

Dos and Don'ts for Early Childhood Education

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As common sense has long suggested, the early experiences of babies and young children have a dramatic impact on the rest of their lives. A growing body of scientific research shows that children's early years are crucial for learning and brain development, laying the groundwork for lifelong cognitive ability, social functioning, and emotional well-being. Researchers from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child explain, "Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health."¹

Because of the importance of the very early years, significant adversity—such as poverty, neglect, maltreatment, or absence of one parent—can cause long-term damage to children's learning and development that is difficult to reverse. At the same time, substantial evidence shows that high-quality care and education for at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschoolers can actually help them overcome the negative consequences of being born into disadvantage, giving children a fair chance to succeed in life and significantly reducing costs associated with social and economic dysfunction in their later years.

Yet while its importance is increasingly clear, the early-childhood education field is still nascent. This gives state leaders an extraordinary opportunity to build effective systems right, from the ground up.



Do: Expand focus beyond pre-K.

As states look to expand access to early learning, it is essential that they think carefully about the most effective allocation of limited resources. Research suggests that pre-K can be almost too late for the most disadvantaged children who are often the primary target of these programs in the first place. Learning starts at birth, making the brain development of children from ages zero to three especially crucial.

So while pre-K can be valuable, an exclusive policy emphasis on programs for four-year-olds is likely to be counterproductive in the long run. Investments in programs such as high-quality child care and voluntary home-visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers may provide even greater long-term returns. In fact, the well-known programs for disadvantaged children that are most widely cited by pre-K advocates—the Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Program—included child care and home visiting as central components.

Child care has conventionally been provided to help lower-income parents—especially mothers—remain employed and off welfare. But there is a growing understanding that it can also have a significant, positive impact on the rapidly developing brains of very young children. For example, the recently reauthorized bipartisan Child Care and Development Block Grant Act now encourages states to maximize the benefit of child care for children by providing them with high-quality learning opportunities, while enabling their parents to work.

Home-visiting programs that help young, low-income parents better fulfill their role as their children's first teachers have also been shown to greatly improve children's academic and social outcomes. A recent study of the Nurse-Family Partnership program, which provides voluntary home visits to high-risk women with young children, showed that it produced an average net savings of \$17,000 per family served through the program's down-the-line impact: improved children's health, reduced child abuse and neglect, increased readiness for school, and reduced future crime.



Do: Design initiatives that test what works while serving children.

The pressure to do something to help young children can be strong but, at the end of the day, how programs are designed and implemented is as important as whether they exist at all. As University of Chicago economist and early-childhood education proponent James Heckman has stressed, "Quality really matters."² New initiatives should be built using existing knowledge and, at the same time, be designed to build understanding of what works best and why. Evaluations of smaller-scale pilot programs can be used to generate essential new knowledge, which can then inform ongoing, larger-scale expansions.



Don't: Scale new programs up too quickly.

Waiting for perfect information before moving forward with much-needed programs does not make sense, but neither does hasty expansion of untested approaches. Premature, overly rapid scale-ups will shortchange children, entrench less-effective program models, and undercut the longer-range potential of early education to make a real difference in the lives of disadvantaged youngsters. It is much easier to do things correctly at the outset than to fix them once they are in place.



Don't: Require early education teachers to have bachelor's degrees.

Teacher quality is the primary driver of program quality in early childhood education, and many argue that early education teachers should have bachelor's degrees to ensure their effectiveness. Yet all K–12 teachers have bachelor's

degrees (almost half have master's degrees as well), and years of experience with failing public schools make it very clear that credentials in no way guarantee that teachers will be effective in practice.

Research shows that what counts is not what degrees teachers have but how they teach. That is especially crucial in early education where interactions between teachers and students, not content knowledge, is what drives success. Requiring bachelor's degrees for early education teachers will not ensure quality, and the cost of college will prevent many potentially wonderful teachers from entering the profession, greatly limiting the pool of prospective early education teachers.



Do: Explore innovative models for training effective teachers.

Teachers have to be adequately prepared for their jobs. But college does not provide the unique skills needed to teach young children effectively. Those skills are best learned through specialized training combined with on-the-job practice under the supervision of an expert teacher. And although it is important to ensure that teachers meet minimum standards of academic ability, bachelor's degrees are not the only way to accomplish that. In the United Kingdom, for example, prospective teachers are required to pass skills tests in both numeracy and literacy to qualify for teacher training programs.

Apprenticeship-based training models open to bright, hardworking high school graduates hold promise as an effective and less expensive approach. This will expand, rather than limit, the pool of potential high-quality teachers for early learners, while also providing a good, meaningful job for talented people who do not have a college degree.



Don't: Tack a 14th year onto the K-12 public schools.

Advocates often promote expansion of public pre-K as a "fix" for the poor performance of the K-12 public schools. But adding new preschool programs into failing, government-run schools as an extra grade is a poor strategy for building a robust early-childhood education sector. This approach will simply entrench some of K-12's worst problems in new pre-K initiatives: emphasizing teacher credentials rather than effectiveness, holding programs accountable for compliance rather than outcomes, and relying on centralized control rather than innovation. Rather than tacking pre-K onto the public schools, states should explore options that create new, innovative systems.



Do: Create room for systems to adapt and evolve to needs of local communities.

Empower parents. Centrally managed systems have a poor track record of improving K–12 schools, and there is little reason to think they will do better with early education. A market system that gives power to parents has a much better chance of success. For this to work, parents need the freedom to choose programs that meet their needs, good options to choose from, and the financial resources to actually utilize what is available.

Encourage entrepreneurs. To improve both quality and availability of programs, states should encourage new and existing providers to establish and expand programs that respond to the needs of local families. Low-income families should be provided with vouchers or subsidies to defray costs for the programs they decide are best for their children.

Ensure transparency. Parents need clear and accessible information to choose wisely. States should require that programs publicize data on their services and outcomes in formats that parents of varied language backgrounds and reading levels can understand. Local governments should also facilitate other ways of ensuring that parents have access to information, such as creating guides, providing referral services, and working with community organizations to create opportunities for families to come together to share information on programs.

Notes

1. Harvard University Center of the Developing Child, "Summary of Essential Findings: A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy—Using Evidence to Improve Outcomes in Learning, Behavior, and Health for Vulnerable Children," http://developingchild.harvard.edu/index.php/download_file/-/view/359/.

2. Dylan Matthews, "James Heckman: In Early Childhood Education, 'Quality Really Matters,'" Wonkblog, February 14, 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/02/14/james-heckman-in-early-childhood-education-quality-really-matters.