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Boosting Intergenerational Mobility: The Lasting Effects of Early Childhood Education on Skills and Social Mobility

By Jorge Luis García, James J. Heckman and Victor Ronda

An analysis of new data from the pioneering Perry Preschool Program shows that quality early childhood enrichment programs can improve life outcomes for participants well into middle-age—and outcomes for their children. Jorge Luis García, James J. Heckman and Victor Ronda analyzed the latest data sweep of Perry Preschool participants, now age 54, which includes data on the life experiences of their children, now adults in their late 20s.

This new research provides strong evidence that quality early childhood programs promote intergenerational social mobility for disadvantaged children and families. It also debunks the myth of so-called “fadeout” of treatment effects, providing clear evidence that limited measurements of skills at age six and ten do not accurately predict long-term outcomes. Improved outcomes across the life cycle for the original treatment group translated into higher achievement and better family environments for their children, who show higher levels of education, better health and less criminal activity. The authors conclude that quality early childhood programs are promising vehicles for social mobility.

Quality preschool programs produce quality outcomes

The Perry Preschool Program was a two-year, high-quality early education program for disadvantaged children conducted as a random controlled experiment in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962, with ongoing data sweeps of the life outcomes and experiences of the participants being conducted over five decades. Perry has become the model for high-quality early childhood education programs, with the effectiveness of its education and family outreach approach being backed by a diverse body of research. Its curriculum fostered the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Children were active learners who planned, executed and reflected on activities guided by teachers. They made choices and solved problems with teachers providing feedback. In addition, teachers established active partnerships with parents through home visiting.

Better outcomes for those treated

Researchers collected current data on 83% of the 123 original participants at age 54, assessing marriage status, education, earnings and criminal activity. The data shows multiple significant lasting benefits for those treated compared to the control group. First-generation adults in the treatment group show significantly higher levels of executive function, cognition and positive socio-emotional skills. They also score higher on grit, or the persistence to pursue a goal over an extended period. First-generation participants in the treatment group were more likely to be stably married, with higher average earnings and lower engagement with the criminal justice system.

Beneficial impacts on long-term health

In addition to lasting cognitive gains, original participants in the treatment group were also healthier on average in their mid-50s compared to the entire pooled sample.

Better family environments and outcomes for the next generation

Improved home environments are the source of Perry's intergenerational benefits. Children of the first generation were more likely to grow up in stable, two-parent households, and they were read to more often while growing up. This translated into positive outcomes for the children of original program participants.

Compared to the children of control participants, children of parents who received early education intervention are:

17% 

less likely to have been suspended from school during K-12 education

11% 

more likely to be in good health through young adulthood

26% 

more likely to be employed

8% 

less likely to be divorced

There is no fadeout

This research verifies that high-quality early education has a long-lasting impact on both cognitive and socio-emotional skills. The researchers found that high-quality early education produced lasting executive functioning, refuting the notion of "fadeout" in treatment effects, specifically on cognition. Short-run measures such as cognitive test scores have propelled the false impression that program effects fade out shortly after preschool—long-term measurements show lasting gains and life outcomes over two generations.

Boys benefit more

Quality early childhood education benefits all disadvantaged children, but important gender differences should be noted. First-generation male participants in Perry experienced better labor outcomes and had lower levels of criminal activity. This analysis found a greater intergenerational impact on second-generation male children than on second-generation females. There is also a greater impact for the children of first-generation male participants compared to females, especially related to crime.

Potential for powerful impact

The Perry Preschool Program continues to influence the design of effective early education programs and its education approach provides the touchstones for achieving high-quality social and economic outcomes. This new evidence on the lasting impact of early learning and family support across generations illustrates the substantial return on investing in high-quality programs for disadvantaged children. Such investments provide a ladder to the middle class.



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