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Development

Transitions Begin Early

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Introduction

It is common for policy-makers to think of preschool-to-school transitions as the experiences children have between the end of their preschool or pre-kindergarten year and entrance into kindergarten. However, evidence is accumulating that interventions earlier in life (in the first three years) contribute to enhanced development in ways that are consistent with improving children's chances for a successful transition. In addition to the specific *services* supporting continuity that Early,[1] Pianta et al.,[2] and others[3] have described, children need the benefits of quality early childhood *programs*.

Subject

In this paper, we first describe the developmental qualities that are important for a successful transition to school, and then show how quality infant-toddler programs contribute to those features of children's early development and learning.

Research Context

What is important for successful preschool-to-school transitions?

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When the National Education Goals Panel defined the first education goal in the United States, the Goal One Technical Planning Group broke new ground by defining not only what the important dimensions of “readiness” are, but also what conditions are critical for supporting those dimensions.[4] The five dimensions of early development and learning (physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning, language, and cognition and general knowledge) have become widely accepted, in one form or another. The three supporting conditions identified include having access to quality preschool programs, parents as children’s first teachers, and appropriate nutrition and health care. Good-quality infant-toddler programs have been shown to be effective in changing the environments babies experience in the early years in ways consistent with these supporting conditions, enhancing children's development.

Recent Research Results

What do effective infant-toddler programs contribute?

Between 1972 and 1977, the Carolina Abecedarian Project enrolled 120 “high-risk” African-American families in four cohorts. From these, 111 children were randomly assigned to the program, which included full-time child care beginning in the first three months of life, or to a control group. Families and children continued receiving services until the children reached the age of five. The program, which also provided social supports for families, was highly successful in improving children’s cognitive development relative to the control group, with significant differences at 18, 24 and 36 months of age.[5,6] Follow-up studies showed that program effects persisted at every assessment point through 16 to 20 years of age.

The Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP) combined home visiting, centre-based education and family services to low-birthweight premature infants and their families during the first three years of life. At age three, the program group scored significantly higher on the Stanford Binet test of intelligence and lower in behaviour problems. The heavier low-birthweight infants benefited more at ages two and three than did the very low-birthweight children.[7] Effects were sustained through age eight for the heavier low-birthweight children.[8]

The Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP) was implemented as a demonstration program in 24 highly diverse sites in 1989 and 1990. Programs featured intensive social services and parent education, although direct child development services and program-sponsored child

care were far less intensive than in the IHDP and Abecedarian programs. When children were two years old, the national evaluation found that CCDPs significantly improved (1) mothers' parenting skills and attitudes; (2) parents' economic self-sufficiency; and (3) children's cognitive development. However, these effects largely disappeared by age three and were absent at age five.[9]

The national evaluation of the federal Early Head Start program[10] found that this two-generation intervention benefited two- and three-year-old children (when contrasted with their randomly assigned control group) along a number of important dimensions: cognitive development, vocabulary and social behaviour (reduced aggressive behaviour problems, increased engagement of parents and higher sustained attention with objects in a play situation). The program also made important changes in the children's environments or the conditions supporting development. These included changing parenting practices so that Early Head Start parents provided more supports for learning and literacy in their home environments and were more likely to read to their children every day.

The Early Head Start intervention also improved children's environments by increasing access to good-quality child care.[11] By ages 14 and 24 months, for example, Early Head Start children were almost three times as likely to be in *good-quality* centre child care as their control-group counterparts. Program children were also 50% more likely to be in good-quality centre settings at 36 months.

Conclusions

Do children from good infant-toddler programs have a head start?

Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of evidence that these positive effects from infant-toddler programs will translate into greater success when the children reach school age. The Abecedarian and IHDP results suggest this outcome, but were implemented only within two special populations (African-American children and low-birthweight babies, respectively). However, the Early Head Start evaluation demonstrated significant impacts across the full range of developmental domains thought to be important for success in school according to the National Education Goals Panel.[4] If children's experiences upon leaving Early Head Start, between ages three and five, maintain Early Head Start's benefits, these children will indeed be shown to have an early "head start" toward a successful transition to school.

Implications

Parents, teachers, program managers and policy-makers need to think about the transition process beginning in the first years of life in order to build the foundations for future success in school. Further research is needed to understand this process in more detail.

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Note:

[a] Raikes was Society for Research in Child Development Fellow, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, during the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project.