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FEATURE

# The world is trying to fix early years - but is it doing it right?

What happens in the years before school is a core focus of countries across the globe, with big promises of a return on investment when children reach adulthood. But Holly Korbey finds that things aren't as clear-cut as many education ministers would hope

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Holly Korbey



**E**arly childhood education is having a moment - and it's happening all over the world.

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transform childcare if her party comes to power at the next general election. Speaking recently to *The Times*, she explained that “providers are closing and childcare is becoming less and less accessible, which is why I believe we need to completely rethink how we deliver childcare. [We need to] move towards a modern system that runs from the end of parental leave right through to the end of primary school”.

Similar movements are happening in the United States. Admittedly, president Joe Biden’s \$400 billion plan for universal pre-k (pre-kindergarten) has sputtered and stalled - but the political push, at least among Democrats, for a more organised way to get more American kids into preschool is gaining steam.

Australia, too, is getting in on the action. There, the states of Victoria and New South Wales are set to introduce a new universal year of play-based learning before children start school, as part of what the state premiers have called “the greatest transformation of early education in a generation”.

Both the UK government and Biden have underscored the importance of research to support their plans: decades of data showing that children from low-income families and society at large benefit from heavy early investment in the first five years of life. Whether this public investment in early childhood education is used to produce “**the best-educated workforce**” for the US, or support children “to thrive in adulthood and contribute to society” in England, they suggest it is a no-brainer. It’s backed by data.

But what that research says, exactly - and what it suggests that governments and schooling do based on its findings - is a little more complicated than it first appears. We are, for example, a lot further away than we might think from what the evidence suggests would be best practice.



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Yet at the very moment that hope and investment in early childhood are expanding, a growing body of new evidence is challenging an assumed narrative that preschool - at least much of the kind currently on offer - is always key in closing the disadvantage gap (or what we in the US call the “achievement gap”). New studies challenge whether preschool provides the best “return on investment” as an intervention for low-income families, and also question whether the quality of preschool programmes has something to do with it. These new studies suggest that the way some countries are handling early childhood education needs a second look.

## Early years education as a ‘return on investment’

Over the past decade, more focus has been placed on investment in early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds, supported by a body of evidence suggesting that early education makes life-changing differences in the lives of poor children.

In the US, states like Vermont, Texas and Florida have taken a greater interest in funding these early interventions and set up their own pre-k programmes in addition to the federal Head Start programme (which served as the model for the now-failed Sure Start programme in the UK), in the hope of closing the “disadvantage gap” that begins the day children enter kindergarten (the first year of compulsory schooling in the US) and continues to widen throughout their school years, affecting both academic outcomes and future prospects.

The passion for preschool was largely based on the work of economist James Heckman, author of a seminal body of research showing that the larger and earlier a public investment is made in children from poor families, the greater the “return,” in the form of positive social and economic outcomes. The basis of his thesis came from following children from places like the Perry Preschool, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, into adulthood and finding that not only were they more likely to complete their education, but they also had more positive life outcomes, like fewer arrests and higher-paying employment.

In childhood development circles, the “Heckman Curve” has become synonymous with the kind of high-quality early childhood interventions we see in Scandinavian countries like Sweden or Denmark, where nearly all three- to six-year-olds attend free or low-cost preschool, and disadvantage gaps are relatively smaller.

### “Why do nearly half of children need to be behind before they begin? It’s unjust”

A variety of factors explain why. From birth to five years old, children’s cognitive and social skills develop rapidly and are crucial to setting the foundation for the rest of life. Early years education can step in and help families build that foundation using a “skills beget skills” approach: Heckman describes preschool as being able to foster “cognitive skills along with attentiveness, motivation, self-control and sociability - the character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive citizens”. That foundation is connected to a 10 to 13 per cent per year return on investment, Heckman writes, “based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures”.

Early years’ proponents say preschool is crucial because it can make up deficits in a way that primary schools can’t. “With schools unlikely to be able to close disadvantage gaps sufficiently on their own,” reads a 2022 report from the Nuffield Foundation on the two-year gap between the poorest English and Welsh pupils and their wealthier counterparts, “other parts of the education system, such as the early years and other public services, such as children’s services, are required.”

But the idea that preschool is the most valuable intervention - offering the “highest” return on investment - has been called into question in recent years. Authors of a recent paper say that while good early years programmes are vital, they are just one way to intervene in

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“We find no support for the claim that social policy programmes targeted early in the life course have the largest benefit-cost ratios,” they write, “or that on average the benefits of adult programmes are less than the cost of the intervention.

“This finding does not imply that there should be less investment in early childhood programmes. There are many early interventions that have large positive rates of return, and there are powerful equity reasons for investment in children. The data shows that prevention can be cost-effective, but, in addition, later treatment and amelioration using evidenced-based programmes can also succeed.”

Their study, along with a Brookings Institution paper on the [“good enough” model](#) of early childhood investment, seems to put cracks in the idea that early childhood programmes have the singular ability to solve some of society’s toughest problems. There are too many unknowns. “The standard model of early experience, which presently drives most policy and practice in early childhood, is imperfect, at best,” writes Grover Whitehurst at Brookings. “It faces numerous empirical anomalies and ignores alternative ways of organising the current body of knowledge and observations on early experience.”

Early years experts disagree. One reason why the life-altering benefits of preschool haven’t been common in places like the UK and the US, says Felicity Gillespie, director of early years charity Kindred Squared, is because real investments in children’s “first 1,000 days of life” have never been tried. The UK government’s incremental investment additions - 1 per cent or 2 per cent increases - aren’t enough to make much of a difference in the long term.

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Gillespie says some European countries like Estonia have taken a much different approach that makes early childhood a priority. Their early childhood spending, as a share of GDP, is **one of Europe's highest**. In addition, Estonian early years teachers must have a degree, and earn more generous pay. In contrast, Gillespie points out, 44 per cent of UK childcare workers claim public benefits or tax credits because their pay is so low (and there is a **similar situation in the US**).

“Good things happen when children are given highly trained, highly focused, high-quality developmental support,” Gillespie says. “If kids get that earlier, they will do better earlier. Our north star at Kindred is a level playing field at five years old. Why do nearly half of children need to be behind before they begin? It's unjust - and it's financially nuts.”

## The Tennessee study

It's not only the long-term return on investment that's been called into question recently - so has the short-term return on investment.

A recent long-term study of the **US federally funded Head Start** programme shows that gains made by disadvantaged preschoolers while attending the programme evaporated by third grade (equivalent to Year 4 in England). And a new study out of Tennessee actually shows negative effects for pupils in a state-run preschool programme.

Dale Farran and her team at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, sent shockwaves through the early childhood world early this year when they revealed the dismal **results of a multi-year study** following a group of pupils from a state-funded pre-k programme through to sixth grade. Those children performed worse academically in every subject area than their peers who didn't attend the programme. They were also more likely to have disciplinary infractions, lower attendance and higher suspensions.

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But one issue, the research team agreed, was how early years education was assumed to be an “all or nothing entity”: the mere existence of a programme was considered an undeniable good, regardless of what happened in classrooms all day, every day. Their results show that what is actually happening in the classroom - the “black box,” as Farran puts it - matters more than they’d previously thought.

## “There’s something really academic in trying to build a bridge out of blocks”

Farran’s team has little reliable data on what makes a good preschool programme, but through observations in classrooms, they have been able to identify elements that many classrooms lack: play, for one. Another is rich interaction between teacher and pupils: on a four-point scale of how much teachers and children interacted, with one being simple, direct instructions and four being a conversation with a sequence of open-ended questions, Farran says she could “count on one hand” the number of times she saw a four. “The kind of instruction that’s going on does not encourage children to think or reflect on anything,” she says.

The study results have the researchers looking at early learning in a new way. Instead of merely trying to push down the literacy and numeracy skills found in kindergarten (Year 1) - think worksheets and phonics - Farran hypothesises that preschoolers from disadvantaged families need a similar set of experiences to what wealthier families choose for their kids’ early education: play, music, nature and open-ended, rich conversations.

That would explain why students appeared early on as if they were ahead of their peers - they had learned the pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills for school readiness. But the researchers guess that it’s the rich experiences that matter more to long-term success. Farran thinks of early childhood learning as an iceberg, with the piece above the water being the easily measured, school readiness skills. But the base of the iceberg underneath the water represents all the social-emotional learning, the relationship building and play that provides the foundation for readiness skills.

Preschool play may not look like much to an adult’s eye, but kids are busy building the base of the iceberg. “There’s something really academic in trying to build a bridge out of blocks,” says study co-author and psychologist Kelley Durkin. “There’s rich academic language, there’s so much that comes intuitively that’s much deeper than rote counting. But it looks like they’re just playing.”

So, if pushing key stage 1 learning down into the early years isn’t the way to improve provision, what is? Some of those working in the sector believe they have the answer.

## A better way for early years?

On a recent autumn day, two preschoolers at an Ark Start nursery in South London decide to build a boat. They notice right away that their boat has sizable holes; they decide to take it to the sink to find out if it will float.

“I’m going to let this play out, because I’m intrigued by their thinking,” says headteacher Molly Devlin. She watches as the children try to plug the holes with tissue, but doesn’t intervene. ArkStart’s question-based curriculum allows little ones to experiment, ask questions, and try things out to see if they work, all under the gentle guidance - not direction - of a highly trained teacher. The goal is to give children the tools to resolve conflicts, gain independence and be curious about the world.

Ark Start is part of a network of publicly funded, privately run schools aiming to give children from disadvantaged backgrounds an early years experience that builds those “under the iceberg” skills. The key, says director Katie Oliver, is having qualified educators who are knowledgeable about child development.

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think teaching generally is continuous professional development. People don't like that answer, it implies a level of investment and challenge, but it's clear that that's what's required."

They also develop close relationships with families, inviting them to "stay and play" sessions, and keep them updated on how their child is doing. Getting families involved early, supporting them and showing them how their child is progressing is often an opportunity the system misses, says Oliver. "There's this real opportunity to get alignment to pay such dividends further on," she explains, "You can reach any family when you have a two-and-a-half-year-old; they are right there!"

Gillespie echoes Oliver's interest in drawing families into the importance of early years education - she says better public awareness of what early childhood education does for children would help to create the political will to make a bigger investment. There's a common misconception that "they're just babies" and don't need anything special, she adds. "If you understand the importance of the early years as the first part of education, not something extra, then the funding will follow," Gillespie says. "If you see the early years as this thing outside of 'real' education in schools, it's going to be a constant battle."

Farran says the Tennessee study opened her eyes to the need for families to have choices for their young children, adding that perhaps the best "return on investment" is giving families the financial help to choose the provision that's best for their kids. It's not that many families lack information, she says, it's that they lack the means. Perhaps the disadvantage gap that shows up academically is just a lack of the freedom to choose; after all, not every family has the luxury of being able to afford the childcare they want as early as they want it, while others do not have the option to stay at home with their child if that is what feels right.

The truth is, though, we don't actually know whether any of these approaches will be more effective in the long run at any scale, and, as the Tennessee study shows, sometimes our assumptions can be problematic. So, while it's important that we get early education right - and that likely involves better pay and better CPD for early years teachers - we also have to recognise that what happens in the early years will only ever be one part of the solution when it comes to tackling the disadvantage gap.

Farran shares an anecdote to illustrate this. She says she was recently stopped by a European grad student at a symposium for doctoral students from all over the world, and asked a key question about America. "One of the Finnish students said to me, 'I don't understand why you're always trying to fix the problems caused by poverty, instead of fixing poverty,'" she says.

Whatever your views on what needs to change about early education, that is a statement that's hard to argue with.

*Holly Korbey is a journalist and the author of Building Better Citizens. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Atlantic, and she is a regular contributor on education for KQED MindShift and Edutopia. She tweets [@hkorbey](#).*

**Holly Korbey**



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