

Introduction

Young children's experiences in the first five years of life can have a dramatic, long-term effect on their life-long functioning. These experiences not only affect children's readiness for school, but can also influence the quality of their relationships with others and their ability to grow up to be effective citizens (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). Thus, the early childhood years have implications not only for the children and their families, but also are of central concern to the social and economic health of the country.

A GROWING INTEREST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

During the past few decades, a number of forces have created greater interest in the needs of young children and their families. First, developmental scientists have made major advances in understanding the developing child as well as what factors influence the child's development. These findings not only provide dramatic new information on the child's early brain and its growth, but, more important, they also have demonstrated that the quality of the child's relationships and the degree of cognitive stimulation in the early years have a profound impact on the child's later cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Sensitive, responsive care and quality education can establish an important foundation on which later academic achievement and success develop. The ability of stimulating early social and cognitive contexts to benefit subsequent developmental outcomes suggests that they pose tremendous opportunities to influence children's development during the first few years of life.

A second factor influences public interest in and concern for early care and education: Family life has changed dramatically over the past three decades. These changes include dramatic shifts in (1) the number of two-wage-earner families—an almost 100% increase in the number of mothers of young children who are employed; (2) a continuing rise in the number of children living in single-parent homes; (3) the persistence of

xx • Evidence-Based Practices and Programs for Early Childhood

poverty for many young children and the growing gap between the poor and the wealthy; (4) significant disparities in developmental outcomes for advantaged versus disadvantaged children as well as continuing ethnic and racial inequities in access to quality health and educational services; and (5) further devolution of funding and responsibilities from federal to state and local governments to develop policies, programs, and services for young children and their families. These changes have come at the same time that employability has been more strongly linked to education, and citizens and policymakers have shown greater attention to improving the quality of our nation's educational systems. As a result, many families are struggling with the tension of balancing work and family responsibilities. A consequence of these changes is that someone other than parents cares for children during much of the day. As a result, early care and education enrollments of children ages three to eight have grown dramatically.

Quality early care and education holds the promise of helping children start school "ready to learn," greatly improving their chances of enjoying success in the classroom and later in life. Conversely, entering school academically or socially behind places many children at risk of staying behind, doing poorly, eventually dropping out, earning less money, and needing more public support during their adult lives.

How can we invest in our children's early development to ensure subsequent academic, social, economic, and emotional success? This question has attracted widespread attention from early childhood professionals, program administrators, public school personnel, early childhood advocates, professionals in early childhood system development and coordination, the business community, and policymakers.

HOW THIS BOOK CAN HELP

This book provides descriptions of programs and practices in early childhood that show evidence of some success in answering this question. It is written in non-technical language that summarizes results and program details, and thus is designed for administrators, staff developers, teacher educators, and other educational professionals, as well as university-level educational faculty. The primary goal of this book is to provide an informative and user-friendly overview of evidence-based programs, practices, and policies with descriptions of exemplar programs and explanations of effective characteristics. As such, this book identifies programs that have demonstrated records of effectiveness, identifies characteristics of programs and services that have positively affected children's social and cognitive outcomes, reviews practices of related services (e.g., family

services, transition practices, non-school-hour programs) that enhance and prolong the benefits of early care and education, and provides estimated costs of implementation. In addition, this book reviews what is needed to prepare professional personnel for the increased size and better skilled workforce that will be needed to fulfill the promise of early childhood care and education. Finally, it provides recommendations for programs, services, and policies that can facilitate the implementation of effective early services.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To accomplish this goal, this book examines the full range of evidence-based school readiness strategies for early childhood care and education. The editors and authors used the concepts of risk and protective factors in understanding how the child's experiences may influence his or her cognitive and social development in the early years. Risk- and protective-factor models provide a broad framework for understanding how to target services that are likely to reduce academic and social problems in childhood. Many of the effective programs and practices reviewed in this book are intended to reduce risk and promote protective factors to improve the child's school and interpersonal success.

Risk Factors and Their Operation

A number of factors have been identified that are associated with increased risk for school failure and social-emotional problems. In the period of ages three to eight, major risk factors are

1. *Family circumstances*: low income and low social class, mental illness in the family, maternal depression, child abuse, stressful life events, family disorganization, and family conflict;
2. *Skill development delays*: low intelligence, attention difficulties, emotional dysregulation;
3. *Ecological risks*: neighborhood disorganization, extreme poverty, racial injustice, and unemployment.

Research supports a number of principles about the operation of risk factors. First, development is complex, and it is unlikely that there is a single cause or risk factor for later difficulties. Second, there are multiple pathways to later difficulties; different combinations of risk factors may

xxii • Evidence-Based Practices and Programs for Early Childhood

lead to the same outcome. Third, risk factors occur not only at the level of individual children and families, but also at the neighborhood, school, and community levels. However, not all children who experience such risks develop later problems; some are resilient, and it is not clear what promotes this resiliency. Finally, culture influences many aspects of child development and is reflected in child rearing beliefs and practices; this is an area that is understudied and less well understood (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Most of the risk factors related to school readiness also predict later academic and social problems, such as delinquency and school drop-out. Efforts in early childhood to reduce the effects of risk should focus on reduction of multiple, interacting risk factors that may have direct effects on multiple outcomes (both academic and social).

Protective Factors and Their Operation

Protective factors reduce the likelihood of troublesome outcomes. Protective factors include

1. *Characteristics of the individual*, such as temperamental characteristics, cognitive skills, and social skills;
2. *Quality of the child's interactions with others*, including secure attachment to parents and supportive relationships with other adults;
3. *Characteristics of communities*, including quality early education and care, quality schools, and comprehensive supports for families in need.

Successful programs are often targeted at children with multiple risk factors and attempt to promote the development of protective factors.

LEVELS OF EVIDENCE REGARDING PROGRAMS AND BEST PRACTICES

This book covers a wide scope of programs, practices, and policies for children ages three to eight. It includes programs and practices for all children, as well as for those in need of more intensive intervention because of significant risk factors or specific disabilities. It covers programs that involve home visiting, comprehensive family services, parent education, family and center-based early care and education, follow-on

programs for children ages six to eight, non-school-hour (afterschool) programs, and the transition to kindergarten.

There is great variability in the quality and extent of research evidence supporting the effectiveness of the wide variety and types of programs and practices that are reviewed in this volume. Programs having better evidence are given greater attention. However, it should be remembered that some topics in early childhood cannot easily be studied with standard experimental research designs and thus rely on less rigorous forms of analysis. The literature reviews rely on the highest levels of evidence available, and there is considerable variability in the levels of evidence from topic to topic. The literature presented in these chapters is illustrative, not exhaustive; it summarizes the most important programs, practices, and policies given the current state of the research.

REFERENCES

- Bowman, B. T., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (Eds.). (2001). *Eager to learn: Educating our preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.