
Synthesis

Early years interventionsⁱ

Moderate impact for very high cost, based on extensive evidence



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Early years or early childhood interventions aim to ensure that young children have educational pre-school or nursery experiences which prepare them for school and academic success. The research summarised here concentrates on the impact of 'packages' of early years provision (known as multi-component programmes) rather than on individual early years interventions. Many of the researched programmes and approaches focus on disadvantaged children. Some also offer parental support.

For more information about the impact of different aspects of early years provision please see the Early Years Toolkit.

How effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that early years and pre-school interventions have a positive impact, delivering an average of around five additional months' progress. The approach appears to be particularly beneficial for children from low income families.

Once early years provision is in place, improving the quality of provision, for example by training staff to improve the interaction between staff and children, appears to be more promising than increasing the quantity of provision (by providing extra hours in the day), or changing the physical environment of early years settings.

In most studies, the impact on attainment tends to reduce over time, although the time this takes varies by approach. This means that even interventions which are effective in narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers will not be sufficient to prevent the gap opening up again in later years. Where an impact on attitudes to school has been found, it tends to be more lasting.

Latin American Evidenceⁱⁱ

There is extensive evidence in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the impact on learning outcomes of early years interventions. Most of the research follows a quantitative approach and the evidence consistently suggests that early years education is beneficial. Some studies analyze the impact of this type of program on literacy or language skills and many others analyze the effect of different early years interventions on cognitive learning, phonological development, and math skills as well as the results on behavioral problems.

A study conducted in Argentina shows, for example, that children who participated in a linguistic and cognitive development program increased their vocabulary and early writing skills compared to their peers who did not participate in the program. Another study conducted in Mexico shows that children aged 5 whose teachers participated in literacy teaching practices, presented better performance in linguistic skills than those whose teachers did not participate. The quality of pedagogical practices also plays an essential role in early years interventions. One study showed that personalized and affectionate attention, sensitive to the needs and characteristics of each child, is important for the infants to achieve positive results.

The research suggests that the impact of early childhood interventions on learning is consistently positive in the region. Thus, it is important to ensure the quality of these programs to generate a positive and long-standing effect on the future academic performance.

How secure is the evidence?

There are a number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses which have looked at the impact of early childhood intervention. Most of these are from the USA, however, where children tend to start school at a relatively late age.

What are the costs?

Understandably the costs are very high, as adult/child ratios in pre-school provision tend to be higher than in school classes. Family interventions have similarly high costs. In general, the costs are estimated as very high.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. High quality provision with well-qualified and well-trained staff is essential.
2. High quality provision is likely to be characterised by the development of positive relationships between staff and children and by engagement of the children in activities which support pre-reading, the development of early number concepts and non-verbal reasoning.
3. Extended attendance (one year or more) and an earlier starting age (three years old) are more likely to have an impact than shorter periods starting later, which deliver lower benefits on average.
4. Disadvantaged children benefit from high quality programmes, especially where these include a mixture of children from different social backgrounds and a strong educational component

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