CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES IN THE FIRST DECADE OF LIFE

A Human Capital Integration

Childhood Programs and Practices in the First Decade of Life: A Human Capital Integration presents research findings on the effects of a variety of early childhood programs and practices for young children and families and their implications for policy development and reform. Leading scholars in the multidisciplinary field of human development and in early childhood learning discuss the effects and cost effectiveness of the most influential model state and federally funded programs, policies, and practices. These include Head Start, Early Head Start, the WIC nutrition program, Child-Parent Centers, the Nurse-Family Partnership, and Perry Preschool, as well as school reform strategies, such as small classes and teacher training. This volume provides a unique multidisciplinary approach to understanding and improving interventions, practices, and policies to optimally foster human capital over the life-course.

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Childhood Programs and Practices in the First Decade of Life

A HUMAN CAPITAL INTEGRATION

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521132336

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First published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Childhood programs and practices in the first decade of life : a human capital
integration / edited by Arthur J. Reynolds . . . [et al.].
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
States.  I. Reynolds, Arthur J.  II. Title.
HV741.C53585 2010
362.70973–dc22 2010006635

ISBN 978-0-521-13233-6 Paperback

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FOREWORD: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

ROBERT H. BRUININKS
President, University of Minnesota

Since the earliest days of my career, issues of early childhood and youth development have been a passion of mine, so it is truly an honor to share a few of my thoughts with you. It is my sincere hope that the ideas that emerge here will yield positive results for children, youth, and families across the nation.

Too often when we see stories about children and youth in the media, or when I hear public discussion about kids, they're portrayed in a negative light. Consider this assessment by an educator of international renown, who said, “The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise.”

Now, Socrates is widely regarded as a wise man . . . but, in this case, he seems to be voicing a popular perspective that has continued to the present day. As 20th-century critic and essayist Logan Pearsall Smith put it, “The denunciation of the young is a necessary part of the hygiene of older people, and greatly assists in the circulation of the blood.”

I have long been concerned about this consistent focus on what is wrong with America’s kids and the seeming lack of public awareness and interest in the problems that many children and families are facing. These issues seem to be steadily losing ground in the competition for public attention. With an aging population that is increasingly more interested in personal health and public safety than in the welfare of “other people’s children,” as evidenced by trends in public spending, I fear that the erosion of public interest may continue. The stakes are very high for our society: We must continue to make the case that the development of our children is an important priority, and we must do more to give our children a healthy start.

Conversations about a healthy start for children often center on the “3 Cs”: Connection, Competence, and Contribution. I’ve added a fourth C: Conviction. Discussing “at-risk” children and youth often conjures images of kids who live in poverty, and it cannot be denied that they are often our most vulnerable children. But I would argue that without these four things – strong
connections, especially to engaged adults who are genuinely concerned for their well-being; core competencies that enable continued learning and socialization; a clear vision of their personal contribution, their worth to society, and their potential to make a difference; and the courage of their convictions and belief in themselves – without these four Cs, all children are potentially at risk. A middle-class child living in a well-to-do suburb who doesn’t have these four things may actually face a greater likelihood of not reaching his or her full potential than the children of a working-poor family whose parents read to them every night before bed.

Improving outcomes for our children and youth requires us to take a fresh look at these problems and to identify alternatives to what isn’t working and what hasn’t worked in the past. And I’m especially excited to see the current focus on the cost effectiveness of early childhood programs – for better or for worse, this is often the deciding factor in what investments are made on behalf of our children.

I believe the University of Minnesota has an important role to play in identifying effective education and developmental programs for children and youth. In fact, in the spring of 2003, I delivered a similar address to a University-hosted Children Summit entitled “Starting Strong,” which sought to spark ideas and generate consensus on how we might work together across organizations to improve the childhoods of Minnesota’s next generations.

The summit was one of the early outcomes of an interdisciplinary initiative I announced in 2002: the Children, Youth, and Families Initiative. This initiative has been coordinated by the University’s Children, Youth, and Family Consortium and chaired by professors Rich Weinberg and Marti Erickson. Their efforts were rooted in the idea that an individual’s contributions to society can be traced directly to his or her formative years. In a few short years, this initiative has also resulted in:

- the Human Capital Research Collaborative – sponsored by the University of Minnesota and our colleagues at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis – which fosters policy analysis and multidisciplinary research on the benefits of investing in childhood development from birth to age 8
- the development of a campus-wide Center for Excellence in Children’s Mental Health, which was key to developing our new Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Certificate
- the Commission on Out of School Time, which researched and reported on the importance of quality out-of-school programming to youth development

These efforts build on the activities of a number of research centers and institutes throughout the University, including:
The Center for Early Education and Development (CEED), which has worked to improve developmental outcomes for young children through applied research, training, and outreach since 1973.

The Irving B. Harris Training Center for Infant and Toddler Development, which became CEED’s Harris Programs, providing training and continuing professional development opportunities to individuals and organizations serving infant and toddler populations.

The Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health – inspired by the pioneering work of Dr. Gisela Konopka, its goal is to disseminate reliable information pertaining to adolescent health to anyone in a position to help.

The Center for 4-H Youth Development, which offers out-of-school, research-based educational programs that nurture positive partnerships between youth and caring adults in safe learning environments.

We’ve also made strategic investments to enhance learning and preparation, not only at the university level but also throughout the education system. Strategic initiatives to help Minnesota schools better prepare young people for college – such as the Consortium for Postsecondary Academic Success and the Minnesota P-16 Partnership – benefit all students in Minnesota but explicitly focus on helping students of color, low-income students, and students whose first language is not English.

The University of Minnesota has made significant strides to improve access to and affordability of higher education through record levels of private fundraising and careful allocation of internal resources. The groundbreaking Founders Free Tuition Program for low-income students, for example, is making the college dream a reality for thousands of young people each year who might not have otherwise had the opportunity. And not only have we raised roughly $200 million for the Promise of Tomorrow Scholarship Drive, but donors are finding new and creative ways to ensure both access and success.

The McGuire Scholars Program, for example, provides additional grant funding to students who benefit from the Founders Free Tuition Program. These additional grants cover 90% of the total cost of attendance. They also provide enhanced academic advising and a bridge program to facilitate the transition from high school to college. The program supported 77 students last fall and an additional 50 this year – and the results announced last month are compelling:

- Once enabled to focus on their studies, 95% of the students continue at the university for a second year (versus 88% of the general population).
- They also achieved higher than expected grades, despite somewhat lower ACT scores.
- In addition, nearly 75% of McGuire scholars are students of color, and 90% fall under federal Pell guidelines for low-income students, underscoring...
our commitment to diversity and meeting the needs of underserved populations in Minnesota.

This combined strategy (Founders program plus McGuire program) has been effective in recruiting, retaining, and supporting the success of students through their critical first year of college and beyond. We are further analyzing these early numbers, but I suspect we may find that we are attracting the highest-caliber students in these underserved populations and that these students are outperforming not only their peers here but also those nationally!

Of course, research and education are only valuable when applied to real-world needs and societal problems. Our recent strategic positioning efforts have provided us with an opportunity to revitalize our land-grant mission. For example, University of Minnesota Extension has been reorganized to better meet the needs not only of our rural populations but of urban and suburban youth and families as well. The University Northside Partnership is a prime example of our urban agenda in action – a pilot opportunity to develop sustainable engagement focused on building human capacity, strengthening communities, and promoting urban health in neighborhoods bordering our campus.

The University also supports community youth initiatives such as STEP-UP (Short-Term Education Program for Underrepresented Persons), an innovative program that encourages young people to learn the value of work in a nurturing environment. These few examples illustrate our conviction that it is imperative for any outstanding public university, and all of us together, to celebrate and commit to our civic responsibilities to improve the lives and futures of our nation’s children.

I see these efforts as part of a continuum of children and youth development from birth through postsecondary education. The early development – physical, mental, and emotional – of a child sets his or her direction for life, but development doesn’t cease at age 6 or at age 16. At each new stage in life – beginning school, reaching puberty, moving to a new community – the ability to adjust and thrive is dependent on the quality of experiences and support that have brought him or her to that point.

In addition, getting our children and youth off to a strong start has lifelong implications for all of us. We live in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, and the need for a highly educated workforce is expected to grow during the course of this century, while the numbers of youth and working adults are expected to shrink. Children whose education, physical health, and mental health have not been attended to will likely be left behind, and each person who is left behind will contribute further to the scarcity of educated workers and engaged global citizens.

Today, in the midst of difficult financial times, some may suggest that it is time to lessen our commitment to the public good and turn our attention...
inward. I believe instead that we must strive to renew our commitment to, and our investment in, public service and public needs.

I referenced Socrates earlier; another ancient Greek thinker, Diogenes, is credited with saying, “The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.” Today’s children are tomorrow’s parents, teachers, workers, and leaders, and the quality of their childhood experiences will have a direct bearing on their ability to contribute as adults. This nation’s children must be nurtured before they arrive on our campuses or workplaces – or they will likely turn away from education toward a lesser future.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume is part of the Human Capital Research Collaborative, a partnership of the University of Minnesota and Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis devoted to understanding the determinants of well-being and the effects of social programs on improving health and well-being. Many individuals, centers, and organizations made this volume possible. At the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Rob Grunewald, Wendy Davis, Diane Wells, and Joan Gieseke were instrumental in planning, organizing, and providing technical support. We thank Rich Weinberg, Karen Cadigan, Sara Zettervall, and Karen Anderson in the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development for valuable assistance in planning and coordination. We are especially grateful to the centers and institutions that provided funding for the preparation of the volume and the conference on which it is based, including the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, the McKnight Foundation, and the University of Minnesota President’s Initiative on Children, Youth, and Families, Center for Early Education and Development, and Consortium on Early Childhood Development.