



AN IDEAL EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Special Report

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Serving Children and Families By Promoting
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A variety of early childhood development programs for low-income children seek to promote mental, academic, social, and emotional development and to prepare competent children for school and to lead productive lives. These programs come in many shapes and may differ in approach and other characteristics. However, certain characteristics appear to be particularly important to the effectiveness of early childhood development programs. The research and best practices literature suggests that one ideal system might have the following characteristics:

- ! **The program starts early in the lives of the target children.** Starting early is important not so much because earlier is better for the children, but for the parents. The program would provide comprehensive services to deal with parent basic needs that interfere with parenting (*see below*). It is also important to get the parent involved with the child and the child's development early because parents likely produce many of the longer-term benefits for their children in such programs.
- ! **The program provides or coordinates and refers to a comprehensive, integrated set of adult- and child-focused services.** The more risk factors and problems a family has, the worse the outcome for parents and children. The program needs to be able to arrange for appropriate services to meet any major need identified by a family. Also, parents have difficulty finding time or motivation to focus on parenting and child goals if major adult needs are present, unmet, and producing stress. It is important, then, to address major needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, mental health services, education and job training, employment, child care or early education, and transportation.
- ! **Parents should identify their own goals and service needs with structure, support, guidance, referrals, facilitation, and advocacy provided by the program.** Services should be used by parents, not done to parents. Without parental initiative, choice, and responsibility, services may not be matched to family needs; parents are less likely to use and benefit from specific services; and parents are less likely to learn that initiative and responsibility are useful traits to acquire.
- ! **Services such as an educational preschool must be provided directly to children, not solely through the parent, to produce the most benefits for children.** Parent training and education produce more benefits for children when they are part of a more comprehensive set of services that includes early childhood programming for children, rather than when they are conducted alone.
- ! **The more intense and the longer lasting the program, the better the outcomes.** The more home visits per month, the more hours of early childhood programming per day (i.e., full- versus half-day), and the more years in the program, the greater and more permanent the benefits for parents and children. "Lite" programs in terms of intensity and extent often do not even produce "lite" benefits.
- ! **A combination of family support and early childhood education, plus extensions of similar specialized services into the first three years of primary school, can increase the magnitude and permanence of the benefits of early childhood services.**
- ! **The better the quality of the program, the better the outcomes.** Quality of program is reflected in several characteristics:
 - " Staff should have higher levels of general education and more education and training specifically in the focal areas emphasized by the program. An

early childhood center program, for example, should be directed by a professional with a graduate degree in child development and early childhood programming, and primary staff should have as much previous and continuing education and training as possible. Community staff can bring valuable social-cultural knowledge to the service, and they also should be trained in child development and early education.

" **Staff should be closely supported, monitored, and supervised by a trained professional.** Staff knowledge and training produce a quality program only if they put that knowledge to work in their behavior and practices, which well-trained, attentive, and supportive supervisors encourage.

" **Fewer children per staff member or smaller caseloads are associated with better outcomes.** Staff need time beyond routine caregiving responsibilities to listen, teach, encourage, and accommodate to individual needs and interests of children and families to promote their development.

" **Early childhood programming that emphasizes developmentally-appropriate practices and direct tuition of cognitive, social, and emotional skills and behaviors is more likely to produce benefits in each area of emphasis than strictly adult-centered programming.** Primary school curricula and methods are not appropriate for preschool-aged children who benefit most from a better balance of child-centered, child-initiated, and teacher-child mutual activities versus fewer teacher-directed activities. Also, early childhood programming needs to be more balanced in topic, with more emphasis on social and emotional development and behavior and less on cognitive and academic skills than in primary school. Balance among these general developmentally-appropriate emphases is more important for positive outcomes than which specific curriculum strategy (e.g., didactic versus direct instruction, open versus traditional classroom, interactive versus cognitive-developmental) is employed.

" **The greater the involvement of the parents in the direct programming of the early childhood service, the better short-term and long-term outcomes for children.** Involvement must go beyond attending open houses or driving on field trips. Parents need to be involved with, and support at home, the lessons the early childhood program is attempting to promote and teach the children.

! **Deliberate attempts should be made to improve the persistence of early programming.** This can be done in several ways:

" **Improve the quality of the schools** that low-income children will attend after the early childhood program.

" **Provide extended services in the primary schools** that are similar to those of successful early childhood programs.

! **Continuous monitoring and evaluation is useful to improve the quality of the services.** Policymakers should not expect the first one

or two cohorts to demonstrate benefits until the program has been developed, implemented, and improved over several cohorts. Also, some program benefits for children may not be realized until years after they have left the program, and then those benefits may be in terms of preventing costly disasters in a few participants (e.g., grade failure, unemployment, criminality) rather than improvements in the average performance of the entire group of participants (e.g., grade averages or test scores).

! **Programs must be funded at a level sufficient to pay for the extent, duration, and quality of services needed to produce benefits for both parents and children.** Because "lite" programs often do not even produce "lite" results, they are a waste of money, at least in terms of achieving the specific child and family results discussed here. Government has often funded service programs at

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only a fraction of the cost of the model program that was demonstrated to be effective, and it sometimes has preferred to provide funds to enroll more children rather than to improve program extent, duration, and quality. It makes little sense to provide ineffective services to massive numbers of children or to expect champagne benefits on a beer budget. As with other commodities, you get what you pay for in human services.

" Families with the most social-demographic-economic risk factors are likely to have the worst outcomes without services and also benefit most from early childhood and family services, and thus services could be targeted to fewer children and families. More focused targeting of services than simply to those eligible by income alone is at least possible under conditions of limited resources.

" But there may be benefits to parents and children to have universal early childhood programming. Children from diverse backgrounds can learn from each other. Greater public, parental, policy, and financial attention and support might be paid to the quality of such programs if they are provided for all segments of society. With PWORA and TANF in place, the need for childcare cuts across all economic levels, and the additional cost to provide a better quality program is relatively modest once custodial-level care for working parents is provided.

" Funding of low-income children should be tied to the child, not the neighborhood. Low-income families are moving out of concentrated inner-city neighborhoods, making neighborhood funding less effective and less fair. If universal programming is offered, funding for low-income children might be modeled after the free-and-reduced-lunch program or sliding scales tied to family income.

" The public schools represent a potentially cost-effective vehicle for administering and housing early childhood services. The public schools are well distributed geographically, they have (or could be renovated at less cost to have) the required physical facilities, they have a financial and administrative infrastructure in place, and use of their physical facilities would eliminate transportation problems and the frequent cobbling together of diverse service arrangements that families now often make. But early childhood, extended day, and vacation day program services may be best "outsourced" by the schools to independent agencies but operated on school premises to deal with the need for specialized training, hours, and salaries of staff.

" Given the burgeoning need for early childhood programming and nonschool-hour care, policymakers should consider creating integrated systems of care, not just independent services.



This report is based upon "The Science and Policies of Early Childhood Education and Family Services" by McCall, R. B., Larsen, L., and Ingram, A. Paper presented for the National Invitational Conference on *Early Childhood Learning: Programs for a New Age*, Alexandria, VA, November 29-December 1, 1999 and the discussion provided by numerous participants at this Conference. This paper was supported in part by Urban University Community Services Program Grant P252A50226, awarded by the federal Department of Education to the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and The Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

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