

ISSUE BRIEF: **RESEARCH CONFIRMS THAT EARLY LEARNING INVESTMENTS INCREASE BENEFITS TO CHILDREN, LOWER COSTS TO TAXPAYERS**



Logic and experience tell us that preventing a problem before it happens is the most effective approach. That is why children use seat belts. And sit in car seats. It's why we put baby gates at the tops of staircases. We know this approach works for children. To paraphrase Frederick Douglass, "It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken people."

When it comes to early education policy, this "ounce of prevention" approach is also backed by some of the strongest social science data available. Parents, families and early childhood educators offer glowing personal testament to the enriching experiences, life-changing and long-term human connections, and other benefits that early learning gives children. And a rich history of research as well as on-going studies show that investing in early learning programs produces unprecedented positive impacts for children, families, professionals, and the economy. We have distilled some of this research to highlight the many social and economic advantages that result from this commonsense approach.

The History of Early Learning Research

The evidence for positive long-term effects of early learning interventions is among the strongest in economics. In the 1960s and 1970s, multiple field experiments were conducted in which a group of children were randomly assigned to early learning programs, including both classroom education and home visiting that provided support to parents beyond the classroom. They were tracked into adulthood to monitor effects across a broad range of socioeconomic indicators.

This groundbreaking research offers truly rare insights. These studies were randomized control trials (RCT) meaning that some participants were randomly assigned to the "treatment" and received the early learning intervention while others were assigned to a "control" group and did not receive access to the early learning programs. RCTs are considered the "gold standard" of evidence in social science because, as in laboratory experiments, randomness of treatment ensures that the treatment and control groups should be roughly statistically equivalent in all characteristics such as health, access to child care, or nutrition that might affect long-term life outcomes. In most circumstances, children enrolled in early learning programs are likely different in many ways from kids who are not — they may come from families with greater financial resources, for example — and it could be these differences rather than early learning itself that drive better socioeconomic outcomes. But, with randomization, the only meaningful difference between the groups is whether they participated in the early learning programs; so we can conclude confidently that the early learning is actually causing any progress observed in the data.

But what was truly special about these experiments was not just that they were randomized giving us top-notch evidence, it is that these experiments were run more than a half-century ago. RCTs are all the rage in modern economics but were much rarer in the 1960s and 1970s. Modern RCTs can often only look at short-term outcomes because not enough time has passed to look

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at persistence of positive effects. But, because these early learning studies were so far ahead of the curve, we have gold standard evidence not just for short-term impacts of early learning on outcomes such as school readiness, but also reliable evidence on long-term impacts well into middle age.

The long-term impacts of these early learning programs were remarkable. These interventions reduced crime, improved educational attainment, boosted cognitive development, increased employment, and improved health. The benefits for taxpayers were just as impressive with \$2.50 of savings for every \$1 invested due to less need for support later in life.

Modern Evidence on Head Start and Early Learning

More recent research continues to confirm that Head Start and other early learning programs carry on the legacy of these pioneering early learning experiments. Using cutting-edge empirical methods to evaluate program effects in the real world, Martha J. Bailey, Shuqiao Sun, and Brenden Timpe find that Head Start increased years of schooling attained and both college and high school completion rates, demonstrating persistent educational impacts. Similarly, research on Oklahoma's universal pre-k program led by Anna Johnson finds that participants have better math skills and self-regulation behaviors into the third grade.

Patrick Kline and Christopher Walters show that children who would not otherwise be able to attend preschool experience the largest positive effects. They further estimate that Head Start delivers benefits for taxpayers that are significantly larger than the cost of funding the program in part because it increases after-tax earnings of participants. Moreover, positive effects on cognitive development and social skills are largest when Head Start centers possess sufficient resources to provide top-quality programming, including full-day instruction and home-visiting services.

Head Start also complements other investments in K-12 education. Analysis by Rucker C. Johnson and C. Kirabo Jackson shows that both Head Start and higher funding of K-12 education independently increase earnings and educational attainment while reducing poverty and chances of incarceration later in life for children living in poverty. But these benefits are even larger for low-income children who receive both — each program boosts the benefits of the other. Greater support throughout the life cycle is needed rather than cuts in essential programs.

Universal preschool provisions may offer even more gains. Work by Elizabeth Cascio demonstrates the positive effects of preschool more generally, showing that preschool programs have positive effects on test scores for low-income kids and these effects are actually larger when preschool programs are universal rather than targeted to just low-income kids. A randomized study of a large-scale public preschool program in Boston finds positive impacts on long-term educational attainment as well as decreases in chances of juvenile incarceration and other

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disciplinary issues. Other research shows that early learning programs improve the economic security and contribution of participating families. Early childhood education boosts work hours for parents of participants and increases family income, demonstrating how a robust public safety net and child investments can increase productive work in the economy.

But the benefits of early learning programs extend beyond the direct benefits for recipients by boosting local economies and communities. In another study, C. Kirabo Jackson, Julia A. Turner, and Jacob Bastian show that universal pre-k increased employment, hours worked, and labor force participation leading to higher earnings. On average, “each dollar spent on [universal pre-k] generated between 3 to over 20 dollars in aggregate earnings – enough that tax revenues might fully cover costs,” severely undermining the case that the government cannot afford universal pre-k. A study by Micah W. Rothbart and Taryn W. Morrissey shows that Virginia’s targeted pre-k program for low-income children increased participation in pre-k and kindergarten readiness both for participants and for children more broadly across the community.

Conclusion

The evidence supporting high-quality early childhood investment is among the strongest in the social sciences. Investing in children during their most formative years is not only one of the smartest financial decisions we can make as a country, it also ensures that children across the country receive the support they need to thrive. Access to high-quality early education should not depend on a family’s income, yet the cost makes it unreachable for many families across the country. When early learning is available to all, it supports working parents and equips children with essential skills that benefit them throughout their lives.

Programs such as Head Start connect families to critical resources such as health care and nutrition support, helping both children and their caregivers succeed. These programs are especially impactful at a time when raising a child is more unaffordable than ever. The average annual cost of raising a child has reached nearly \$30,000. For low-income families, these expenses are unsustainable. Child care is among the highest costs for families, costing more than rent across the 100 largest U.S. metro areas. The high-cost of raising children is a critical policy failure – having a child should not be a luxury, nor should it force families into poverty. Federally funded child care subsidies are essential to the economic security and well-being of families across the country.

Along with the lack of affordability for families looking to access high-quality early childhood resources, there is a critical shortage of early care educators. Poverty-level pay and a lack of professional development opportunities create difficulty in maintaining early childhood educators, exacerbating child care shortages across the country. The early care and education workforce was found to be compensated at lower rates than 97% of all professions. The low pay and lack



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of resources can make early childhood careers undesirable and create high turnover. Increased investment in the early care and education workforce is desperately needed. A high-quality early childhood workforce requires specialized training and specific skill sets. It's important that the pay and benefits of the job match the qualifications needed.

The evidence behind early childhood investments is clear, and recent policy decisions have resulted in insufficient levels of spending. This lack of investment creates inequitable access to high-quality early childhood education and leaves kids and educators behind. It's time for our federal government to follow the data and invest in our youngest.