

Is Preschool Good for Children?

by Darcy Olsen

Is preschool good for children? Ask ten parents, and you'll likely get ten different answers. And all of them would probably be right.

Children's needs vary as naturally as fingerprints. While one child might need more instruction in the letters of the alphabet, a second child might need more time to play. Another child might need more time with mom and dad. There are as many possibilities as there are children. That's one reason why government plans to enter the preschool business are ill-advised.

The Canadian government has promised to spend \$5 billion over the next five years towards the establishment of a national child care program that federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden has likened to the birth of medicare and public education. While the details of this program have not yet been negotiated, child care advocates continue to lobby for an integrated, European-style system of formal care and early education for all three- and four-year olds. As Martha Friendly, who heads up the University of

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Toronto's Child Care Resource and Research Unit (CRRU), laments, "Canada has very much fallen behind" continental Europe (Friendly, 2003, p. 1).

An examination of test score data suggests those European pre-kindergarten systems do not give children superior academic skills. To the contrary, in the early years Canadian students routinely outperform Europeans in the international competition in reading, math, and science, as do students in the United States. Consider fourth-grade test performance, the earliest year for which international comparison data is available, and importantly, an age at which the benefits of early education systems should be apparent.

In reading, Canadian fourth graders score 544, far above the international average of 500. In particular, Canadian children test better than students in the United States (542), Italy (541), Germany (539), and France (525). In addition to being more literate at earlier ages than their European counterparts, Canadian fourth-grade students have above-average math and science scores. To the degree that international test scores are instructive, the Canadian system with its diversity of settings and funding mechanisms in the early years broadly appears to put Canadian children on track for academic success.

Over time, Canadian students continue performing above average, but their rel-

ative performance slips. Canadian senior students score above average (500) in science and math competitions, with scores of 532 and 519 (IAEEA, 1998). While there is demonstrable room for improvement during the high school years, it is unlikely that the solution will be found in more schooling for younger children.

Experience from the United States may be instructive in this regard. The move into daycare and preschool in the United States has been dramatic. Since 1965, the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in preschool has climbed from 16 to 66 percent. Forty percent of 3-year-olds are also enrolled in preprimary programs (NCES, 2003). If preschool were a key to academic achievement, we would expect to see at least some relationship between enrollment and achievement over time.

However, according to multiple domestic and international assessments, US student achievement has stagnated or fallen in most subjects since 1970. That is all the more disturbing when it is noted that, over the same period, funding for education has tripled, teacher salaries have risen, and class sizes have been reduced (Coulson, 1999, p. 32; NCES 2002; NCES, 2003).

That preschool has failed to measurably improve student achievement is not surprising. There is, after all, only so much information the average three-year-old or four-year-old is developmentally prepared to absorb. Equally important is this: no amount of preschool can make up for what does or does not occur during the next 12 years of formal schooling.

This may explain, in part, why the US Head Start program has failed to improve academic outcomes for millions of participating children since its 1965



inception. The largest synthesis of Head Start's impact conducted for the US government found, "Once the children enter school there is little difference between the scores of Head Start and control children... Findings for the individual cognitive measures—intelligence, readiness and achievement—reflect the same trends as the global measure... By the end of the second year there are no educationally meaningful differences on any of the measures" (McKey *et al.*, 1985, pp. 8 and III-11).

Advocates for more preschool contend that the programs simply need improvement, and they point to "model" programs that reportedly demonstrate long-term gains. The most widely cited program is Perry Preschool. This is the program that generated the claim that \$1 invested today yields \$7 later in savings by improving achievement and reducing welfare use and criminal behavior.

Perry Preschool was a longitudinal study of 123 children conducted from 1962-1965, which independent peer reviewers found to be compromised by significant sampling and methodological errors (Locurto, 1991; Zigler, 1987). It also lacks the ability to inform the preschool discussion for mainstream children because it included only children at risk of "retarded intellectual functioning" (Zigler, Taussig, and Black, 1992, p. 1000). Furthermore, and critically, the results have never been replicated. That no other preschool program before or since has shown such results suggests that Perry Preschool is not a reliable guide to what can be expected from preschool.

The early education literature is replete with this disturbing pattern: preschool provides an initial boost for low-income children that washes out within a year or two of exiting a program. Whatever

the potential for preschool may be for particular children (and that remains an open question), it is a certainty that the benefits of such programs will not lead to improvements in overall academic achievement until or unless children exiting the programs have access to better quality schools capable of sustaining and building on those gains.

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A fundamental concern with the government's plan is the marginalization of parents in the lives of their children. There is no substitute for the family at any age, and the early years are no exception. Implicit in the government's plan is the presumption that parents aren't up to the job. But it doesn't take a roomful of advisors or a School Readiness Board to prepare children for school. It takes love, time, and simple activities like talking, singing, and reading to children, routine activities carried out by parents every day. Think of a favorite grandmother, and you have the idea.

There's a telling story attributed to former US Senator Phil Gramm. An advocate was trying to persuade the Senator that she knew better than parents how to educate their children. Gramm asked her directly, "Do you think you know my children's needs better than I do?" She said "yes." So he said, "Okay, what are their names?"

Not to put too fine a point on it, but there are some things government isn't suited for; parenting is one of them.

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