



Preschool Policy Facts

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Advancing Quality Pre-Kindergarten for All

Promoting Children's Social and Emotional Development Through High-Quality Preschool

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Knowing the ABCs does not by itself prepare children for school. Children need a combination of intellectual skills, motivational qualities and social-emotional skills if they are to learn once they enter kindergarten. Children must be excited and curious about learning and confident they can succeed (motivational qualities). They must be able to understand the feelings of others, control their own feelings and behaviors, and get along with their peers and teachers (social-emotional skills).

Teachers rate these qualities as more important to school success than being able to hold a pencil or read. The growing number of children who are socially or emotionally unprepared for school means teachers spend too much time trying to rein in unmanageable children and too little time teaching. Many of these problems begin before kindergarten. If not addressed, they can result in behavioral problems that accompany children through their school years and into adulthood.

What We Know:

- Teachers say about 20 percent of children entering kindergarten do not yet have the necessary social and emotional skills to be “ready” for school. In low-income families, as many as 30 percent of children may lack the necessary skills.
- Social and emotional development is important, both in its own right and because it facilitates cognitive development. Children with good social and emotional skills can get along with others, follow directions and pay attention. These are skills that will help them get the most out of classroom instruction.
- When children are young, the adults around them (parents and other adult caregivers, including preschool teachers) are the most important influences on their social and emotional development.
- High-quality preschool programs can create significant long-term social and emotional benefits. Much of the long-term economic payoff from public investments in high-quality preschool programs will come through decreased crime and delinquency.

Policy Recommendations:

- High-quality preschool education that is designed to enhance children's social and emotional development can yield students who are more likely to graduate from high school, continue with higher education and avoid anti-social behaviors. As policymakers design preschool programs, they should:
- Include enhanced social and emotional development as a key goal.
 - Design & implement standards specifying outcomes expected for social and emotional development.
 - Expand access to high-quality preschool programs so more children can benefit.
 - Ensure that all preschool programs are of high quality, since high-quality programs support social and emotional development.
 - Provide administrators and teachers with technical assistance and training to help them implement effective curricula and teaching practices supporting social and emotional development.

Social-Emotional Benefits Preschool

How Social-Emotional Skills Develop

Social-emotional skills develop in large part through children’s relationships with other people around them, including parents, caregivers and peers. Each play critical roles in the following ways:

Parents and Families

Parents and families play an enormous role in shaping a child’s social and emotional development. Early relationships with parents lay the foundation on which social competency and peer relationships are built. Parental support greatly increases the likelihood that children will develop early emotional competence, will be better prepared to enter school and less likely to display behavior problems at home and at school.

This is why many preschool programs include a focus on parental involvement and parenting education.

Caregivers and Teachers

Most children also spend many hours each week in the care of someone other than their parents. These caregivers play a similar role in promoting social and emotional development to that of parents when children are young. Just as parents who are warm and responsive are more likely to promote strong social and emotional skills in their children so too are early childhood educators and caregivers who provide this environment. The development of secure attachments between children and caregivers and teachers is important. That means staff turnover in preschool programs should be kept to a minimum.

Peer Group Children

Emotionally healthy children engage in positive play behaviors, develop mutual friendships and are more likely to find acceptance from their peers. Through their play, they learn how to work in teams and cooperate with others. As early as preschool, positive peer relationships can have a lasting impact on academic achievement and have been shown to contribute to more positive feelings about school and eagerness to engage in classroom activities. This in turn can lead to higher achievement. Conversely, early rejection by peers has been associated with persistent academic and social difficulties in elementary school. It is important for preschool teachers to encourage positive interactions and to intervene when children are having difficulties with peers.

Evidence that Preschool Influences Social and Emotional Development

There is convincing evidence that high-quality preschool positively affects social-emotional development. Many studies of immediate and short-term outcomes show preschool to have meaningful impacts on self-esteem, motivation and social behavior. Longer-term studies demonstrate long-lasting benefits such as improved classroom behavior and social adjustment and decreased future crime and delinquency. These programs deliver high-quality center-based education services. Some focus on 3- and 4-year-olds; others provide services from birth to 5. Some offer parent education or family support services.

Snapshot of Programs, Services and Benefits

Program	Services	Benefit
High/Scope Perry Preschool Project 1962 - present	High-quality preschool w/family intervention. 3- and 4-year-olds.	Program group had higher achievement test scores, better attitudes toward school, higher high school graduation rates. As adults, program group earned more, owned homes more often, had lower crime rates.
Syracuse University Family Development Research Program 1969 - 1975	Education, nutrition, health & safety, human service resources. Prenatal to 1st Grade.	Intervention group had far lower rates of juvenile delinquency as teenagers.
Houston Parent Child Development Center 1970	Home visits, family education, nursery school.	Program group children rated as more considerate, less hostile 5-8 years after services.
Consortium for Longitudinal Studies	Combined 11 studies of early childhood education programs begun in 1960s and 1970s.	Children who attended preschool more likely to express pride in their achievements and have better jobs.
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	Preschool and Kindergarten w/family support services and continued intervention in early elementary school.	CPC children demonstrated greater cognitive achievement, better social adjustment, less-frequent grade retention, and lower rates of crime as adolescents. Cost-benefit analysis: substantial ROI in form of reduced crime rates and school remedial services and increased earnings capacity by age 21.
Early Head Start	Comprehensive educational, health and social services. Birth to age 3.	EHS children had more positive interactions w/parents. Parents show more emotional support/less negativity. By age 3, children attentive to objects during play and reported by parents to be less aggressive.
Mauritius	Two-year preschool. Ages 3 to 5. Three components: educational activities, nutrition, and physical exercise. Adult-child ratio 1:5.5.	Preschool group showed lower scores on measures of mental health and antisocial behavior at age 17 and lower rates of criminal behavior at age 23.
The Abecedarian Project	Full-day educational child care for low-income African-American children from birth to age 5.	Higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance.

Several studies – the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, the Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project, and the Abecedarian Project – suggest that too much time spent in early childhood settings — particularly low-quality ones — may slightly increase children’s aggression levels. Yet, the bulk of the evidence is compellingly positive and derives from a broad range of investigation, beginning with demonstration programs implemented decades ago and continuing with present-day programs.

This fact sheet is based on the policy report “Promoting Children’s Social and Emotional Development Through High-Quality Preschool” by Judi Boyd, W. Steven Barnett, Deborah J. Leong, Elena Bodrova and Deanna Gomby. The report includes full references and is available at www.nieer.org in the NIEER publications policy report section. This was made possible by the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.