



Preschool's Benefits Linger Into Adulthood, Study Finds

After 25 years, kids enrolled in fulltime program had better life than children who were not, researchers say

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THURSDAY, June 9 (HealthDay News) -- Children enrolled in a full-time preschool program that sees them through elementary school have a better life 25 years later than children who were not in preschool do, University of Minnesota researchers report.

Children who went through preschool have higher incomes, higher education levels, a higher socioeconomic status and are less likely to abuse drugs or be involved in criminal activities, the investigators found. They are also more likely to have health insurance coverage.

"These effects haven't been found before for public programs, so the findings are encouraging to provide access to high-quality programs through public funding for kids at risk," said lead researcher Arthur J. Reynolds, a professor in the university's Institute of Child Development.

Preschool also seemed to be especially beneficial for males and children from high-risk or impoverished families.

The report was published in the June 9 issue of *Science*.

For the study, Reynolds' team followed 1,386 children, 989 of whom were enrolled in the Chicago-based Child-Parent Center Education Program from 1983 to 1989, and 550 who weren't. The program is funded by the federal government.

All the children went to full-day kindergarten and received social services. Fifteen percent of the control group attended Head Start, with the rest in home care.

According to Reynolds, the preschool program succeeded for several reasons. First, children were enrolled when they were 3 so they get more participation in the program. "We know that the amount of time in the program is associated with gains," he said.

Also, since the program is run by local schools, all the teachers were certified in early childhood education, which is not true of many preschool programs, Reynolds said. The program was also coupled with outreach programs that involved parents in their child's education.

The program itself emphasized language development and literacy, Reynolds noted.

Moreover, the program has provided continuity. "Because it's a school-based, there is continuing access to services, and kids stay in the same environment through elementary school," he said. "It promotes positive transitions from one grade to the next."

As overwhelmingly positive as these results appear, government-funded preschool programs, especially those for poor kids, have political implications, Reynolds said.

There isn't enough spending on high-quality services," he said. "The social program that has the biggest effects and the most enduring effects is preschool. But, there is a gap between what we know and what we fund."

"This program can reduce the disparities in education and success," Reynolds declared.

Reynolds added that while this program costs more than some other preschool programs, it pays dividends later in life because adults who went through the program are more likely to succeed and not burden public health programs or the legal system.

But not everyone believes that the federal government should be funding early childhood education programs.

Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, the "the study's findings on the Chicago Parent Center program are certainly interesting but they do not provide evidence in support of the authors' policy recommendations."

"While a few specific pre-K programs seem to have had lasting impacts, they appear to be exceptions rather than the rule," he said. "More specifically, the federal government's efforts to scale-up the success of those particular programs, over four decades and at very great cost, have not proven effective. Yet another study pointing to the effect of one of the three pre-K programs that did have lasting effects does not alter that picture," Coulson said.

Another expert who supports the findings begs to differ. "It is exciting to see the lasting effects of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Education Program on participants a quarter century later -- their educational attainment, socioeconomic status, health status and behavior, and reduced crime and justice system involvement," said Larry Schweinhart, president of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Mich.

Schweinhart noted that these findings, from "a preschool program serving one of America's great cities," corroborate similar lifetime findings of two small-sample projects, included the HighScope Perry Preschool Study, which he oversaw.

"Because high-quality early childhood education requires major investment both in the aggregate and in each child it serves," Schweinhart added, "it is critical that the evidence of its powerful return on investment be as strong as possible, and the Chicago Longitudinal Study contributes greatly to this evidence base."

More information

For more information on early childhood education, visit the National Education Association.

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