Preschool For All: The Gift that Counts

The most valuable gift we can give the nation’s children this holiday season can be found in the hard evidence just released from three nationally recognized institutions that cinch the case for increased public investment in high-quality preschool education.

The research findings from the National Institute for Early Education Research of Rutgers University, Georgetown University and the High/Scope Education Research Foundation point conclusively to the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality preschool for our children, their families, the communities in which they live and for the nation as a whole.

The Georgetown University study of Oklahoma’s preschool program found impressive learning gains for children across the socio-economic spectrum. Overall, this voluntary pre-K program produced a 52 percent gain in letter-word identification, a 27 percent gain in spelling, and a 21 percent gain in math skills at kindergarten entry.

Hispanic children made particularly impressive progress as a result of the public preschool program. With high school graduation rates below 60 percent among Latino children, this is a particularly important finding.

Long-awaited findings from the High/Scope Foundation’s Perry Preschool study—research that tracks pre-school-educated children into adulthood—showed that gains made in preschool continue throughout life. Children who attended the Perry Preschool program as 3- and 4-year-olds in the 1960s and are now 40 years old are more likely to have graduated from high school, hold a job, own their own homes and have a savings account. What’s more, they’re less likely to have committed crimes. A benefit-cost analysis based on these data calculates that for every dollar invested in high-quality preschool programs, there is a $17 return. (For more on this report, see page 7.)

These reports were followed by findings from NIEER’s 2004 State of Preschool Yearbook that measured progress—or lack of it—that states are making as they get their own preschool programs up and running. It found that a child’s access to a state preschool program depends not only on what state that child lives in, but where that child lives within the state. A “dirty dozen” states have no state preschool program at all, while a handful of other states are on a path to provide preschool for all 4-year-olds. Georgia and Oklahoma lead the pack on this front. The report also shows that while enrollment increased nationally for the 2002-2003 school year, spending per student dropped from the previous year.

The new studies show it’s time to turn this situation around. Given the global economy and the huge payback from high-quality pre-K, it’s time for policy leaders to develop a sustainable approach to providing high-quality preschool for all America’s 4-year-olds. Some are already on board. Leaders—from Florida to New Mexico have recently proposed publicly funded preschool for all in their states.

Florida Governor Jeb Bush brought the legislature back for an emergency session to meet the demand from voters who passed a constitutional amendment to guarantee pre-K to all the state’s 4-year-olds. Perhaps he could share what he has learned with his brother, the President, about the value of early education. Nothing would move state efforts to ensure all children have access to a good preschool education as rapidly as federal matching grants to help states pay for high-quality preschool programs.

That would surely be the best gift we could give our children this holiday season, one that not only lights up their eyes but also empowers them to grow and learn.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is one component of a larger early education initiative designed, funded and managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

W. Steven Barnett, Director
Carol Shipp, Deputy Director
Pat Ainsworth, Communications Director
Mary Meagher, Communications Assistant
Betty Holcomb, Editor
Sandy Ogilvie, Art Director

© 2004 National Institute for Early Education Research
Send comments, opinions, and news to editor@nieer.org.
Address Changes: Please include mailing panel on page 12 when requesting address changes.
State Pre-K Report: Disparities Abound Despite Progress, Many Still Left Behind
State Survey Finds Oklahoma Still Leads, Twelve Still Lack Any State Program

A new state-by-state survey reveals that Americans are embracing public preschool more than ever—creating programs for an additional 45,000 children even in the toughest of economic times. Yet that expansion is taking place in fits and starts, creating wide disparities for youngsters across the nation.

That’s the most important finding of the latest “State of Preschool” report released by the National Institute for Early Education Research, an annual effort to take the pulse of state-funded preschool across the country. Thirty-eight states funded some type of public preschool effort in 2002-2003, yet the quality varied widely from state to state and even from region to region. “The difference of even a few miles can make the difference between being guaranteed access to high-quality preschool and having no access at all,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER’s director.

Every 3- and 4-year-old in New Jersey’s major cities, for example, now has the right to attend full-day, state-funded prekindergarten programs, with college-trained teachers and a state-approved curriculum. Yet youngsters a few miles away in Pennsylvania may have no public preschool program at all.

Children living in rural areas generally had the least access to preschool, even in states such as Georgia and New York, which have ambitious programs underway. Indeed, Georgia’s pre-K program now has such a long waiting list, mostly made up of children in rural counties, that families and school districts are suing state officials to win more funding for the program. (See “New Georgia Lawsuit” story on page 5)

A handful of highly rural Rocky Mountain states, including Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Utah still have no public pre-K program at all. Also bringing up the rear are more populated states like Indiana, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Florida.

“Given all that we know about the value of high-quality preschool, it’s scandalous that such inequities persist,” says Barnett. “A quality program can lift children’s language and math skills, and also help them develop social skills that help lower the crime rate right into adulthood.”

About 740,000 children across America attended public preschool in 2002-2003, the school year surveyed.

That was an increase of about 45,000 children from the previous year, but the overall results revealed unsteady progress at best:
• Ten states accounted for 75 percent of the students,
• Five states accounted for three-fifths of all preschool funding,
• State spending varied widely, from less than $1,000 per student in Maryland to more than $8,700 in New Jersey,
• Standards also vary widely, so much so that some states may be investing in programs that fail to benefit the children enrolled, and
• Only 13 states require pre-K teachers to have a bachelor’s degree and training in pre-kindergarten education, even though research shows children learn more from such teachers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>
Edward Zigler: It’s Time for a New Approach to Public Pre-K, Starting from Birth

No scientist has had a greater impact on early education in America than Edward Zigler, Sterling Professor of Psychology and director of Yale University’s Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy. His scholarly work is widely known and respected. Yet, he’s probably best known as the father of the nation’s Head Start program, having served as its first Administrator and one of its most ardent and eloquent advocates. But Ed Zigler never stands still. He’s proved an inveterate pioneer and innovator in early education, sparking new ideas and turning them into concrete programs. Most recently, his “Schools of the 21st Century,” which make public schools the hub of education for children starting at birth, are breaking new ground, as they model a comprehensive approach to early care and development, one that embraces not just the whole child, but the whole family and the whole community. He’s currently at work on another new book, in which he advances this view of preschool, essentially redefining the very notion of preschool itself.

Q. When you talk about preschool, you are obviously thinking of something more than an educational program for 3- and 4-year-olds. Can you elaborate? A. First of all, I think we have to think of preschool more broadly—as anything that happens before kids get to school, from birth on up. By preschool, you have to pay attention to everything that happens pre—that is, before—school. You have to start at birth with home visiting, and continue right on from there. That’s the only way you’re going to have an impact. That’s what all the research shows.

Q. Isn’t that rather ambitious? A. Absolutely not. It’s already being done in the Schools of the 21st Century, over 1,300 of them. The public schools serve as a hub, but you offer services to families and children, starting at birth. These ideas have already shown to be do-able. They exist. And they are the kind of programs that really make an impact.

Q. ‘Preschool’ in your mind, includes parents? A. Absolutely. If you look at what really impacts children, what really influences their development, it’s both the quality of the preschool experience and the parental impact. So you have to shoot for two things, to make sure that everything you do is quality and that everything you do is true to a model that includes parents, addresses the whole child and is of appropriate intensity.

Q. So you start with home visits and then what? A. You start with the idea that children are learning from birth, and that school readiness doesn’t begin at 3 or 4. It starts at birth, with how much a parent talks to a child, what a parent is doing with a child. We know that home visits can help with that. So I propose that ‘preschool’ start with home visiting for the first three years, and then you have a good quality public preschool education for years 3 and 4. And what’s different about 3s and 4s for me is that you make sure the preschool day is as long as the work day for mothers and fathers.

Q. So ‘preschool is badly needed by both the children and their families. The evidence is fairly clear now that poor children aren’t the only ones who lack school readiness.”

Q. Won’t that be seen as child care instead of education? A. It shouldn’t be! That’s just not the case. Preschool is badly needed by both the children and their families. The evidence is fairly clear now that poor children aren’t the only ones who lack school readiness. Many middle-class children also aren’t ready for school. That means all children can benefit from high-quality early education, and we need to make the day as long as the work day for mothers and fathers. We’re starting at birth. This isn’t pie in the sky. It’s realistic. And the goal of all this is clear. It’s Goal One of the Educate America Act, that every child will arrive in school ready to learn.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11 >>
Georgia Prekindergarten Program has attained near-legendary status, as not only one of the first, but also one of the most ambitious. Employing lottery funds, the state promised a place in a pre-K classroom to every 4-year-old who wanted to attend. With about 60,000 children now enrolled, the state has won accolades from advocates, educators and policymakers.

But a new lawsuit charges the program still fails to meet its promise, especially in rural areas across the state. “We are lucky to have a preschool program—we know that—since so many states still don’t,” says Joe Martin, executive director of the Consortium for Adequate School Funding in Georgia. “But we have a long waiting list for it, and that’s a serious problem.” The shortfall is such a serious problem that Martin’s consortium included it in the lawsuit challenging the state’s overall funding for education, arguing that Georgia still fails to provide an “adequate” education for its children, as required by the state constitution.

Dave Long, civil rights activist and consulting attorney on the case, Consortium For Adequate School Funding v. State of Georgia, characterizes the lawsuit as one which insists that public education starts with preschool. “This is a pre-K to 12 funding case, because we believe preschool is essential for many at-risk kids,” he says. “The evidence shows that they start behind, and without the opportunity for preschool education, they never catch up.”

Specifically, the lawsuit argues that many students enter kindergarten “at a severe disadvantage” and that “a significant cause of their unreadiness for school is lack of early childhood education.” Thousands of children—as many as 30,000 by some counts—have applied for pre-K slots, but the districts currently receive insufficient funds from property taxes or state aid to enroll those children. The lawsuit seeks significant new funding for public education, including preschool, to help lift children’s achievement across the state.

Students in the 51 mostly rural, low-income districts fare poorly. The overall high school graduation rate in Ben Hill County, for example, is only 59 percent, and rates among African-Americans and Hispanics are even worse. Only 54 percent of African-American children and 42 percent of Hispanics graduate.

“Without adequate funding, you can predict the schools won’t have the resources and children will continue to fail,” says Long. “The evidence bears this out. If we don’t provide at least an adequate education, we will pay a horrendous price later in increased crime and welfare costs.”

For more information on the case, visit the consortium’s website at www.casfg.org.
Kansas Prof Woos Lawmakers and Wows Pre-K Advocates

Kansan Dale Walker had never addressed state lawmakers before, but address them she did. After her persuasive debut, it’s likely she’ll be back for encores as she campaigns for statewide support of early education, including high-quality public preschool.

Walker appeared at a packed hearing in the Kansas state Legislature, where advocates urged lawmakers to invest more in early learning, and by all accounts, she proved a star witness. “She wowed them,” reported Ellen Boylan, head of Starting at 3!, a national project aimed at establishing a legal right to preschool.

“I just spoke from what I know, and what I know is that quality education for young children is absolutely crucial. The research on language is absolutely convincing,” says Walker, associate research professor at the Juniper Gardens Children’s Project, a center affiliated with the University of Kansas. “We now know that a quality program can promote language and literacy.”

I think they were impressed to hear about the research. Most of them were still unfamiliar with the evidence,” she says. “They didn’t realize how much of children’s brain development takes place before they ever get to school.”

Walker championed high-quality preschool as part of an early education program. “I believe in universal pre-school as part of an overall effort to improve early education,” she says. “I cautioned lawmakers about making sure that whatever we do be of high quality, and that it not jeopardize existing Head Start programs. I also urged caution about the way we design preschool, to make sure we don’t just push kindergarten standards down to early education.”

Instead, she argued, pre-K curriculum must address the hands-on, concrete ways that young children learn. “There are lots of ways to put literacy and numeracy into the curriculum, to do it explicitly, as part of play activity. It can be rhyming, it can be counting. It shouldn’t be drilling,” she says.

But more than anything, she told the lawmakers, it needs to be done for Kansas children. “I presented the studies and arguments that showed what a good investment early education is,” she says. “I think they really heard that. I also think they were shocked at how low the quality in many local programs is, and how much support there is to do it better.” For a copy of Walker’s remarks to the legislature, email her at walkerd@ku.edu.

White Paper: Time to Get Teachers Ready!

As states move forward, making pre-K an integral part of public education, they must address questions about how to prepare teachers for the job. Or even how to get enough of them to do the job.

The issues are urgent, according to a new white paper from the folks who train the nation’s teachers. In it, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education offers concrete and specific advice to policymakers and others who want to make sure the best-qualified teachers arrive on the job. Among them:

- Prepare all teachers to work with diverse groups of children,
- Align teacher preparation with new state early learning standards,
- Make early education credentials portable across institutions and even states,
- Involve communities and families in teacher preparation, so programs reflect local needs, culture and concerns.

ACROSS THE NATION

Prekindergarten Effects Last Long Into Adulthood

Scientists following the graduates of a high-quality early education program in Michigan report that the positive effects of the program last well into middle-age. Not only that, but the study also documented a return of more than $17 for every tax dollar invested in such a program.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study found that low-income children who attended the program at ages 3 and 4 were nearly three times more likely to graduate high school, less likely to suffer emotional problems and earned about $5,000 more a year as adults than their children who lacked such early education.

“These findings can be expected of any Head Start, state preschool, or child care program similar to the program High/Scope coordinated and then studied,” said Larry Schweinhart, president of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. “Our teachers were well-qualified, they served no more than eight children from low-income families at a time, they visited these families as part of the program to discuss their child’s development, and the classes operated daily for children 3 and 4 years old.”

The study, begun in 1962, identified 123 young African-American children living in poverty and assessed to be at high risk of school failure in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The researchers randomly assigned 58 of the children to a high-quality early care and education setting; the rest received no preschool program. The study can be downloaded at www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm.

Could Prekindergarten Lower Risk of Lymphoma?

An intriguing new study from researchers at the Harvard School of Health shows that attending a preschool or child care program can lower the risk of one form of cancer, Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. The researchers set out to explore factors in children’s early environments that might lead to contracting the disease after the age of 15. To their surprise, they found a “novel association” between attendance at nursery school or day care and Hodgkin’s. The researchers have no idea why, but speculated that the early experience with other children might have boosted the children’s immune system, since early exposure to infections is known to lift the ability of cells to fend off disease. The study, “Childhood Social Environment and Hodgkin’s Lymphoma: New Findings from a Population-Based Case-Control Study,” appeared in Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev 2004; 13 (8), August, 2004.

Book Nooks: A Cozy New Way to Boost Early Literacy

No one doubts the value of early literacy, and experts agree that making kids comfortable with books is key. But few have taken the case as literally as a Seattle-based literacy effort, Page Ahead, which invited local architectural firms to design spaces that would promote reading. The architects who joined the project, called “Book Nooks,” produced cozy and colorful bookcases and reading areas that can be used in libraries, classrooms or even at home. A tiny purple castle, a bookcase sprouting grass and a small hide-out with a treasure chest won honors. Page Ahead auctioned off the winners, which can be seen at http://www.pageahead.org/booknooks.htm, and used the proceeds to buy books for local children from low-income families.
Some Bright Spots
Four states made significant progress: Arkansas was the only state to notch all 10 quality benchmarks and Illinois, New Jersey and Oklahoma impressed on quality, funding and enrollment.

“The Arkansas Better Chance program offers some important lessons for other states,” says Barnett. “They not only have the best overall standards for the classroom, but they also pay preschool teachers on the same scale as other public school teachers. Research shows that’s key to ensuring quality.”

Indeed, several recent national studies link teacher compensation with high-quality experiences for preschoolers. “It just makes sense,” says Barnett. “If you pay teachers adequately, they are more willing to get college credentials, get the skills that make them effective in the classroom and stay on the job.”

Illinois made the biggest increase in enrollment in public preschool, adding about 8,000 more children to its program. The state also made strides toward the best quality, making the grade on nine out of ten benchmarks used to measure quality. Surprisingly, Illinois flunked on providing meals and snacks to children in all-day pre-K.

Oklahoma outdoes nearly every other state in the sheer reach of its effort. Better than nine out of ten school districts now offer pre-K classes, which serve 59 percent of all 4-year-olds in the state—a higher percentage than any other state. “We think quality is the big selling point,” says Ramona Paul, director of the state’s early education programs. “Once parents see a quality effort, they clamor for it and districts add it. Parents are our best advocates.”

New Jersey added $100 million to its “Abbott” preschool program, which is open to all 3- and 4-year-olds in its 30 poorest school districts. “As the state achieves its goals in the 30 Abbott Districts, the challenge will be to expand the effort to other districts,” says Barnett.

Several other states deserve accolades, the researchers concluded. (See “States to Watch”) Maryland plans to reach all 4-year-olds at risk of school failure by the 2007 school year. New York State now has 80 percent of its teachers certified for its preschool program, which serves nearly a third of all its 4-year-olds.

North Carolina’s More At Four program was slated to expand its enrollment from 1,240 students in 2001 to ten times that number in 2004. The state investment in More At Four simultaneously grew from $6.5 to $50 million in the same period. Unfortunately, the new investment in pre-K came at the expense of its much-admired early education program, Smart Start, which serves children from...

What’s The Price Tag?
Suppose you’re already a convert to the value of preschool. You know your state can expect at least a 12 percent return on every dollar spent, that children are likely to do better in school, get along better with their peers and go on to college.

What will it cost?
NIEER’s researchers estimate it would cost an additional $15 billion to make sure that 80 percent of all 4-year-olds can attend half-day programs. If states put up just over half that amount, it would cost just a little more than a penny for each current dollar in state spending.
birth to kindergarten.

“As states invest pre-K, policymakers should not reflexively cut other investments in young children but, instead, examine the full range of options for cutting less productive state spending—including corporate welfare,” says Barnett.

Eye On The Future
That is the real message of the latest survey. By now, the research makes a clear and convincing case for both the economic and educational benefits of high-quality preschool. So it’s no wonder that the researchers recommend a rapid expansion of public preschool across the country, an investment that more than pays for itself.

“If states simply paid the same share of preschool that they do for the rest of the public school years, the full cost would come to just a bit more than one penny per dollar of current state spending,” says Barnett. “Clearly, states can afford high-quality preschool programs.”

Among the other recommendations in the report:
• The Federal government should offer matching grants to states that invest in pre-K to spur growth in the programs. This proposal is endorsed by leading business groups, including the Committee for Economic Development, as well as crime prevention groups, such as Fight Crime, Invest In Kids.
• States should adopt better, more consistent standards for preschool programs, based on the consensus among researchers and educators. Improving teacher qualifications, for example, can lead to big gains for pre-K kids.
• Create better data on the education of young children. Most states still don’t have an accurate count of how many children are served in early education programs, or even exactly what services they provide, from education to health care. Such data are critical to planning new preschool efforts.

“It’s astonishing that we still don’t have even the most basic information about where 3- and 4-year-olds spend their days, and what services they receive. It’s essential that we do a better job of collecting basic information, both for the kids and the taxpayers,” says Dr. Jason Hustedt, an author of the report.

A copy of NIEER’s Yearbook may be obtained at info@nieer.org. To read it on the web, visit nieer.org.
Science Key to Winning Over Illinois, Push for Preschool for All Bounds Ahead

Governor Keeps Pledge of $90 Million to Enroll 25,000 More 4-Year-Olds

When Jerry Stermer, head of one of Illinois’ oldest and most successful children’s advocacy groups, is asked whether research helped win over the hearts and minds of lawmakers in his state, he is quick and confident in his reply.

“Extremely important,” he says. “Very important.”

Without scientific studies, he argues, it would have been much harder to win $90 million in new funding for public preschool, perhaps impossible. “The research enabled policymakers like Governor Blagojevich to strongly champion early education, even in the face of a tough budget. The research also allowed many members of the state Legislature, especially in the General Assembly, to feel that they are on totally solid ground as they supported the Governor’s proposals.”

Stermer knows whereof he speaks. As a champion of early education for several decades, he saw the difference the early studies on brain development made in his advocacy efforts starting in the 1980s. “The studies back then of brain development made a huge difference. They were dramatic and gave new authority to the arguments that we’d always made about the importance of early development.”

—Jerry Stermer
Early Learning Illinois

Governor Blagojevich cited the results of the now renowned Chicago Longitudinal Study when he announced his plan to increase funding for public preschool and to create a new state early childhood council. “The budget was really tough, and those studies helped him to stay resolute in his promise to expand preschool,” says Stermer.

It also helped, of course, that Stermer’s group had recently joined forces with other early childhood advocates—the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Illinois Action For Children—to press for preschool for all the state’s children. The new coalition, Early Learning Illinois, has joined with many other partners to show broad support for early education. “Having the science on your side is always a good thing, and having such compelling science certainly helped people understand the importance of early learning,” says Maria Whelan, president of Illinois Action for Children. “But it’s not the only thing of course. Illinois has a long history of organizing around the importance of early childhood issues, and that matters a great deal.”

The advocates helped convince elected officials to take the lead by trumpeting the studies that show the power of high-quality early education and polls showing public support for such programs. “Elected officials always care about public opinions, so carefully-conducted polls help move the issue as well,” says Stermer.

So it was that this year Governor Blagojevich not only kept his promise to expand funding for pre-K by $29.4 million so that 8,330 more children can enroll, despite a difficult state budget. He also established a brand-new Early Learning Council, a private-public partnership with the mission to expand and improve early childhood services.

Illinois advocates could have rested on their laurels. Instead, they keep the spotlight on the need to do even more for the state’s children, bringing the issues to wider audiences. This fall, the group brought the latest research to the attention of the state’s business and policy leaders in a special event, working closely with an influential Chicago business group, Metropolis 2020. Metropolis 2020 has become an active voice in Early Learning Illinois. To learn more about their efforts in Illinois, visit the group’s website at www.voices4kids.org.
Schools of the Future?

Back in 1988, Ed Zigler first proposed that local communities start to develop the “School of the 21st Century,” one that incorporated early care and education, as well as family support services. One of his colleagues, Dr. Matia Finn-Stevenson immediately set about to put the idea into action, and now there are 1,300 such schools around the country. At its heart, Zigler’s vision recognizes the way work and family life have changed, and aspires to support the healthy growth and development of youngsters from birth. To learn more about the schools and the upcoming national conference on this bold new vision, visit www.yale.edu/bushcenter/21C/html.

Edward Zigler: Preschool Starting from Birth

Q. But isn’t there a difference between child care and education?
A. For three decades, we have been routinely placing children in child care so poor as to compromise their growth and development. We have been losing a wonderful opportunity to intervene, and support the growth and development of all children. We can do that with full-day programs. Children are learning all the time. We need to support that learning in a way that makes sense for them and their families. And we need to include a health component in every program.

Q. Now you are talking pie-in-the-sky!
A. Absolutely not. We have already made progress in making health care available to more children, through Medicaid and CHIP. We already broker those services for families and that’s a good thing. We just need to put it all together and expand it. That’s already happening, as I say, in the Schools of the 21st Century. Then the next thing we do is we work very hard at the transition between the end of preschool and kindergarten. Many people don’t understand how anxiety-provoking this transition is for children and their families. We need to do more to make that transition less anxious. We need to make sure that the kindergarten teachers actually know the children when they arrive. We can do that.

Q. You sound optimistic, even in the face of rising poverty and scarce public funding.
A. I am. It’s not very complicated. We have a lot of the pieces in place already. Now we just have to take preschool literally. We have to see it as a whole, starting at birth right through school entry. And the last thing I want to say is that we can afford it. I can tell you from the brand-new economic analyses that will be included in my book, we can afford it. We have to approach this like a businessman, like an investment. When you look at it as an investment in human capital, you see that it may not cost anything. We’ll get back at least $7 for every $1 spent.
Randomized Trial Boosts Health

Getting the Lead Out: Parent Education Helps

Most children in the U.S. are safer than ever from exposure to lead, thanks to national campaigns to ban the deadly stuff in gasoline and paint. Yet millions of low-income kids still inhale the toxic metal, which can lower IQ, delay language and reading, cause attention deficit disorders and generally compromise a child’s academic success. “You don’t have to eat a paint chip to get lead poisoning. It’s still all around us in water, dust, soil and even in some home remedies,” says Catherine Jordan, assistant professor of pediatrics and director of the Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota.

The most typical exposure for young children occurs as they play on the floor, outside in the dirt or from the water they drink. “The exposure is gradual over time, but it does show up in elevated blood levels,” she says. And it is most acute in low-income neighborhoods, where housing may be dilapidated, not only causing paint to crumble into the dirt and household dust, but also to leach into family drinking water from lead pipes.

Yet it is also possible to lower children’s exposure through simple house-cleaning and hygiene techniques, once parents know what to do. That’s what Jordan and her colleagues learned from a randomized trial that created a community of peer educators to reach out to mothers—a technique that could be adopted by early education programs. “Education alone does not entirely eliminate the risk, but it can make a measurable difference,” says Jordan.

The researchers recruited 594 mothers with children up to 3 years old, and randomly assigned them to two groups, one receiving intensive peer education about how to prevent exposure to lead and another group receiving less intensive counseling. Lead levels in the children’s blood were tested every four months. The children in families with intensive, ongoing peer counseling on strategies to reduce exposure to lead experienced measurably lower lead levels in their blood. Overall, the intervention reduced lead levels by 34 percent.

“Education alone does not entirely eliminate the risk, but it can make a measurable difference.”

—Catherine Jordan
Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota

Along the way, the scientists also learned some lessons about the most effective ways to reach low-income parents, and which families hold the most promise of putting the education into action. Most importantly, they learned that moms were most apt to listen to and follow tips from their peers, other mothers in the community, “I probably wouldn’t have been in the program if somebody told me a social worker was coming out,” one told the researchers after the study was over. Another told them, “If you send social workers, you’ll turn a lot of people away.”

Why? Several reasons emerged. Some feared they might lose their housing if they participated in the study, since many had heard stories about other families who had to move out of their apartments once lead was detected. Others said they found professional social workers, academics and case workers too “judgmental.” The researchers’ decision to use peers as educators helped overcome such resistance—so much so that many participants began to spread the word about what they were learning to others in the community.

The research results can be obtained by emailing Jordan at jorda003@umn.edu.