Importance of early childhood development

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Invest in the Very Young

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Topic
Importance of early childhood development

Learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life. Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success, just as early failure breeds later failure. Success or failure at this stage lays the foundation for success or failure in school, which in turn leads to success or failure in post-school learning. Recent studies of early childhood investments have shown remarkable success and indicate that the early years are important for early learning. Moreover, early childhood interventions of high quality have lasting effects on learning and motivation. As a society, we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene.

However, current policies regarding education and job training are based on fundamental misconceptions about the way socially useful skills embodied in persons are produced. By focusing on cognitive skills as measured by achievement of IQ tests, they exclude the critical importance of social skills, self-discipline and a variety of non-cognitive skills that are known to determine success in life. Furthermore, this preoccupation with cognition and academic “smarts” as measured by test scores to the exclusion of social adaptability and motivation causes a serious bias in the evaluation of the human capital interventions.

Another common error in the analysis of human capital policies is the assumption that abilities are fixed at very early ages. This static conception of ability is at odds with a large body of research in the child development literature. More specifically, research has shown that, in the early years of life, basic abilities can be altered. A more corrective view of ability (or rather abilities) is that they are developed in a variety of learning situations and that early ability in turn fosters further learning.

1 Adapted from the paper “The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young,” published by the Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Studies. 2000. The present paper has been approved by Dr. Heckman.
Also missing from current policy discussion of education and training policy is any consideration of priorities or recognition of the need to prioritize. Unfortunately, in an era of tight government budgets, it is impractical to consider active investment program for all persons. The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: invest in the very young and improve basic learning and socialization skills.

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While parents, along with some psychologists, sociologists and public-health experts, have long intuitively understood the importance of early childhood development (ECD), it is really only over the last quarter-century or so that scientists, physicians and social scientists have come to recognize the crucial role played by ECD. And it is only very recently that ECD has taken its place in the economic literature beside schooling, on-the-job training, public health and informal learning.

Successful ECD depends on the interaction of a number of factors. As is the case for the development of human capital in later years, the various factors influencing ECD interact multiplicatively to produce “success,” as measured by readiness to learn when entering primary school. Good health (of both mother and child), good nutrition, good parenting, strong social supports and stimulative interaction with others outside the home all combine to provide the best chance of success. Since neglecting investment in any one of these areas reduces the value of investment in other areas, investments to improve pre- and post-conception health of the future mother are a crucial input to ECD. Thus, support of all types to improve parenting during this period is crucial. This support includes development of parenting skills, social support, employer and government support to increase the amount of time parents can spend with their children and, in some cases, direct income support.

In the final period of ECD – roughly ages three through five – the research demonstrates clearly that some form of ECD outside the home makes a very important contribution to the development of the child. This form of intervention, in combination with effective parenting, would appear to significantly increase the chances of a child being “ready to learn” when he or she enters primary school.

The issue then arises as to the appropriate allocation of public (and private) funding for human capital formation. To generate the maximum total return on investment in human
capital, it is important that new investment be allocated efficiently at the margin – just as is the case for physical capital. Thus, it is critical to try to ascertain the return at the margin for different types of investment in human capital – a very difficult exercise. And we should not be surprised that empirical research does not produce definitive numerical results. So while it seems clear that, at the margin, public investment in human capital should be directed towards the very young, how to make those investments most productive is far less clear.

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