

Northern Illinois University

The Benefits of Early Childhood Intervention Programs

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By

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Abstract

Early intervention programs have been around for a long time. The goals of many early intervention programs are to enhance the child's development and to provide support and assistance to the family. Early intervention programs like Head Start and preschool help parents who lack the finances to prepare their children for elementary school (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). These programs help many children prepare for kindergarten by exposing the children to a "school like" environment. Early childhood intervention programs goals are to help children build communication and socializing skills as well as basic school skills like recognizing numbers and letters.

Over the years, many parents believed that early intervention has helped many children succeed; while others believed children do not benefit from the programs at all. In addition, most people thought of early intervention programs as the beginning of education (Decker & Decker, 2005). Traditionally, our society begins to educate children when they reach the age of five or six years. Many researchers and educators now suggest that as much as 80% of intellect is formed before the school years (Paulsell, Kisker, & Love 2004).

The Benefits of Early Childhood Intervention Programs

Overview

Pre-K and Head Start programs are the two primary programs that are designed to reduce school failure for at-risk children. Head Start and other early childhood programs like pre-K are funded with the idea of helping these groups of young children catch up with their middle class cohorts (Decker & Decker, 2005).

State pre-K programs continue to grow. Pre-K programs are usually state funded, while Head Start programs are federally funded. Early intervention applies to children of school age or younger who are discovered to have or be at risk of developing a handicapping condition or other special need that may affect their development. While attending pre-Kindergarten (pre-K) and Head Start programs, children learn communication skills, how to express ideas, construction of language, how to count, quantity, and memorization skills.

Research has shown that children who attend Head Start performed better on measures of cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development than their peers who did not participate. In addition, children who attended Head Start continued to outperform children in the control group at age 3. Parents of Head Start children also performed better on measures of the home environment, parenting, and knowledge of child development. (Hamm, K. & Ewen, D, 2006).

Head Start Program

The federal Head Start program was initiated in 1964 as part of the federal initiative called the War on Poverty for low-income families (Smith, 2004). Most Head Start eligible children did not participate in these programs designed to reduce the impact

of risk factors that contribute to disabilities (Smith, 2004). The Federal Government asked a panel of child development experts to draw up a program to help communities meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children. The panel report became known as the blueprint for Project Head Start (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005).

The federal government also asked the panel of child development experts to develop program guidelines to help communities overcome the disadvantages borne by preschool children from low-income families (Decker & Decker, 2005). Project Head Start was launched as an eight-week summer program by the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1965 (Anthony, Anthony, Morrel & Acosta, 2005). The Office of Economic Opportunity was designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs (Anthony, Anthony, Morrel & Acosta, 2005). Head Start is a government-funded program that serves children from birth to age five, pregnant women, and their families. The program is child-focused with the purpose of preparing children in low-income families for school, by providing a safe environment, nutritious meals, health care, and the skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. It is free to children whose families fall within certain income guidelines and to children with disabilities. Head Start is a great program that helps motivate children and parents by involving the parents as employees, volunteers, and members to serve on the advisory councils (Decker & Decker, 2005). Parents are also encouraged to interact with their children and others during business hours.

Because Head Start is a government-funded program, the government spends a great deal of money to make sure the children and families are receiving all resources that they are qualified for. The government increased funding to prevent young children from experiencing things that will diminish their self-image, health, learning abilities, and optimism for the future (Taylor, 2004). With an increase in funding, more services are offered to foster healthy development in low-income children and their families. For instance, Head Start provides medical, dental, and mental health checkups, and nutrition. The nutrition program is designed to help children develop positive attitudes about food and good eating habits. Furthermore, nutrition education is provided to the parents to increase their awareness and ability to meet the nutritional needs of their children and families (Taylor, 2004).

Research has established that the rate of human learning and development is most rapid in the preschool years (Paulsell, et al., 2004). One of Head Start's goals is to ensure that the children attending the program begin kindergarten as confident, healthy, and prepared (Taylor, 2004). According to statistics, children who attend Head Start, tend to do better in school and increase their chances of academic success (Paulsell, et al., 2004). All early intervention programs are structured differently, but they all have similar goals.

Head Start does not require any specific training for directors. Most directors come from the ranks of teachers and then work as component coordinators before serving as directors (Decker & Decker, 2005). Head Start does offer new directors workshops, weeklong regional training sessions, tailored administration, and the Head Start management fellows program (Decker & Decker, 2005).

When staff and families work together, each child is treated as a unique individual and allowed to grow and develop at his or her own rate. Children grow, learn, and develop through an enriched environment with caring staff that wants them and their families to succeed. Most of the regular family participation occurs in not-for-profit centers (Decker & Decker, 2005). The parents of enrolled children are members of the Head Start parent committee (Decker & Decker, 2005).

The Head Start program is administered by the Head Start Bureau, the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) (Decker & Decker, 2005). In order to qualify for this program, a child must be three or four when the school year begins. Head Start legislation states that the federal grant to operate a Head Start program shall not exceed 80% of the approved costs of the program, with 20% to be contributed by the community in either cash or services (Decker & Decker, 2005).

There are two different types of Head Start programs, center-based and home based. The center-based program is based on providing a classroom experience for four-year-old children (the child must be four years old by September 1st of the current school year) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). It provides individual attention between the teacher and the children. This program gives the children the opportunity to socialize with other children from different backgrounds and ethnic groups (Anthony et al, 2005).

For the home-based Head Start program, the learning process starts in the home, the most comfortable, natural learning environment offered in the early years of life.

With the philosophy that parents are teachers, families, who enroll their three and four year old children into the home-based program, will receive Head Start services through a parent-focused approach. These services to the children are primarily in the home through weekly home visits by a Family Educator. During this time, parents and children are given the opportunities to participate in social activities. It is a family program with parents as the main focus because parents are the first and most important educators in the home (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005).

In 1969, Head Start was transferred from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Office of Child Development in the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and now it has become a program within the Administration on Children, Youth and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2007).

In the 1960s, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 funded Head Start to provide childcare services for parents who were involved in the various manpower projects (Decker & Decker, 2005). The Head Start Act Amendment of 1994 established the early Head Start program, which expands the benefits of early childhood development to low income families with children under the age of three and pregnant women (Decker & Decker, 2005).

The Head Start amendment of 1993 gave eligibility criteria for the enrollment of children with disabilities (Smith, 2004). It also give guidance in providing comprehensive services to children and their families in screening children and using evaluative criteria to determine eligibility for special educational services for children with special needs (Decker & Decker, 2005). Public agency programs, such as public schools and Head

Start, have generally been immune from full liability as provided by the civil rights act; immunity was not extended to intentional injury, negligence, and educational negligence (Decker & Decker, 2005).

A child who has been determined to meet the low-income criteria and who is participating in a Head Start program shall be considered to continue to meet the low-income criteria through the end of the succeeding program year (Decker & Decker, 2005). Head Start has also developed new standards, called the Head Start child outcome framework. This framework was intended to guide the assessment of three to five year olds children enrolled in Head Start (Decker & Decker, 2005).

My Head Start Study

Studies has shown that the home based program help families grow stronger because parents are the primary positive influence in the lives of their children and that parents serve as the first and most important teachers for their children's education (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). Volunteering and family involvement is 88% prevalent in all Head Start programs, but is only prevalent in 45% of school-sponsored programs, and 12% of for-profit programs serving pre-kindergarten children (Decker & Decker, 2005).

At Head Start in De Kalb, Illinois, I observed children between the ages of four and five. While observing, I did notice there was no writing center in the room. The art supplies were stored in a closet that was not accessible to the students. In addition, there was only one of every toy in the classroom, which caused many conflicts among the children.

I was able to see the students' daily transitions from playtime, group time and outdoor play. When I first entered the room, the children were eating snack. After snack, the children were told to wash their hand and use the bathroom and when they were finished to have a seat on the carpet while the teachers cleaned.

During group time, the teacher sat the students on a carpet to begin the activity. The teacher began the lesson by holding up the letter "A" for the group of children to see. The teacher then called on one of the students whose name started with the letter "A". The teacher asked the student to identify the letter and the color of the letter. After the student responded, the teacher handed the student the letter to compare it with the first letter of their name on their name tags which were placed on their cubby. When the task was complete the students were able to line up at the door to go outside. The longer it took for the students to participate, the longer they had to wait to go outside. Six out of eight five year olds were able to identify the first letter of their name. The two years olds who were not able to identify the letter in their first name had special needs.

While observing a Head Start program in DeKalb, Illinois, I noticed the teacher appeared less successful in preparing children for Kindergarten. In the same Head Start program in which many of the children were able to identify the first letter of their first name, many of the children were not able to spell their name, write letters, or recognize numbers. In the Pre-k classroom I observed in Rockford, Illinois many of the 5 years olds were able to do all the above tasks.

Pre- Kindergarten Programs in Illinois

In comparison to the Head Start program, pre-K programs also serve children ages 3-5 who are at risk of academic failure. In addition, children who are not at risk are served through the program as well.

In Illinois, the pre-K programs are funded through the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant awarded to public school districts (Early Childhood Research Collaborative, 2007). It began in 1986 serving children for only half a day (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). The first full year of the program began in 1987. In July, 2006, Illinois signed a law providing all Preschool age children the opportunity to receive services (Early Childhood Research Collaborative, 2007).

Although some states require their teachers to have a degree and certification in early childhood, many states only require a Child Development Associate certificate in order to teach children attending preschool. Approximately 10,000 new children will be reached in 2006-07 due to this program ensuring that 190,000 children will have access to high-quality preschool in Illinois (Early Childhood Research Collaborative, 2007).

A Pre-K Study

A study of a Georgia universal pre-K program concluded that “82% of former pre-K students rated better on third-grade readiness in comparison to national norms” (Henry, Gordon, Mashburn, & Ponder, 2001). In a study conducted by Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, and Dawson, 2005 of a Tulsa, Oklahoma universal pre-K program, the authors compared "young" kindergarten children who were beginning pre-K to "old" pre-K children who just completed pre-K.

The participants of this study consisted of 1,843 pre-K students and 3,727 Kindergarten students. The treatment group was composed of Kindergarten students

enrolled in Tulsa pre-K program the previous year and the control group composed of children who just began the pre-K program. The author used the three subsets of the Woodcock-Johnson Achievement test to assess the children. The children were assessed in the following areas: Letter-Word Identification, Spelling, and Applied Problems. The test was only administered in English. The authors found Hispanic, Black, White, and Native American children all benefited from the program, as did children in diverse income brackets, as measured by school lunch eligibility status. The scores indicated that children who attended Tulsa pre-K program had scores that were significantly higher than those who did not attend a pre-K program. For instance, on the letter-word portion of the assessment, the African American children scores increased by 2.91 points and the Native American children scores increased by 3.56 points. Overall the program scores on Letter-Word recognition increased for every ethnic group.

In conclusion the Oklahoma's universal pre-K program has succeeded in enhancing the school readiness of a diverse group of children in the areas of letter-word recognition, spelling, and applied Problems (Gormley et al., 2005). In addition, other studies have found those children who entered pre-K scoring below national norms on a letter-recognition test began Kindergarten scoring above national norms (Henry 2003).

My Pre-K Study

To test the Oklahoma's universal pre-K program results, I decided to conduct a similar study using pre-K children from a rural community in Illinois. I was a student teacher there during the months of March-May.

Participants. The study consisted of 50 children who were 5 years old by April 15, 2007 in a half-day, at-risk pre-K program and Kindergarten in Machesney Park, IL.

To conduct the research, I tested 25 children from the pre-K and 25 children from Kindergarten who did not attend a pre-K program the previous year on the recognition of letters, numbers (mathematic skills), colors, and shapes. In addition, I assessed the children's socialization skills during small and large group activities and spelling. The children were selected based on attendance at school (the children in both group had an attendance rate above 80%).

Measures. The test instruments I used were assessments used by teachers in the Harlem school district in Machesney Park, IL to test if a child is ready to begin Kindergarten. The letter recognition test measures the children's abilities to read letters in the alphabet. The children were required to identify letters and pronounce letter sounds (see assessment below).

- | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A | <input type="checkbox"/> G | <input type="checkbox"/> M | <input type="checkbox"/> S | <input type="checkbox"/> Y |
| <input type="checkbox"/> B | <input type="checkbox"/> H | <input type="checkbox"/> N | <input type="checkbox"/> T | <input type="checkbox"/> Z |
| <input type="checkbox"/> C | <input type="checkbox"/> I | <input type="checkbox"/> O | <input type="checkbox"/> U | <input type="checkbox"/> Knows
all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> D | <input type="checkbox"/> J | <input type="checkbox"/> P | <input type="checkbox"/> V | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> E | <input type="checkbox"/> K | <input type="checkbox"/> Q | <input type="checkbox"/> W | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> F | <input type="checkbox"/> L | <input type="checkbox"/> P | <input type="checkbox"/> X | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a | <input type="checkbox"/> g | <input type="checkbox"/> m | <input type="checkbox"/> s | <input type="checkbox"/> y |
| <input type="checkbox"/> b | <input type="checkbox"/> h | <input type="checkbox"/> n | <input type="checkbox"/> t | <input type="checkbox"/> z |
| <input type="checkbox"/> c | <input type="checkbox"/> i | <input type="checkbox"/> o | <input type="checkbox"/> u | <input type="checkbox"/> knows
all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> d | <input type="checkbox"/> j | <input type="checkbox"/> p | <input type="checkbox"/> v | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> e | <input type="checkbox"/> k | <input type="checkbox"/> q | <input type="checkbox"/> w | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> f | <input type="checkbox"/> l | <input type="checkbox"/> r | <input type="checkbox"/> x | |

* Using 5x9 alphabet cards, the child is asked to name the lowercase and upper case letters on each 5x9 card. The cards are placed in random order. The worksheet above is used to record the child responses. The box next to letter is marked when the children name the letter incorrectly. The box "Knows all" is mark if the child identifies each letter correctly.

<input type="checkbox"/> A	<input type="checkbox"/> G	<input type="checkbox"/> M	<input type="checkbox"/> S	<input type="checkbox"/> Y
<input type="checkbox"/> B	<input type="checkbox"/> H	<input type="checkbox"/> N	<input type="checkbox"/> T	<input type="checkbox"/> Z
<input type="checkbox"/> C	<input type="checkbox"/> I	<input type="checkbox"/> O	<input type="checkbox"/> U	<input type="checkbox"/> Knows all
<input type="checkbox"/> D	<input type="checkbox"/> J	<input type="checkbox"/> P	<input type="checkbox"/> V	
<input type="checkbox"/> E	<input type="checkbox"/> K	<input type="checkbox"/> Q	<input type="checkbox"/> W	
<input type="checkbox"/> F	<input type="checkbox"/> L	<input type="checkbox"/> P	<input type="checkbox"/> X	

* Using 5x9 alphabet cards, the child is asked to give the sounds of lowercase letters on each 5x9 card. The cards are placed in random order. The worksheet above is used to record the child responses. The box next to letter is marked when the child gives the incorrect sound. The box "Knows all" is mark if the child identifies each letter sound correctly.

The number recognition/mathematic skills test measures children's abilities to count and recognize numbers 0 through 10, connect numbers to quantities they represent and to understand the terms "more", "less", and "the same" (see assessment below).

<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 7	<input type="checkbox"/> 10
<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 8	<input type="checkbox"/> 10+
<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input type="checkbox"/> 9	

* Using 5x9 number cards, the child is asked to place the cards in order. Then the cards are placed in random order and the child is asked to read the number. The worksheet above is used to record the child

responses. The box next to number is marked when the child gives the incorrect number. The box "Knows all" is mark if the child identifies each number correctly.

The color and shape recognition tests measure children's abilities to name basic colors and shapes (see assessment below).

- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Red | <input type="checkbox"/> White | <input type="checkbox"/> Black | <input type="checkbox"/> Blue |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gray | <input type="checkbox"/> Orange | <input type="checkbox"/> Pink | <input type="checkbox"/> Brown |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Purple | <input type="checkbox"/> Green | <input type="checkbox"/> Yellow | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Circle | <input type="checkbox"/> Square | <input type="checkbox"/> Oval | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart | <input type="checkbox"/> Star | <input type="checkbox"/> Triangle | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Diamond | <input type="checkbox"/> Rectangle | | |

*Using 5x9 number cards, the child is asked to place the cards in order. Then the cards are placed in random order and the child is asked to read the number. The worksheet above is used to record the child responses. The box next to number is marked when the child gives the incorrect number. The box "Knows all" is mark if the child identifies each number correctly.

The socialization test measures children's communication and participation skills during small and large group activities (see assessment below).

- Takes turns when listening and speaking
- Follows 2-3 step directions
- Listens with interest to stories read aloud
- Participates in rhyming activities
- Express ideas during conversations and discussions

Lastly, the spelling test measures children's skills in writing words and letters and whether or not a child produces lower and uppercase letters and spells words correctly (see assessment below).

Scribbles

Letter-like marks

Writes random letter

Copies/ writes words

After conducting numerous tests and observations, I was also able to conclude that the pre-K program does enhance school readiness. I was able to reach this conclusion because those children, who were 5 years old, were able to identify all the letters in the alphabet, recognize letters and sounds, identify numbers 1-10, and recognize their own name as well as some of their classmates' names.

Furthermore, while observing a pre-K classroom in DeKalb, Illinois, I was very impressed to witness the children learning sign language and Spanish. Also 75% of the children were able to recite a book and five nursery rhymes from memory.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there has been scientific information to support the effects of early childhood intervention programs on children especially in the Head Start and pre-K programs. From personal experiences, I believe Head Start and pre-K were very beneficial to my development and academic success. The program was an advantage to my family because there was no cost for childcare and transportation to a childcare facility due to free busing.

In addition, Head Start and pre-K programs provide children with a fun experience because the children are able to learn through play. It was very diverse, so I was able to meet many different people and learn about many different cultures. In addition, it helped prepare me for the public atmosphere and eliminated stranger anxiety.

Some researchers believe Head Start has been less effective than better-funded public pre-kindergarten programs because poor quality programs have negative effects on the children's play and relationships with teachers (Helburn, 1995, as cited in Decker & Decker, 2005). Although this might be true, many parents believe that they are lucky to

have their children attend a free and educational program because Head Start only serves 60% of eligible children (Decker & Decker, 2005).

Early invention programs' main goal is to prepare children for education not to replace education. These two programs are here to provide children the tools and resources they will eventually need when they enter Kindergarten. It prepares the children to be able to sit in a classroom environment and most importantly teach them how to obey rules.

My research did not find support the effectiveness of early intervention. Was not able to find evidence that that early intervention increases the developmental and educational gains for the child, improves the functioning of the family, and reaps long-term benefits for society. Even though Pre-K and Head Start does not guarantee a successful education, my research concluded that early intervention can help prepare children for success.

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