nursery school, or school readiness or other enrichment program.

The new knowledge about children's brain development has narrowed the distinction between "child care" and "early education." This has created debate about whether to extend formal education to children under age five. Some policy leaders say that because so many young children spend considerable time with nonparent caregivers and the quality of young children's experiences so influences their future, attention should be given to all settings where children are found: with their family, with other caregivers, and in the community. Some experts say

that changing ideas about education, work, and welfare have linked two previously separate objectives—meeting labor market needs (providing child care for working parents) and fostering child development (providing education). They say that programs that *care* for young children while their parents work also must *educate*. Child care, of necessity, involves both stimulating children's thinking and supporting their social, emotional, and motor development in a safe and nurturing place.

What is the best use of public funds in the early-childhood years? Some say that children most at risk (those who will begin kindergarten at a disadvantage because of poverty and other factors) should be the first priority. Others want to move toward *universal* access—that is, making good early-childhood education and care available to *all* families. Some question whether more public investment in early-childhood services will make a difference at all, doubting that current research provides a sufficient basis for changing public policy and making a significant investment. Others suggest that rather than funding early-childhood education programs, it would be more effective to (1) reduce poverty, a major risk for positive child development, with fiscal policies such as expanding the earned income tax credit, which gives parents more income or (2) make it easier for people to work part time so they may spend more time with their children.

Among those who advocate for more public investment in early-childhood education, the balance between federal and state funding is a key consideration. For public elementary and secondary education, states and localities pay 93 percent of the costs and parents pay nothing, but for early education and care, parents and the federal government, respectively, are the biggest funders. A recent proposal from some of the nation's leading executives in business and education (the Committee for Economic Development, New York and Washington, 2002) call for (1) both federal and state government to significantly increase their investment in early education and (2) universal preschool for which each family's share of the cost would be based on income.

Regardless of the advantages of having one's children in a good program, many families cannot afford it. Unfortunately, a good many are not aware that both subsidized programs and financial assistance are available. More important, a dearth of funding limits the number of children who can be served: Despite increases in federal and state funding for early-childhood programs and child care, only three children of every five who are eligible are enrolled in Head Start, the country's most extensive investment in educating young children, and federal child-care assistance covers only about one in eight eligible children.

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A growing number of people now believe that early-childhood education clearly is linked to school success, and they want schools to take the lead in assuring universal access. Others say the schools are unable or unwilling to take on another monumental task. The debate has gone to court: Recent rulings in Arkansas, New Jersey, and North Carolina have ordered public schools to add pre-school programs for at-risk children. Cases are pending in at least five additional states.

Opinion polls reveal strong public support for improving access to good child care, good after-school programs, and paid parent leave (the latter enables new parents to stay at home with the baby for a certain length of time). In a 2000 poll, respondents were asked which, to them, is more important for government to do: (1) provide access to early-childhood programs such as Head Start and after-school programs or (2) cut taxes. Nearly 70 percent come down on the side of early-childhood programs—about the same percentage who believe that shoring up Social Security and Medicare is more important than cutting taxes.

See also Child Care; Youth at Risk.

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Children's Defense Fund
122 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 628-8787
(202) 662-3150 FAX
www.childrensdefense.org

Families and Work Institute
330 7th Avenue
New York, NY 10001
(212) 465-2044
www.familiesandwork.org

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation
600 North River Street
Ypsilanti, MI 48198
(734) 485-2000
www.highscope.org

Michigan Association for Education of Young Children
Beacon Place
4572 South Hagadorn Road
East Lansing, MI 48823
(800) 336-6424
(517) 336-9700 FAX
www.miaeyc.com

Michigan's Children
428 West Lenawee Street
Lansing, MI 48933
(800) 330-8674
(517) 485-3500
(517) 485-3650 FAX
www.michiganschildren.org

Michigan Ready to Succeed Partnership
600 West St. Joseph
Lansing, MI 47833
(517) 484-4954
(517) 484-6549
www.readytosucceed.org

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