

EARLY CHILDHOOD SUCCESS: INVESTMENTS THAT LAST A LIFETIME

OVERVIEW

Success in the early years of life - generally prenatal to kindergarten - is crucial in developing positive physical and emotional health. Both quality childcare and early childhood education promote positive development during childhood. Children with strong foundations in the early years are more likely to have successful academic careers; launch and maintain successful employment; maintain financial stability as adults; and raise healthy, stable children themselves.



However, access to high-quality early childhood education is not mandated by the state of Minnesota, and only about 50% of children have any kind of pre-K education in Olmsted County. This means that many children in Olmsted County start kindergarten behind their classmates in literacy, language, math, and social-emotional skills. Children from low-income households benefit the most from high quality early childcare (Cohen & Lurie-Hurvitz, 2009). Indeed, preschool has the potential to change the developmental track of children from low-income households (Schweinhart et al., 2005), narrowing or even closing the achievement gap between them and their middle-income peers.

High-quality childcare for young children is also in high demand in Olmsted County and can be especially difficult to access for low-income families. The average annual cost for licensed center-based childcare for a preschool-aged child was \$13,296 in 2021 (Kids Count, 2022). Yet, safe, enriching childcare benefits both children and families, as well as our economy. Parents who have access to safe, consistent childcare can participate more fully in the workforce. Access to childcare can increase both participation in the workforce and educational attainment for parents with low-incomes (Sabol and Chase-Lansdale, 2016.) For these reason, United Way of Olmsted County funding will be focused on programs that prioritize service to low-income children – those from families living at or below 185% of the federal poverty line.

WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

Public preschool was initially designed to prepare children from low-income households for kindergarten by providing an educational setting for them to develop foundational academic skills that their peers were learning in the home environment or private preschool. Since the 1960s, multiple studies have demonstrated high rates of return on investment and improved outcomes for students who attend preschool.

The Abecedarian Project was a randomized control trial in which half of the children in a sample were provided high-quality educational childcare and children in the control group were not. All participants were from low-income households and remained in the program from birth to age five. Follow-up assessments were completed at ages 6, 8, 12, 15, 21, and 30. Children who received educational childcare reported numerous improved outcomes when compared to the children who did not receive the intervention. As children they had higher reading, math, and IQ scores; completed more schooling; were less likely to be teen parents; and were less likely to participate in criminal activity. As adults they held more skilled jobs, were less likely to be unemployed, less likely to use public assistance, and tended to delay parenting (Campbell, 2011).

Similar results were reported by the Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al., 2005), with estimated returns on investment between the programs ranging from \$4 to \$9 for every dollar invested. Related studies have suggested that returns are highest when investments are made early in childhood (J. Heckman & Kautz, 2013), and the impact of quality care and education is largest for at-risk and low-income children (Cohen & Lurie-Hurvitz, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

Preschools originally involved a great deal of play but are now starting to focus more on achieving educational milestones. Many parents now want longer school days and more education for their children. This may be due, in part, to increased public awareness of the value of early childhood education, but another factor is the increased academic rigor of kindergarten. Between 1998 and 2010 the percentage of teachers expecting children to know how to read by the end of kindergarten had risen from 30% to 80% (Bassock, Latham, & Anna Rorem, 2016). Policies like the No Child Left Behind Act also centered academic rigor and frequent paper-and-pencil assessments, explicitly linking funding to academic outcomes. However, this trend has been reversed in recent years as educators now recognize the numerous developmental and academic value of both free and guided play. Simply put, children, especially very young children, learn best through active learning that includes play, experimentation, and age-appropriate challenges. Methods such as guided play with instructional scaffolding can help children effectively build academic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills better than through teacher-directed instruction and pen-and-paper tests.

Due to the success of preschool and the expansion of kindergarten, traditional preschool for 4-year-olds has become commonplace, with nearly 70% of US children enrolled (NCES, 2017). While preschool has traditionally been available to four-year-olds in a half-day setting, enrollment has begun to include younger children and longer days. Nationally, in 2015, approximately 40% of three-year-olds were enrolled in preschool programs. Additionally, among three- to five-year-olds who were enrolled in preschool programs in 2015, 51% attended full-day programs (NCES, 2017). Here in Olmsted County, participation in early childhood education is similar to national averages; approximately 48% of kindergartners in 2021 had participated in some form of early childhood education (ECLDS, 2020).

WHY CHILDCARE?

A compelling driver of UWOC's investment in childcare is due to local context: in 2020, 27% of children under 18 were ages 0-4 (Kids Count, 2020). Although the challenge of finding affordable childcare affects most families with children ages 0-4 years old, single parents, those who work non-traditional shifts, immigrants and families from low- and middle-income

households experience disproportionate burdens (Werner, 2016). In response to the 2019 Olmsted County Community Health Needs Assessment survey, nearly one third of residents rated the availability of affordable childcare in Olmsted County as “poor”. The average annual cost for licensed center-based childcare was \$13,296 in 2021 (Kids Count, 2022).

It is not only an affordability challenge that compels UWOC to invest in early childcare. Childcare plays a key role in many families: keeping a child safe and supervised while the adults in their family are at work. As more mothers enter the workforce, fewer grandparents live with their adult children, and more children come from single-parent homes, demand for childcare has grown dramatically since mid-century. Children under the age of 5 are typically not yet able to attend preschool due to their age, access to quality childcare is important due to the long-lasting effects of early environmental influences and their significance for emotional security, cognitive development, and learning skills.

In many respects, childcare provides benefits similar to those of preschool by promoting healthy development. First and foremost, and somewhat counterintuitively, access to childcare promotes and protects the mother-infant relationship. While mothers of infants who spend more than 30 hours a week in childcare spend 32% less time with their infants, they are not less sensitive in interactions with their infants (Booth, Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, & Owen, 2002). For non-Caucasian women specifically, more hours of childcare have been associated with more sensitive mother-child interactions. Across the board, higher-quality childcare experiences have been consistently associated with somewhat more sensitive and engaged mother-child interactions (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). In at least two of the four broad developmental categories – cognition and communication/language – childcare has been shown to have a strong, positive impact that extends through middle childhood and adolescence (Belsky et al., 2007; Vandell et al., n.d.).

WHAT CONSTITUTES QUALITY?

FOUNDATIONAL QUALITY

Enrollment in early childhood education or access to childcare in and of itself does not guarantee early success – quality matters greatly. Currently, a bevy of federal and state regulations work to ensure adherence to basic quality standards related to staff qualifications; child-to-adult ratios; naps and rest; behavior management; furnishings, equipment, materials, and supplies; sick care; informing parents; field trips; emergency procedures; and the provision of food, water, and transportation. Although these regulations establish essential baselines expected for early childhood education and childcare centers, they do not alone determine quality.

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Research shows that children learn best through play (Mead 2018) and small group interactions (Wasik 2008). Children at this age also struggle with frequent transitions (Martinelli, 2018) and need repetition to learn new skills (Horst 2013). Children are also developing skills related to executive function, such as attention, impulse-control, and memory (Duncan et al. 2007). Such skills develop through free and guided play.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Multiple studies have shown that social emotional skills are significantly associated with children's academic success and have been demonstrated to be at least as significant as IQ (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). In fact, re-analysis of the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Program results suggests that the social emotional skills gained through preschool attendance may in fact account for the long-term benefits related to academics, employment, and criminal behavior – possibly more so than academic skills (J. Heckman & Kautz, 2013). Although current research has not been able to clearly determine which portion of academic success is attributable to academic skills acquisition and which portion is attributable to social emotional skills, there has been extensive research on the ways in which children learn both cognitive and social skills.

Social emotional and cognitive skills are tightly correlated to income levels. Children growing up in poverty are at particularly high risk for delayed language skills, possibly due to reduced resources (such as books) and language stimulation (such as babbling and narration) in the home (Ryan et al. 2006). Given that much of the learning that occurs in preschool is due to peer effects, children from lower-income households may see the most gains in school readiness when they attend a classroom filled with peers from various socioeconomic backgrounds rather than a classroom that is uniformly low-income (Schechter & Bye, 2007), although this finding is not as strong as many others in early education.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT

When surveyed, 55% of parents of public K-12 school students said having a mix of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds is extremely or very important. However, in a 2001-03 sample of nearly 3,000 children in eleven state pre-K programs it was found that only 23% of preschoolers attended a classroom that could be considered diverse – between 30-70% nonwhite. Most students attended a classroom that was either mostly white (30%) or mostly nonwhite (49%). In classrooms where the students were mostly nonwhite, over 75% of the students were low-income. Only 17% of students attended a preschool classroom that was both ethnically diverse and medium or high-income (Reid, 2015). In 2021, Kindergarteners in Olmsted County were 9% Asian, 18% Black/African American, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 53% White, and 9% Two or more races. (MDE, 2022)

A survey of Minnesota childcare providers in 2011 found that 94% of family childcare providers, 88% of center-based childcare providers, and 95% of preschool teachers were white statewide. Center-based teachers in the Metro were significantly more diverse, indicating that well over 88% of center-based childcare providers in greater Minnesota were white. This survey indicated little change in the racial and ethnic composition of childcare providers since 2000 (Valorose & Chase, 2012).

Culturally responsive classroom management is an approach to running a classroom which includes maintaining high expectations, promoting cultural competence, and promoting critical consciousness (Dickson, Chun, & Fernandez, 2015; G Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). It is a pedagogical approach that calls for the instructor or childcare provider to recognize their biases and values and reflect on how these influence their expectations for behavior and their interactions with students (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2008). While the approach is beneficial to all students (not just students of color or low-income students), it is an especially valuable approach in cases where

the instructor is white and most students come from other ethnic and racial backgrounds, as is the case in many Minnesota childcare and preschool classrooms that serve students from low-income households.

For very young children, culturally responsive care may involve working with parents to learn about care practices and rituals experienced by the child and mirroring those methods in the care setting. Care that connects with infants' and toddlers' home experiences helps them develop a sense of who they are and value their home cultures (Virmani & Mangione, 2013). Culturally responsive care has also been shown to support healthy infant and toddler development and language development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Older students who are exposed to culturally relevant teaching practices perform better academically (Byrd, 2016), and those exposed to culturally relevant course content have shown improved attendance, GPA, and credit attainment (Dee & Penner, 2016). The earlier a child is immersed in a culturally responsive environment; the earlier such gains can be seen.

CONCLUSIONS

Communities across the country are facing a crisis in availability and affordability in early childhood education and childcare. Here in Olmsted County, the best information we have available indicates that only about 50% of children in our county attend an early childhood education (pre-k) program before starting kindergarten. High-quality childcare is also too expensive for many working families to be able to afford. These challenges affect children, families, the workforce, the economy, and our communities. Solving them will require long-term investments and commitment from multiple sectors. As part of that commitment, immediate investments are needed in local early education and childcare in Olmsted County.

Resources

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