1 Early Childhood Education

An Expanding Enterprise!

Evan's big brother is in the third grade at Darwin Elementary. Evan goes to Darwin too. He is four years old and is enrolled in the district's state-funded prekindergarten program.

It used to be that most young children began their association with the public schools when they entered kindergarten. Today, however, we are seeing large numbers of prekindergarten-aged children coming through the schoolhouse doors. Many of them are involved in early childhood programs, such as Head Start or childcare services that are housed in or work in partnership with local schools. Increasingly, schools are also administering their own preschool classes.

During the 2006–07 school year, thirty-eight states funded preprimary education programs, investing $3.7 billion in the enterprise (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2008). This nationwide infusion of state dollars into early childhood education has prompted more than twenty thousand public schools to offer voluntary preprimary programs, including special education prekindergarten, general prekindergarten, and Head Start. It has also expanded school collaborations with other early childhood partners. As of 2007, approximately 35 percent of the public schools in the United States offered state-funded preschool classes, enrolling a total of 1 million children. That accounts for one in four of all the three- and four-year-olds participating in early learning settings nationwide; there is every reason to believe that these numbers will continue to rise.

This means that if you are an elementary principal, odds are, you will have some responsibility for educating three- and four-year-old children sometime in your career. To carry out these responsibilities effectively, it is important to understand **why** very young children are coming to "school" in such high numbers.

WHY THE PUSH FOR PREKINDERGARTEN?

The following news items are among hundreds that appeared in last year's press.

Governor Advocates for Early Childhood Education

Enrollment of 4-Year-Olds Hits 90% in Oklahoma

Billions at Stake in Expansion of PreK

Headlines like these underscore a growing trend in the United States: the number of young children attending early childhood programs (preschool, child care, kindergarten) is increasing dramatically. Whereas preprimary enrollments in the United States were only about 0.3 million in 1970, by 2002 they topped 2.8 million. Today, approximately half of all the three- and four-year-olds in the country (4 million children) are enrolled in formally organized early childhood settings. The number of five-year-olds in prekindergarten and kindergarten programs is even higher, reaching up to 80 percent of the total five-year-old population (Hodgkinson, 2006). By age six, nearly every child in the United States is involved in some type of formal early learning program ranging from preschool through first grade.

The boom in early childhood enrollments is happening for several reasons:

- Large numbers of families need and want out-of-home care and education for their preschool-age children.
- Research has demonstrated that early childhood experiences strongly influence children's later development and learning.
- Evidence is mounting that quality early childhood education improves the chances for success of children who would otherwise be at risk for school failure.
- There is growing proof that early education provides a good return on investment to taxpayers.

Each of these factors is worth considering further.

INCREASING FAMILY DEMAND

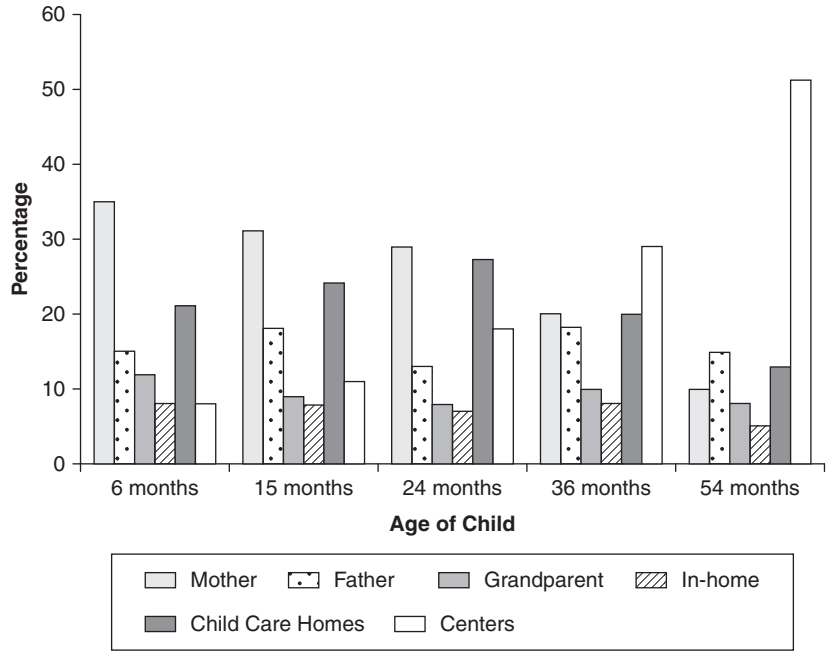
> *My neighbor used to look after my daughter, but I really wanted Taylor in a learning environment. I moved her here because I didn't want her watching TV all day. When it comes time for kindergarten, I want her to be prepared.* (Parent of a child in a prekindergarten program)

> *We have eight sections of one kind of preschool program or another spread out over three elementary buildings and still we haven't met family demand. I have my eye on a "big box store" that just went out of business—that building might make a great early childhood center for our PreK classes.* (District superintendent)

Many families today see benefits in their children having some kind of school experience prior to starting the compulsory grades. Although infants and toddlers are mostly cared for at home by a

mother, father, grandparent, or some other in-home provider, by three years of age, large numbers of young children are involved in out-of-home care and education. See Figure 1.1 for descriptive data on these family arrangements.

Figure 1.1 Descriptive Data on Type of Care



Source: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; 2002).

Note: Centers refer to formal early childhood education programs including state prekindergarten, Head Start, preprimary special education, and other private programs such as childcare and preschool programs. These may be housed in schools or in other community facilities.

Initially, most families seek outside programs for their children so adult family members can work, go to school, or engage in some other form of training. This involves both mothers and fathers. However, the increase in working mothers has been the single biggest demographic shift to influence the demand for early care and education. According to recent labor statistics, 56 percent of American women with infants are in the labor force. By the time their children are age six, the percentage of employed mothers goes up to 64 percent (National Women's Law Center, 2008). These high figures are precipitated by personal choice, fiscal necessity (mothers' earnings contribute approximately 35 percent to families' incomes), and welfare reform policies that require single mothers to work to continue receiving benefits.

More recently, recognition that preprimary programs can enhance children's learning has also fueled the demand for greater access. By age three, education rather than child care alone is the primary reason families cite for having their children participate in early learning settings prior to kindergarten (Barnett & Yarosz, 2007). They hope that their children will not only be safely cared for, but that they also will benefit socially and academically from going to preschool.

EARLY LEARNING IMPERATIVES

There is no question that the early years are learning years.

> From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, development proceeds at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life. Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: What matters during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile foundation for what follows. (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 384)

Children come into the world biologically programmed to learn. Everything they do, every interaction they have with a person or object, and everything they see, hear, smell, taste, or touch is a source of stimulation and potential learning. From the very beginning, a healthy child is an active participant in her own learning: exploring the environment, responding, communicating, and, in a relatively short time, constructing ideas and theories about how the world works (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). During the first five years of life, tremendous growth occurs in intellectual, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical competence. It is during this period that the basic groundwork is laid for adolescent and adult dispositions and skills in every developmental domain. That covers a lot of territory. See Table 1.1 for a few highlights of the significant competencies children potentially develop in the early years.

Table 1.1 Early Competencies That Undergird Future Learning

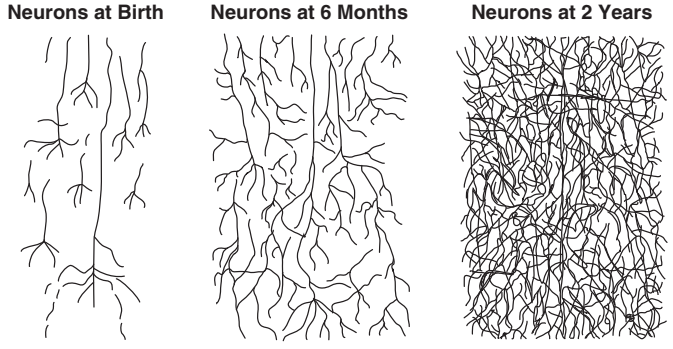
Developmental Domain	*Examples of Significant Competencies Grounded in Early Childhood*
Cognitive	• Number concepts • Problem-solving strategies • Concepts of time, space, order, patterns, and categories
Linguistic	• Language • Communication skills • Associating meaning and print • Emergent literacy
Social	• Social awareness • Work habits and attitudes • Prosocial understandings • Development of conscience • Understanding expectations and rules
Emotional	• Emotional awareness of self and others • Empathy • Coping strategies
Physical	• Body awareness • Attitudes toward food • Nutritional habits • Body image • Physical mastery (fine motor and gross motor)

The competencies listed in Table 1.1 are just a few of the numerous and remarkable accomplishments that develop during early childhood. All of these are influenced by what is happening in young children's brains.

THE MARVEL OF EARLY BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

At one time, we thought children were born with fully formed brains. Now we know better. Because of technological advances in neuroscience, today we can literally "see" brain activity we once knew very little about. As a result, scientists have learned that although babies are born with all the brain cells they will ever have, the connections among those cells are relatively sparse and immature. During early childhood, children's brain cell connections multiply in number and grow in strength. Basic circuits within the brain are established first. As certain connections are made over and over again, those connections become stronger (e.g., a child's repeated experiences of interacting with the same caregiver eventually lead the child to recognize and form attachments to that caregiver). With each variation in experience, new circuitry is created (e.g., the infant begins to differentiate between mom and dad). These more complex circuits create the foundation for increasingly complex skills. See Figure 1.2 for examples of how children's neural connections become more numerous and more complex from birth through two years of age.

Figure 1.2 Brain Growth Birth to Age Two



Source: From Marjorie J. Kostelnik, Anne K. Soderman & Alice Phipps Whiren *Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum: Best Practices in Early Childhood Education,* 4/e. Published by Allyn and Bacon/Merrill Education, Boston, MA. Copyright © 2007 by Pearson Education. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Both biology and experience play a role in brain development. Consider how the simple act of reading a storybook prompts important neural action in a young child's brain.

> A child care provider reads to a three-year-old. In a matter of seconds, thousands of cells in the child's growing brain respond. Some brain cells are "turned on," triggered by this particular experience. Many existing connections among brain cells are strengthened. At the same time, new connections are formed, adding a bit more definition and complexity to the intricate circuitry that will remain largely in place for the rest of this child's life. (Shore, 1997, p. ix)

Some experiences lead to stronger, more prolific neural connections, and some experiences hinder brain development. For young children, nurturance and stimulation are literally "brain food." Thus, children's brain development is **enhanced** when they experience the conditions outlined in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1

Day-to-Day Care of Young Children's Brains

Children's brain growth is enhanced when adults

- ensure children's health and safety,
- provide appropriate nutrition,
- establish close relationships with children,
- encourage exploration and play,
- offer a stimulating environment,
- establish routines, and
- minimize stress (Shore, 1997, pp. 26–27).

Sometimes, though, neural connections are **inhibited** when children experience deprivation and neglect, when they are habitually overstimulated (as happens in chaotic environments), and when they encounter repeated failure. Environmental assaults such as starvation, alcohol, drugs, or abuse can actually **damage** neural connections, leading to impairments that cannot be undone later in life.

By six to eight years of age, children achieve about 90 percent of their mature brain growth. If you were to compare children's brains at this age, the number and strength of the neural connections from one child to the next might vary by as much as 30 percent (Bjorklund, 2005). Those differences would be directly related to the kinds of environments the children experienced. Optimal experiences provide benefits that last a lifetime. Lost opportunities and negative experiences are difficult to overcome. Unfortunately, many children do not receive the supports they need to enhance optimal brain development. These youngsters are the ones most at risk for school failure.

CHILDREN AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE

> *I have children come to my class who have never handled a book, never drawn with a crayon, and who are constantly worried about whether or not they will get supper each night. This puts them behind from day one. Years later, I see these same kids and they have never caught up.* (Kindergarten teacher)

Kindergarten teachers report that one out of three children comes to school lacking the basic abilities they need to succeed. Most often, these children come from families living close to or below the poverty line (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000). Poverty is the single biggest predictor of low birth weight, malnutrition, poor dental and physical health, stress related to food insecurity and physical safety, homelessness, and child abuse and neglect (American Humane Association, 2006). None of these conditions contributes to healthy development or school achievement. Additional risk factors in early

childhood (also associated with poverty) include having parents who have not graduated from high school, living in a single-parent family, and having parents who do not speak English at home. Consider the following statistics:

- Twenty-four million children under the age of six live in the United States.
- Ten and a half million (43 percent) of them live in low-income or poor families ($20,650 = the federal poverty level for a family of four).

Unfortunately, in this country—the richest country in the world—the proportion of children living in poverty is high and rising. Between 2000 and 2006, the number of preschoolers who were poor increased by 18 percent. We cannot afford to lose a single child to poverty, not only because it is unjust, but also because we cannot sustain ourselves in the new global economy without a huge reservoir of "brainpower." That brainpower will come from our children.

The Burden of Poverty

Growing up in a low-income family does not guarantee school failure, but children from poor families are more prone to poor achievement than are children from more-advantaged homes. At kindergarten entrance, they are twice as likely as more-advantaged children to score in the lowest quartile in reading, math, and general knowledge. Many come to school nineteen months to two years behind their peers. This creates an achievement gap that can last throughout children's school careers and that is difficult to amend (Lee & Burkham, 2002).

Although children living in low-income families share a common lack of adequate resources, they vary along many other dimensions such as family structure, race or ethnicity, country of birth, parents' education, parents' employment, and the communities and areas of the country in which they live. There is no single demographic profile that describes all children who are economically deprived. See Box 1.2.

Box 1.2

U.S. Child Poverty Snapshot

- A child in the United States has a better than two in five chance of beginning life in a poor or low-income family.
- Young children who are poor may live in single-parent families (51 percent) or in two-parent families (49 percent).
- Children living in poor or low-income families may have two working parents (54 percent), one working parent (27 percent), or no working parents (20 percent) at home. One-third of the parents in the "no parents working" category have disabilities that prevent them from entering the workforce.

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Sixty percent of young children who are poor have immigrant parents; 40 percent have parents who are native born.
- Children of every race are among the poor and struggling. Although Native American, Latino, and black children are disproportionately low income, whites compose the largest single group of low-income children under age six. See the bar graph that follows.
- A significant number of young children who are poor live with parents who have less than a high school education (26 percent). Some have parents who have earned a high school diploma (36 percent), and some live with parents who have some college or more (38 percent).
- Children living in poverty can be found in urban environments (37 percent), in the suburbs (41 percent), and in rural areas (21 percent).
- Young children live in poverty in every region of the country. See the bar graph that follows.

Figure A Percentage of Low-Income Children by Race/Ethnicity

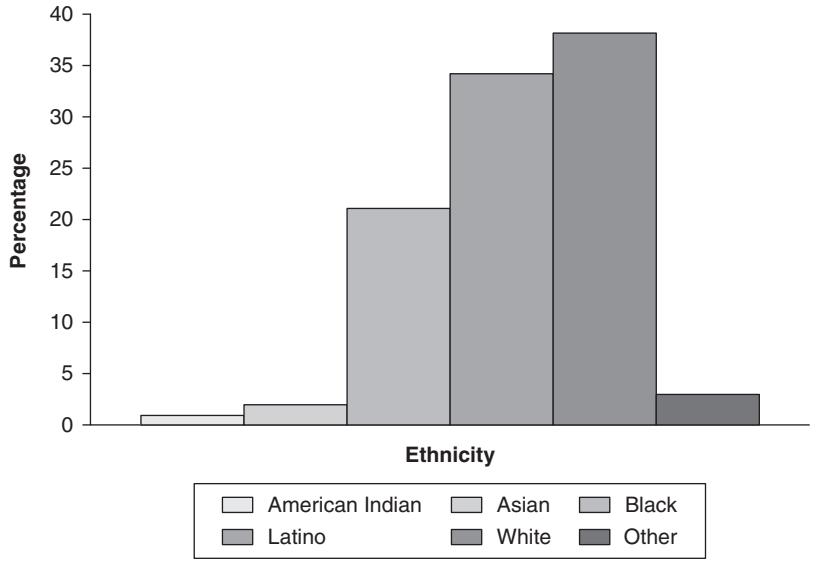
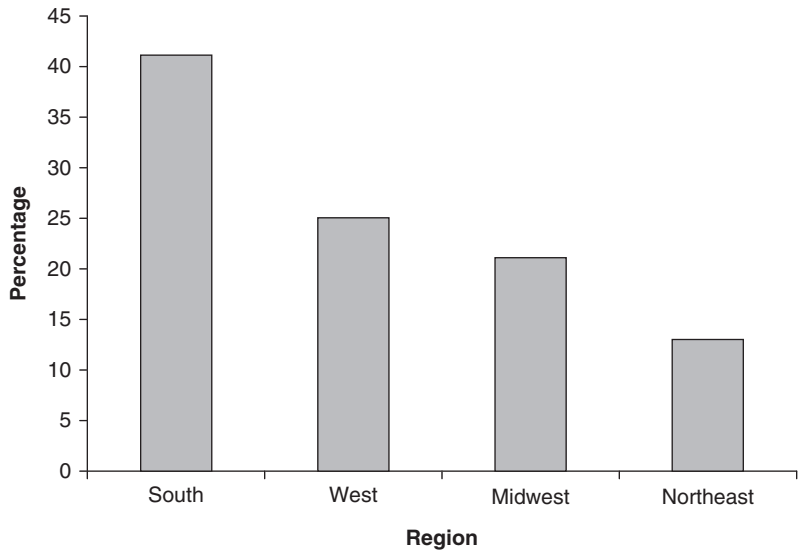


Figure B Low-Income Children by Region



Source: Adapted from Douglas-Hall & Chau, 2007, pp. 1–4.

As the facts in Box 1.2 attest, many young children in the United States live in disadvantaged circumstances. This does not bode well for their immediate academic success or their long-term ability to break the cycle of poverty. See Box 1.3.

Box 1.3

The Consequences of Childhood Poverty Are Generally Long Term

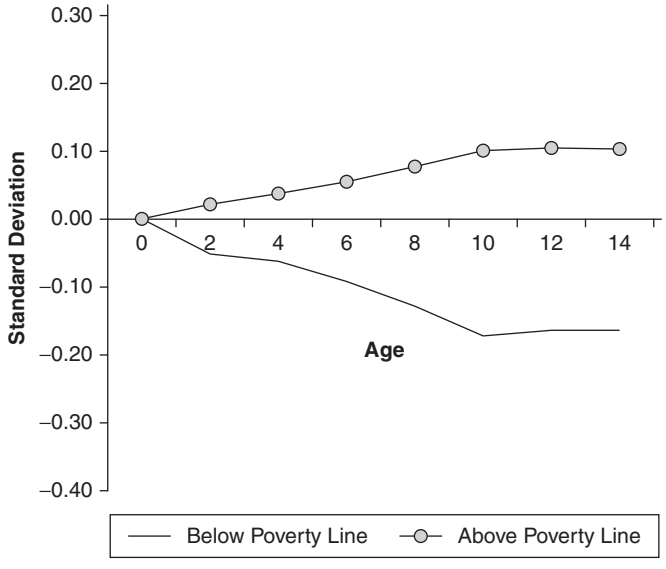
Poor children are at greater risk of

- raising their own children in poverty,
- dropping out of high school,
- teen parenthood,
- emotional and behavioral problems,
- exposure to family violence,
- working at a low-wage job as an adult, and
- serious and chronic health problems (Rosman, Kass, & Kirsch, 2006, p. 8).

Uneven Playing Field for Poor Children

Poor families struggle to support their young children. Love and effort taken into consideration, it is hard for them to meet their children's basic physical, cognitive, and social needs. Thus, from the earliest days of life, there are essential differences between the environments experienced by children from low-income families and those experienced by other children. These differences have a significant impact on children's developing cognitive skills (numeracy, literacy, problem solving, language) and noncognitive abilities (socioemotional skills, physical and mental health, perseverance, attention, motivation, and self-confidence). For instance, research shows that in families living below the poverty line children and adults read stories together only about half as often as happens in higher-income families. This contributes to the fact that by the time children from low-income families enter first grade, many of them have only one-fourth of the vocabulary words of children from families who are better off financially (B. Hart & Risley, 1995; Vandivere, Moore, & Zaslow, 2000). Similar gaps in achievement are evident in every facet of development. These trends are depicted in Figures 1.3 and 1.4.

Figure 1.3 Cognitive Skill Accumulation of Children Born in Families Below and Above the Poverty Line



Source: Cunha & Heckman, 2007, p. 5.

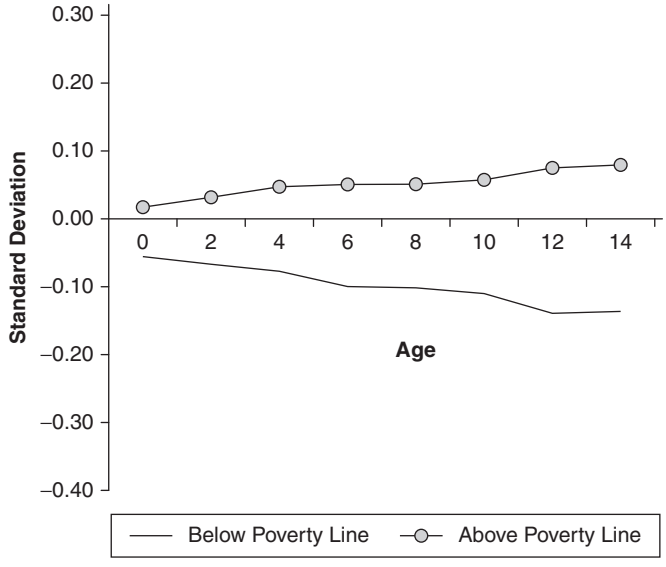
Note: Cognitive skills = numeracy, literacy, problem solving, language.

By the time children reach first grade, it becomes increasingly difficult to reverse trends that began at birth. Current skills lay the foundation for new skills and contribute to expanding abilities. Lack of skill impedes new skill development and makes it harder to catch up. This explains why the trend lines in Figures 1.3 and 1.4 grow farther apart over time. Awareness of these trends has led many people to advocate for high-quality education that begins long before formal schooling starts.

Reducing the Achievement Gap Early

Formal education that begins at age five is TOO LATE. . . . While our state continues to spend more and more money correcting problems that occur later in children's lives through remediation, special education, alternative schools, and the criminal justice system, we ignore the front end of their lives, where it would truly make a difference . . . preschool will make more of a difference than anything else we can do to improve the lives of our children and our state. (C. J. Picard, former superintendent of education, Louisiana; Picard, 2006)

Figure 1.4 Noncognitive Skill Accumulation of Children Born in Families Below and Above the Poverty Line



Source: Cunha & Heckman, 2007, p. 6.

Note: Noncognitive abilities = socio-emotional skills, physical and mental health, perseverance, attention, motivation, and self-confidence.

Box 1.4

Common Program Elements of Three Early Learning Projects: High Scope/Perry Preschool, Abecedarian, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers

- Intervention started early in children's lives.
- Children and families were involved at least two years.
- The curriculum was whole-child focused.
- Curricula were tailored to the developmental characteristics of young children.
  - Programs included play, hands-on learning, and focused instruction.
- Teachers had undergraduate degrees in early childhood education.
- Teachers were relatively well paid.
- Children were taught in small classes.
- Parental involvement was a priority.

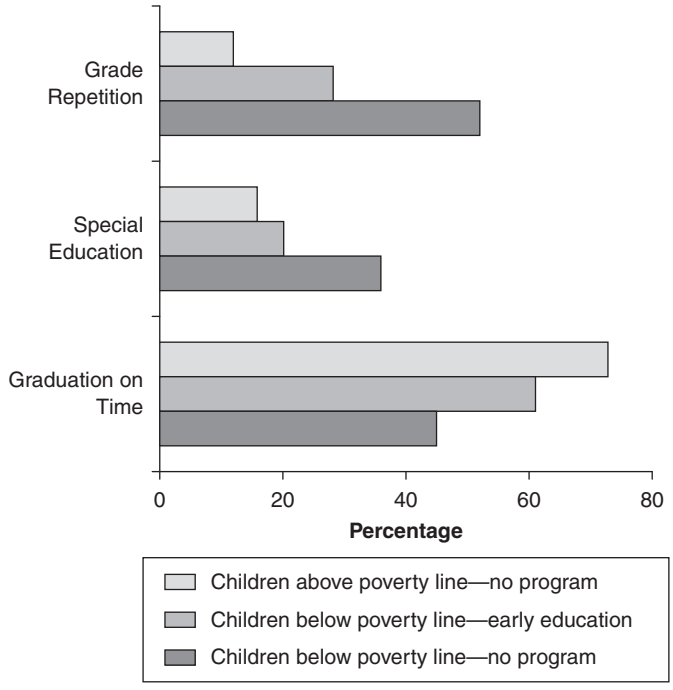
What was initially an assumption has become documented fact—high-quality early childhood education can help children succeed. Three important studies that began in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s and are ongoing provide the strongest evidence in this regard. These are the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Project (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). Although the specific interventions and geographic locations of the projects varied, all three projects shared the characteristics outlined in Box 1.4.

The research-evaluating program effectiveness for all three projects was well designed and methodologically sound. This led to credible results. All three evaluations

- focused on young children identified as at-risk for school failure,
- utilized research designs that included both intervention groups and control groups,
- were longitudinal (followed children from preschool into adulthood),
- used a variety of academic and life success measures to compare children over time, and
- calculated academic, social, and fiscal benefits of program participation both to the child and to society.

The overall outcomes of these studies show that children at risk for school failure profit from high-quality early childhood programs. This is vividly illustrated in Figure 1.5, which provides a composite view of the impact of early intervention on children from low-income families.

Figure 1.5 The Effects of Early Intervention on Children Living in Families Below the Poverty Line



Source: Cunha & Heckman, 2007, pp. 16–17.

The findings documented in Figure 1.5 underscore the fact that **all** children born into families below the poverty line are more at risk for school problems than children living more affluent lives. The risks are greatest when no early intervention occurs, however. Poor children with no preschool experience are the most likely to repeat a grade, be referred to special education, and fail to complete high school on time. Those negative outcomes are significantly reduced when children experience a high-quality early childhood program.

A meta-analysis of state-funded preschool programs shows improved achievement test scores for children from low-income families over time as well as impressive gains (ranging from 16 percent to 54 percent) in disadvantaged children's language, mathematics, reading, and general knowledge skills (Public Policy Forum, 2007; Rosman et al., 2006). Additional results from the High/Scope study indicate that by the time students reached high school, only 15 percent of the children in the no-early-intervention group were performing at a level considered "high achieving," whereas 49 percent of the early-learning group were performing that way (Cunha & Heckman, 2007).

As we can see, children benefit developmentally and academically from participating in high-quality early childhood programs. A recent analysis of school results indicates that schools benefit, too.

Positive Impact of Prekindergarten Programs on K–12 Schools

Children who are ready for school perform better in school and the schools they attend achieve greater success as well.

> [T]he primary value of the [Perry Preschool Program] was that it improved children's readiness for school so that when they entered school, they performed better; and because they had more success, they got more committed to school; and because they got more committed to school, they had even greater success. (Schweinhart, quoted in Karoly et al., 2005, p. 9)

Investigators at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) documented significant academic, social, and economic benefits to school systems when children arrive having gone to preschool first. The NIEER (2008) findings are based on data collected through the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (a long-term follow-up of a cohort of kindergartners who were in the fifth grade) and the Schools and Staffing Survey (teacher and administrator perceptions of their work environments).

According to the research, children's preschool attendance is associated with the following positive elementary school outcomes:

- Children score higher on standardized reading and math tests causing overall school scores to improve.
- Schools have fewer children who fail a grade.
- Fewer children are referred to special education.
- Children exhibit more "order and self-discipline" in kindergarten.
- Children exhibit fewer behavioral problems and more self-control throughout the elementary grades.
- Children's health problems are detected earlier, leading to improved performance over time.

- Incidents of risky behavior among children are reduced.
- Absenteeism among students is lower.
- Teacher absenteeism and turnover is reduced.
- Teachers report higher work satisfaction.

Based on the findings outlined above, researchers calculated the potential dollar savings that could come about as a result of reduced special education costs for children and improved working environments for teachers (i.e., lower turnover and absenteeism, and reduced teacher recruitment and retention expenses). They determined that schools would save between $2,600 and $4,400 for each "preschool" child over the time of that child's K–12 experience (Wat, 2007).

Economists and members of the business community echo the idea that early childhood education can actually save money over the long run from coast to coast. A variety of economic experts have demonstrated that preprimary education yields significant economic returns not only to school districts, but also to child participants and to society overall.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A SOUND INVESTMENT

> *Just as public and private entities take an active interest in the construction and maintenance of roads, public transportation, utilities, housing, and educational facilities to support economic development, quality ECE should be considered essential to [the nation's] economic health.* (Gruendel, 2004)

The preschoolers in the three landmark early childhood projects described earlier in this chapter are all adults now. Researchers have continued to follow their progress and have found strong evidence that, as a group, those who participated in the early childhood programs are better off financially today than those who did not. Preschool alumni are less frequently on welfare. They are more likely to own their own home, to earn higher wages, are more often employed, and are more likely to establish savings accounts. See Figure 1.6 for examples of the economic effects at age forty of former participants the Perry Preschool Program.

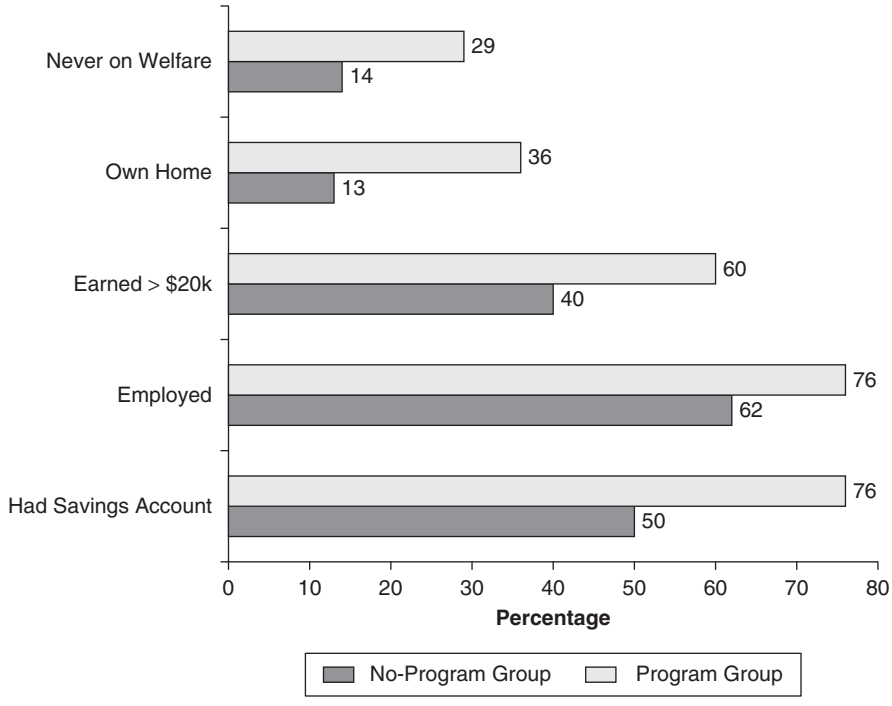
There is further evidence that those who went to preschool were less likely than the nonprogram subjects to engage in criminal behavior as youth and as adults. See Figure 1.7.

Looking to the Bottom Line

Results like those just described have excited the early childhood community as well as economists, business leaders, and public policy makers. Reducing the number of people on welfare and lowering the crime rate represents a substantial savings to taxpayers. Conversely, higher earnings through wages and savings dividends contribute to the tax base. As noted by James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate in economics,

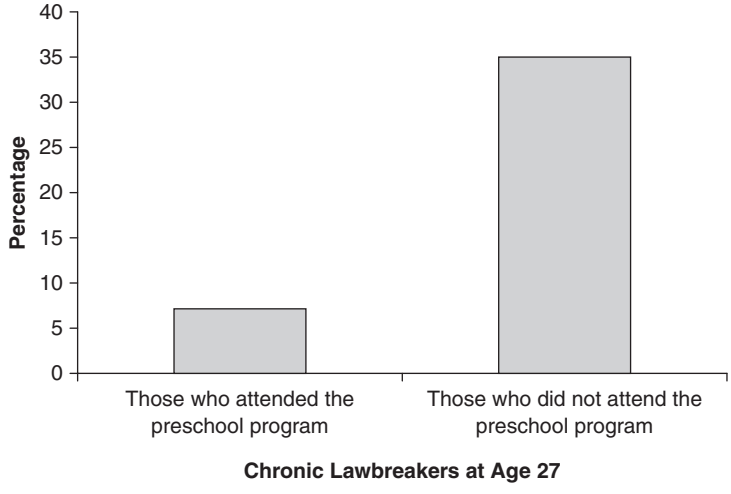
> The effects of high-quality preschool for disadvantaged children have been studied extensively. The programs improve student outcomes, increasing their educational attainment, decreasing their criminal activity, and improving their employment and earnings as adults. These changes in behavior reduce the burden on public resources by

Figure 1.6 Economic Effects of Participants at Age Forty



Source: Schweinhart et al., 2005.

Figure 1.7 Quality Preschool Cuts Future Crime

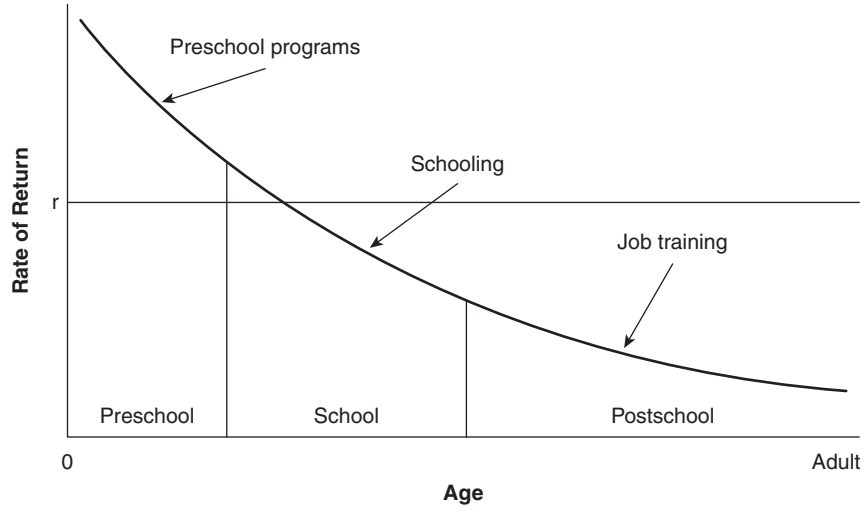


Source: L. J. Schweinhart, H. V. Barnes, and D. P. Weikart (1993). Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27. (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press. PS 021 998

> decreasing spending on special education, incarcerations, and public assistance; and by increasing future tax revenue. Such changes produce a substantial return on investment. Studies have estimated that these programs produce as much as $17 in social benefits for every dollar invested. (Heckman & Masterov, 2007, p. 1)

Heckman also points out that the economic return on preschool intervention is much higher than the return on later interventions such as reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies, or tax expenditures on police. This is because there is economic efficiency to getting involved early on with a focus on building new skills that will lead to further skill development. Remedial programs in adolescence and adulthood are much more costly and much less likely to yield positive results. The difference in the rate of return on investment across the lifespan is illustrated in Figure 1.8.

Figure 1.8 Rates of Return on Human Capital Investment Across the Life Span



Source: Cunha & Heckman, 2007, p. 18.

Economic models such as the one presented in Figure 1.8 add to the belief that it is better to get things right the first time than to try to fix them later (Galinsky, 2006). This message is being echoed throughout the country and has led some economists to propose universal preschool for all three- and four-year-old children, especially for children from poor families.

Potential Economic Benefits of Universal Preschool for Low-Income Children

Based on findings from the Chicago Child-Parent Centers project, economist Robert G. Lynch has projected the long-term savings and benefits that would come about if high-quality early childhood programs were extended to all three- and four-year-old children in the United States whose families fall in the lowest quarter of income distribution (Lynch, 2007). His calculations are based on a program that would operate three hours a day, five days a week during the traditional

school year. Teachers would be certified in early childhood education and would be paid in line with K–12 salaries. There would be at least two teachers per classroom and the curriculum would focus on whole-child learning. He assumes that the initial cost per child would be $6,300. The report includes specific cost-benefit data for each state as well as the nation overall for 2008 and for 2050 (to demonstrate the benefits accrued as the 2008 children reach middle adulthood). Sample findings at the national level are presented in Box 1.5.

Box 1.5

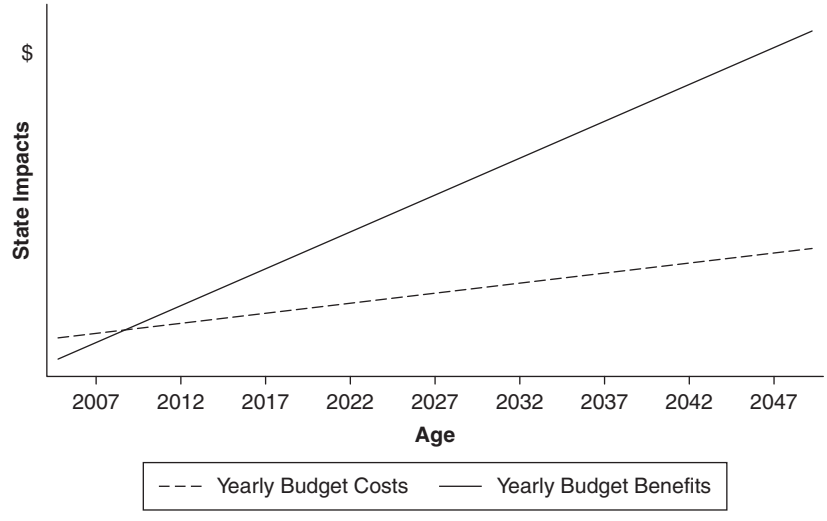
Projected Economic Costs and Benefits of Universal Prekindergarten for All Children Living in Poverty in the United States

Number of children served	Approximately 7 million nationwide in 2008
When the program would begin to pay for itself	Six years
Annual costs in 2008	$8.2 billion
Annual costs in 2050	$26 billion
Net benefit in 2050	$289 billion
Ratio of total benefits to costs	$12 in benefit for each dollar spent in 2050

Source: Lynch (2007).

Similar positive outcomes would be garnered at the state level. See Figure 1.9.

Figure 1.9 State Costs Versus Potential Benefits of Universal Preschool



Source: Lynch, 2007.

Some Communities Moving Toward "Preschool for All"

The potential benefits of early education have proven so compelling that entire states (e.g., Florida, Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, and Oklahoma) as well as many local communities are beginning to implement voluntary (parents may choose if they want to enroll and with whom to enroll their children), universal (available to all children regardless of income) preschool systems for four-year-olds. In each case, these systems have included significant participation by public schools as well as other public and private providers. In 2006, Illinois became the first state to legislate voluntary early education to all three- and four-year-old children in the state whose families want them to participate. In time, the program could serve as many as 190,000 children. Similar proposals are being examined in hundreds of communities throughout the United States.

As a result of initiatives like these, elementary school "principals across the country are becoming more involved with early childhood programs—leading comprehensive pre-K programs in their school buildings or creating new links with many types of pre-K programs in their communities" (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2005 p. v). Here are some preliminary steps you can take to contribute to this important work.

PRINCIPALS' ROLES

Laying the Groundwork

> *Public and private demand for high quality early childhood education is growing, and principals of elementary schools need to be ahead of the trend.* (NAESP, 2005, p. v)

1. Know the benefits of early childhood education—academic, social, and fiscal. Examine the rationale for initiating high-quality early learning programs as offered in this chapter. Consider this information in terms of your own experiences. Use this as a basis for becoming more involved in early education.

2. Rethink K–12 education to include prekindergarten programs as the foundation for later learning. Talk with others about the critical nature of children's prekindergarten experiences.

3. Make a conscious decision to create a school culture that values early childhood education. Use this text as one tool to help you make this ideal a reality.

4. Provide others with information about the value of early childhood education. Use the data presented in this chapter to talk with teachers, staff, administrator colleagues, school board members, and community leaders about early childhood education. Explore the implications for your school and community.