

Preschool: At What Cost?

Susan K. Stewart



The Real Numbers

“Preschool helps children learn to read by third grade.”

“Children who attend preschool are more likely to go to college.”

“Children who attend preschool are more successful as adults.”

With headlines like these, is it any wonder the public in general and parents in particular are convinced young children need some type of formal instruction during the first five years? It is also easy to think the studies and reports quoted are conclusive because opposing reports receive little publicity.

Questionable Claims

These questionable claims were blasted at parents in 2006 when the Preschool For All initiative was on the California ballot. Voters saw through the hyperbole and struck down the attempt at universal preschool.

The headlines, though, struck fear in the hearts and minds of many good parents. Fear they would ruin their children's lives if some type of preschool program wasn't provided, whether at a center or in the home.

Most of the claims made by the Preschool for All (universal preschool) supporters are based on two Rand Corporation reports. The supporters of the Preschool for All initiative commissioned the reports.

But, even those reports showed fallacies to the boldly stated claims.

The Rand reports were not based on original research. Instead, they were compiled from the Chicago Child/Parent Program (CPC), a longitudinal study of 1550 children: 1,000 who attended the program and 550 who did not. Rand extrapolated the statistics from the CPC research to children in the state of California. Several problems crop up.

The CPC is not a preschool as we commonly think of preschool. It is a parent and child program. In addition to the child centers, CPC has parent classes, assists parents in finishing their high school diplomas, and conducts in-home visits. Also, parents take part in the preschool center with their children and go on field trips. CPC is more of an outreach program than standard preschool.

CPC is specific to disadvantaged children. Although Rand tries to extend the information to middle class and wealthy children, by their own admission there is little information to make those conclusions.

"On the surface the Rand study looks like a credible, thoroughly research document," said Chris Cardiff, who teaches economics at San Jose State University and is co-author of the analysis of Rand's universal preschool study. "But upon review we found the Rand study fails to pass even the basic benchmarks of what can be considered a reasonable economic analysis."¹

Broad Generalizations - Narrow Fields

Another problem with many of the studies done on preschool education is the broad generalizations made from a narrow field. Most research is based on Head Start, a program specifically targeting “disadvantaged” or “at risk” children. Dr. David Elkind of Tufts University and Edward F. Zigler of Yale University calls these “inappropriate generalizations” of excellent programs, which are aimed at economically disadvantaged children. These generalizations may not apply to all children. Little evidence is available that shows young children from middle- and high-income homes have the same or any additional advantages.²

Since Head Start has become the gold standard for early childhood education, it has been used as “proof” that all young children need some type of formal program. Here again, the reports don't bear out this “fact.”

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) has concluded in a number of reports to Congress that Head Start does not produce any long-term advantages for children in the program. All you have to do is read the titles of these reports to get an idea of what is the reality of Head Start. Here are just a few of the reports:

HEAD START: Research Provides Little Information on Impact of Program (April 1997)

Although an extensive body of literature exists on Head Start, only a small part of this

literature is program impact research. This body of research is inadequate for use in drawing conclusions about the impact of the national program in any area in which Head Start provides services such as school readiness or health-related services.

HEAD START: Research Insufficient to Assess Program Impact (March 1998)

In summary, the Head Start program has provided comprehensive services to millions of low-income children and their families—services that in the program's early years participants probably would not have otherwise received. Little is known, however, about whether the program has achieved its goals. Although an extensive body of literature exists on Head Start, only a small part of that involves program impact research. Because of these research studies' individual and collective limitations, this body of research is insufficient for use in drawing conclusions about the impact of the national program.

TITLE I PRESCHOOL EDUCATION: More Children Served, but Gauging Effect on School Readiness Difficult (September 2000)

Currently, <the Department of> Education lacks the information to measure Title I's effect on children's school readiness, . . . Title I funds represent a significant and growing federal investment in preschool education, but its effect

on children's school readiness is not known. Given previous difficulties in evaluating the effect of title I funding on older children, questions remain about whether title I's effect on school readiness can be isolated.

With so little known about the impact of Head Start and other early education programs, it is easy to conclude that maybe the statements made about the need for formal, out-of-home programs for children based on Head Start are exaggerated.

Economic Benefits?

The oft-quoted Rand study looks almost exclusively at economic benefits. These claims of “benefits” permeate the thinking of other areas of our society. For example, a 2005 Zogby poll shows that a clear majority of businesses favor publicly supported pre-kindergarten.

However, another conclusion of this poll says, “Business leaders **clearly tie their support to studies** that showed significant economic advantages to providing pre-school to all children. More than four in five say they are more likely to support universal pre-school **because of studies** that showed disadvantaged children provided with pre-K educations *earned higher incomes . . .*” (emphasis added).³

Other Research

There is more to the story than these government studies and reports. Extensive research has been

conducted with results that are contrary to the widely reported information. Durham University's (England) Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre (CEM) conducted one such study.

The CEM study looked at 35,000 children over six years. The results were disappointing to the proponents of early childhood education. In spite of the money spent on and changes made in programs for young children, “children's development and skills at the start of school are no different now than they were before the introduction of the early childhood curriculum.”⁴

Various studies have concluded that although children who have been in academic settings for preschool, often called pre-kindergarten, start kindergarten with an academic advantage, the advantage is gone as early as mid-first grade. The cost of this short-lived academic advantage is increased discipline and behavior problems, the least reported outcome of early formal pre-kindergarten programs

Experts agree that children learn aggressive behavior or control of aggressive behavior during the first five years. As young as 18 months, a child can begin to imitate destructive actions.⁵ Although cognitive gains may be seen with higher reading and math scores, the cost is a negative impact on social behavior. These negative behaviors were greater when children entered a care center at a younger age.⁶

Brain Science

Brain science is also invoked as a reason for earlier and earlier formal education programs. It is this

“science” that has led to the development of such in-home programs as Little Einstein. The advancements in neurobiology do provide a wealth of information about how and when the brain learns. The very young brain, birth to five years, develops rapidly, more rapidly than at any other time in life. This information has led to the mistaken belief that programs need to be in place to capture this rapid learning phase. The programs to capture this development phase have focused on reading and writing at the expense of social play and child-directed exploration.

Jennifer Matthews looked at various research reports and compiled the conclusions of these reports in her paper “Early Brain Development Research: Implications on Early Childhood Education.” She found little support for early group or classroom experiences to nurture the rapid development of a young child's brain. In fact, some of the conclusions drawn are quite the opposite.

Ms. Matthews found research indicates that

- Secure attachments and relationships are more important than curriculum
- An environment of learning is more important than curriculum
- Infants and young children are active and self-motivated learners
- Although the brain develops and grows rapidly during the first five years of life, it is never too late for a child to learn
- Each child is unique and learns differently.

- Brain studies should not be used to promote or market “smarter baby” materials.⁷

In his book *The Myth of the First Three Years*, John T. Bruer discusses the use of brain science to set early childhood policy and says, “... it seemed as if there was, in fact, no new brain science involved in the policy and media discussions of child development. What seemed to be happening was that selected pieces of rather old brain science were being used, and often misinterpreted, to support preexisting views about child development and early childhood policy.”⁸

Something is Missing

In all the studies done on young children, there is one key element missing: families. Certain assumptions are made about children in the preschool age group. One is that no parent or other family is available to care for the children in a home environment. Again, economics is the basis for the rational. The reasoning is families “need” two incomes, therefore all families have two working parents, and therefore all children are placed in a center for care.

Supporters of universal preschool base this argument on statements like this one from Vermont state legislator Bill Suchmann: “Many children do not have parents available at home or even capable of appropriate intellectual stimulation.”⁹ Mr. Suchmann is quoted often, with no factual foundation for his statement. No study can be found that looks at

children who remain home with a parent or are in the care of another family member.

Social Experiment

Dr. Molly H. Minkkinen of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, wrote in the *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, “Today children in the United States are living a social experiment with unknown consequences.” She also stated, “A large number of today’s children spend their days with people who do not love them unconditionally, people who come and go from their lives at a time when their brains are organizing attachment patterns.”

But Dr. Minkkinen sadly concludes that child care for young children needs to be improved rather than children spending more time with loving family members.¹⁰

The high profile reporting of a few questionable statements from research have parents of young children thinking that they are failing their child. The leap is to put young children in preschool programs, even if the intention is to homeschool later. Few parents want to think that they are hindering their child’s chances for success as an adult.

REFERENCES

1. “Professors Find Preschool Benefits Grossly Exaggerated,” May 20, 2006, Reason Foundation, <http://www.reason.org/news/show/126869.html>.
2. Elkind, David, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk* (1987; New York: Knopf, 1997), 69, and Edward F. Zigler, “Formal Schooling for Four-Year-Olds?”, 28.
3. Peck, Christian W., “American Business Leaders’ Views On Publicly-funded Pre-kindergarten and the Advantages to the Economy,” Zogby International, December 2005, 3.
4. Weston, John-Henry, “Massive Study Finds Pre-School and Early Child Education Initiatives Show No Benefit,” August 2007, accessed April 8, 2010, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2007/aug/070831.htm#5>. Article also at <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1889686/posts>
5. Keenan, Kate, “The development and socialization of aggression during the first five years of life,” Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/child-aggression/according-to-experts.html>.
6. Tremblay, Richard E., “Development of physical aggression from early childhood to adulthood, Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development,” <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/child-aggression/according-to-experts/tremblay.html>.
7. Matthews, Jennifer (June 23, 2005), *Early Brain Development Research: Implications for Early Childhood Education*, 6.
8. Bruer, John T, *The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain*

Development and Lifelong Learning, 1999 The
Freepress, 3.

9. Suchmann, Bill, "Not Mandatory," Letter to the editor, Burlington Free Press, March 8, 1998.
10. Minkinen, Molly H., Marchel, Mary Ann and Riordan, Kim (2006), Kindergarten Readiness: The Changing Focus of Childhood, University of Minnesota Duluth,
<http://www.d.umn.edu/~mminkkin>.