



Programs and Policies to Foster Early Development

What Works (Part 2 of 2)

The Science of Early Brain Development

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ADDITIONAL INFO

Dr. Riley's presentation is available on the web at familyimpactseminars.org/s_wifis32ppt_dr.pdf. A briefing report on the science of early brain development edited by Professor and Extension Specialist Karen Bogenschneider and Olivia Little at familyimpactseminars.org/s_wifis32report.pdf.

The Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars are a project of the School of Human Ecology, the School of Social Work, and the College of Letters and Science at UW-Madison in collaboration with Cooperative Extension at UW-Extension.

Rigorous evaluations show that early childhood programs can solve some of our country's most pressing problems in a fiscally responsible way. We can have extraordinary, life-changing, cost-effective impacts on the lives of individuals and our society. As a nation of practical problem solvers, what can we do to foster early development?

The Chicago Child-Parent Center. Funded largely by Title 1, public schools in Chicago operate 24 centers for low-income parents and their children, beginning at age 3. By age 25, participants had higher living standards, higher rates of high school completion, and lower rates of substance abuse, felony arrest, and incarceration. The program returned \$10.15 for every \$1 invested. Schools in Wisconsin could use their Title 1 funds in the same way. State financial incentives could make this local policy choice more possible.

Pre-K. State-funded pre-K programs in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas, and elsewhere have shown consistent meaningful impacts on early vocabulary and math skills, with stronger impacts for high-risk children. Also, Wisconsin could provide funding to make Head Start available to all eligible families. In a study of siblings, those who attended Head Start were much more likely to graduate from high school, and less likely to be unemployed as young adults.

Mixed-model funding of child care. Wisconsin could reinstate Governor Tommy Thompson's approach of state grants of \$1,500 per child to early childhood programs that commit themselves to quality improvement. Even though this increased program budgets by only 16%, child care quality improved in only a one- or two-year time span. North Carolina's approach, Smart Start, provides state funding to improve child care quality with local control of how to make improvements.

Market-based improvement of the quality of early childhood programs. YoungStar, Wisconsin's 5-star quality rating system, appears to be working. In the last two years, the percent of children in programs rated 3 stars or higher

has risen dramatically. However, 62% of rated providers are still at the 2-star level. The policy questions are whether to increase state reimbursement to keep programs with higher stars in business and how to improve quality in programs with lower stars. The biggest barrier in moving to the 3-star level appears to be meeting education standards for child care staff.

Teach/Reward. Wisconsin child care teachers turn over at the annual rate of 30% to 35%, which suppresses efforts to improve child care quality. The number of college courses a teacher completes has a direct relation to how much children learn in the classroom. Wisconsin's TEACH and REWARD programs address teacher training, pay, and retention. The impact on child care quality or child outcomes is not known, but teachers do become better trained and stay in the early childhood workforce longer.

Intensive home visiting. When evidence-based home visiting programs, like Olds' Nurse Family Partnership, are delivered as designed, we can have a high level of confidence in the powerful, life-changing impacts of these programs that start at an early age. They are not cheap, costing about \$4,000 to \$5,000 per family. But when targeted to high-risk families, they return more dollars to the public than they cost.

Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care. Youth whose foster parents received this training and support benefited in two ways. They spent 60% fewer days in jail the following year, and spent almost twice as much time living with their own parents or relatives (which is one of the program's goals).

Co-parenting education for divorcing parents. Divorce affects 15,000 minor children annually in Wisconsin. Under current law, judges can require divorcing parents to take up to 4 hours of classes on effectively co-parenting after divorce. In one study, these classes may save the state money by reducing court costs. Given this potential, some states have made these courses mandatory. ■