
THE BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

The early childhood years provide the foundation for all later learning and the development of life skills. Interventions in the early years of childhood offer an extraordinary opportunity to avoid or moderate learning problems, and to bring lasting benefits to individuals and society. Scientific findings have demonstrated that support of early development yields rich benefits not only in immediate ways for the child and its parents, but also over time in terms of the child's ability to contribute to the community.

For the individual. Evidence from the fields of physiology, nutrition, psychology, education, and related disciplines continues to accumulate which indicates that the early years are critical to all of later life. To cite a few of the findings:

1. BRAIN DEVELOPMENT. During the first two years critical brain structures develop that affect children's ability to learn. Research shows that stimulation of a child's senses affects the structure and organization of neural pathways in the brain during the formative period. By age 6, most of these connections are made (or not, as the case may be). Programs that provide proper nutrition and support stimulation of a child's senses enhance the structure and organization of the brain. Providing opportunities for appropriately complex perceptual and motor experiences at an early age favorably affects various learning abilities in later life and can even compensate, at least partly, for deficits associated with early malnutrition and trauma.

2. NUTRITION, HEALTH, AND THE ABILITY TO LEARN. Children with consistent, caring attention are better nourished, less apt to be sick, and learn better than children who don't receive such care. Neglected children are more prone to sickness and malnutrition and are less equipped and motivated to learn. Programs that support families and teach them how to provide consistent, healthy care are helping children develop the readiness to participate in school and the community.

For the family and community. Parents provide the child's first and most important learning environment. ECCD programs that provide support to parents and rely on resources within the community for their implementation and sustainability ultimately benefit parents, families, and the community at large. These community and family benefits are evidenced by parents' improved self-confidence, the emergence of leaders, and by increased organization and social action in communities.

For society. The benefits of early childhood interventions include:

1. INCREASED ECONOMIC PRODUCTIVITY. Interventions that support young children’s physical and mental capacities lead to increased enrollment and improved progress and performance in school. School performance, in turn, is linked to children’s increased economic productivity when they become adults. Early childhood programs also free parents and older siblings to earn and learn, thus increasing their productivity.

2. COST SAVINGS. Early childhood investments can reduce costs and improve the efficiency of primary schooling. Children who are better prepared physically, mentally, and socially for school have an easier transition from home to school. Therefore, drop-out and repetition rates are lower and the need for remedial programs is reduced, cutting costs. Effective early childhood programs can also bring cost savings in areas other than education: health care costs can be cut through preventive measures in programs which help reduce disease and accidents; the social costs of delinquency and related problems are cut as children stay in school longer; and absenteeism in the work force is reduced when parents, assured of proper care for their children, can devote their time to the job.

3. REDUCTIONS IN SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES. Poverty and/or discrimination can inhibit development in the early years. By failing to intervene to support positive growth and development, governments tacitly endorse inequalities. This is certainly true if early childhood programs are available only to those who can afford to pay for them. Investments in early childhood development have been shown to modify inequalities rooted in poverty and social discrimination by giving children from disadvantaged backgrounds a fair start in school and in life. Studies suggest that these children benefit more from early intervention programs than their more-privileged peers.

4. REDUCTIONS IN GENDER INEQUALITIES. All children have a right to develop to their full potential. Attention to young girls often lags behind attention to boys, beginning and reinforcing a long cycle of discrimination. Gender-linked disparities in attitudes and expectations, and in patterns and practices of early care and development, need to be examined. There is evidence that early attention to gender can produce changes in the development of the girl child and in the way families perceive the abilities and future of that child. Furthermore, early childhood programs can also benefit women and older siblings by freeing them from constant child care responsibility so they can learn, and so they can seek better employment and earnings.

5. STRENGTHENED VALUES. In societies where there is a concern that crucial values are being eroded, a strong incentive exists to find ways in which those values can be strengthened. Transmission of the social and moral values that guide children in the future begins in the earliest months of life. To preserve moral and social values—or to change them for the better—one must begin with young children. Values can be promoted through early childhood programs that provide environments within which children can play and give attention to culturally desirable beliefs. Values such as living together harmoniously begin to take hold in the pre-school years.

6. PROGRAM EFFICACY. The success of other programs can be improved by incorporating ECCD components. Programs that emphasize health and nutrition can benefit from the addition of attention to cognitive and social development because sound psycho-social development

increases the child's chances of survival. Primary education programs become more efficient when children have had appropriate pre-primary experiences; repetition and drop-out rates are lowered. Women's programs benefit when child care is provided, freeing women to focus on their productive role.

The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, 1996.

Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development. CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1999.