Beyond Pre-K

Rethinking the Conventional Wisdom on Educational Intervention

By James J. Heckman

Most parents can readily attest that earlier is better when it comes to helping children. Indeed, the oft-repeated parenting maxim “Get them while they’re young” is not just homespun wisdom but a consistent finding of social scientists who study government programs for disadvantaged youths. One of the best investments government can make to raise academic achievement and reduce welfare dependency and crime is the provision of quality preschool programs. Yet popular support for early intervention has a more pessimistic if less publicized corollary among both parents and policy analysts: Namely, that not much can be done to alter the paths of children once they hit the rebellious teenage years. Then, the baleful influence of peers, the lure of street culture, and the failure to have developed skills in childhood all take their toll—or so the theory goes. In practice, remediation programs for adolescents have proved costly and often ineffective.

I, too, once subscribed to this split view of how best to aid disadvantaged youths. In fact, much of my work as an economist has been devoted to demonstrating the impressive economic and educational return to early interventions. Yet research that I recently undertook with a fellow economist at the University of Chicago, Flavio Cunha, has forced me to rethink the conventional wisdom. I now believe that early interventions with children are not so productive if they are not followed up with ongoing investments in children during their elementary and secondary school years. Instead, we need to invest early in children—and not stop. And by “invest” I do not simply mean that government should be pumping money into new social programs for disadvantaged youths.

Our research project started several years ago, when the America’s Promise Alliance, founded by Gen. Colin L. Powell, approached us to do a novel assessment of five “promises” or essential building blocks that children need to flourish. These five key resources—the value of which has been demonstrated time and again—include having a caring adult in a child’s life, offering an effective education, and providing access to health care and proper nutrition. We then asked what would happen if government, the private sector, and families continued...
to invest in children throughout their childhood, much as landmark preschool programs like the Perry Preschool initiative in Ypsilanti, Mich., had done in the past. But we did not limit our analysis of skill-building investment to government dollars spent on schools and educational initiatives.

We examined, as well, the skill-building investments that families make in their children, such as reading to kids, providing encouragement with schoolwork, and setting good examples through community service and healthy lifestyle choices. These nongovernmental investments foster persistence, reliability, and self-discipline—all important predictors of school performance and subsequent success on the job. Government policy does not create, but can help sustain these “noncognitive” skills—our analysis assumed, for example, that policymakers would expand effective mentoring programs, adolescent-literacy initiatives, and college-tuition programs during the teenage years.

The results of our projections were striking—and surprising. Our study looked at the impact of investing in boys, the most troubled teenage demographic, and especially at boys born to low-achieving white mothers. We found that without additional skill-building investments, most at-risk boys will falter. Only about two in five boys, we determined, would graduate from high school, fewer than 5 percent would enroll in college, and more than 40 percent would wind up convicted of crimes or on probation.

Boys who had the benefit of a comprehensive preschool program fared better. They were more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college—and considerably less likely to be convicted of crimes or go on welfare. But the unexpected finding was that at-risk boys were easily most successful when investment was sustained into the teenage years. Under that scenario, more than nine in 10 boys graduated from high school, and nearly 40 percent attended college. Only about 10 percent of the boys would be convicted of crimes—and just 2 percent would end up on welfare.

These gains in educational achievement and the corresponding declines in criminality and welfare are quite large. To put these numbers in perspective, sustained skill-building investments would go a long way toward shrinking, and in some cases eliminating, the nation’s worrisome racial disparities in academic achievement, drug use, and college attendance. And while ongoing investment in children is expensive, the country would ultimately save tens of billions of dollar each year in reduced welfare payments and increased productivity. The Princeton University economist Cecilia Rouse estimates that the reduced earnings of high school dropouts alone account for $50 billion in lost income taxes each year.

Much in the way that compound interest creates exponentially larger returns on monetary investments, ongoing investments in children’s skills have a multiplier effect. Traits learned young, like perseverance and self-discipline, make it easier to acquire skills during the teenage years. Skills, that is, beget skills. But the enduring value of these noncognitive abilities has politically conservative
implications as well. Disadvantaged teenagers often receive poor discipline and little encouragement at home—making it incumbent upon educators to do more to enforce strict discipline within high schools and middle schools.

Too often, government officials design programs for children as if they lived their lives in silos, as if each stage of a child’s life were independent of the other, unconnected to what came before or what lies ahead. It’s time for policymakers now to look beyond the silos, to begin recognizing that consistent, cost-effective investment in children and youths can pay for itself. Providing young people with the resources they need to compete in today’s global economy is not just a moral imperative. It is an economic necessity, too.

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