

Parenting Promotes Social Mobility Within and Across Generations

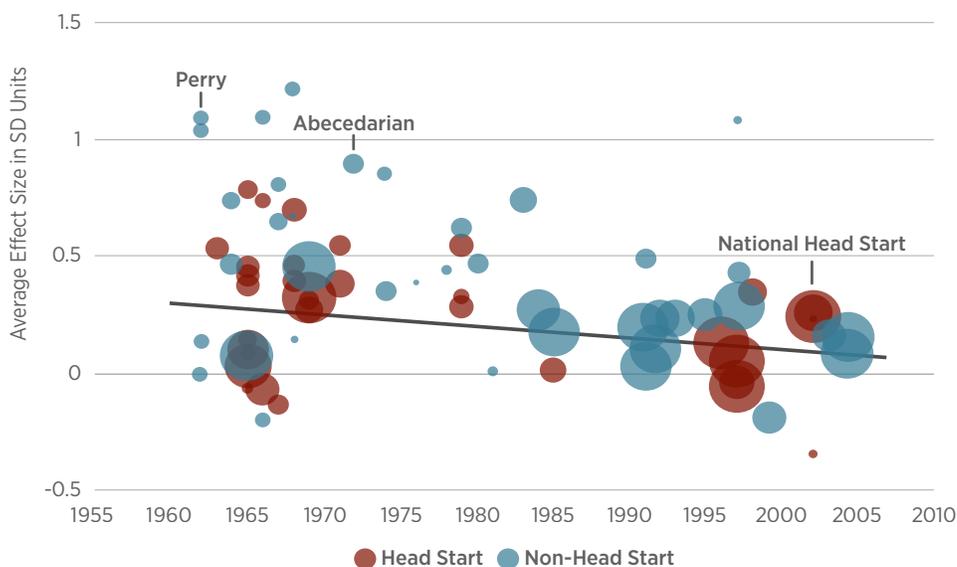
Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-145, [“Parenting Promotes Social Mobility Within and Across Generations,”](#) by Jorge Luis García, Clemson University; and James J. Heckman, University of Chicago

While most approaches to early childhood development (ECD) programs focus on finding the “best program” to implement, this paper focuses on common mechanisms and relationships that transport across environments to reveal the power of fostering parenting or parental investment as essential to effective ECD.

Recent research has made claims that place of residence during childhood is an important determinant of social mobility, stimulating interest in policies that promote such mobility. On the other hand, an established and more often-replicated body of literature emphasizes the role of family influence, primarily that of the mother. This paper contributes to this literature by critically analyzing programs meant to enrich family life and the early lives of children, with an eye toward the long run.

Much of the current literature is unclear about how best to supplement family life. Some advocate income transfers, but childhood disadvantage encompasses more than income to include parental characteristics like education, mental health, parenting style, or quality of home life. Also, childhood disadvantage might equally encompass the quality of parent-child interactions, which are known to foster child development.

Figure 1 • Average Impact of Early Childcare Programs at End of Treatment



Source: Duncan and Magnuson (2013). Note (directly from source): This figure shows the distribution of 84 program-average treatment effect sizes for cognitive and achievement outcomes, measured at the end of each program's treatment period, by the calendar year in which the program began. Reflecting their approximate contribution to weighted results, "bubble" sizes are proportional to the inverse of the squared standard error of the estimated program impact. There is a weighted regression line of the effect size by calendar year.

Figure 1 offers an illustration of the crude meta-analyses that often dominate discussion in the recent literature, and which compare programs that differ greatly in terms of target populations, interventions administered, and measures used to gauge success. The figure compares programs that originated without any attempt at standardizing the populations studied, that are based on measures taken during early childhood and shortly after the end of the programs, and that do not consider their lifetime consequences. Likewise, assessments of these programs are incomplete.

This paper takes a different approach. When the authors examine influential programs that supplement the family lives of children, they do so with an emphasis on long-run child development and with a focus on understanding the mechanisms underlying successful programs in all populations. In doing so, they isolate a central component that promotes child development: parenting.

All of the successful programs that the authors study promote parenting—attachment, guidance, and support—even though the studies themselves are superficially very different. Some are omnibus programs that have many features promoting child development. Others are more focused, home-visiting programs, that are much less expensive and demanding to operate than omnibus programs. Either way, the authors' discovery of this common thread across successful programs is supported by powerful evidence on the effectiveness of low-key, and low-cost, home-visiting programs.

Bottom line: Parents and parenting skills are key. Advocates who hope to develop the next best ECD program by, for example, improving teacher and facility quality, or increasing the supply of nurses and other professional personnel, are largely barking up the wrong tree. Instead, by searching for common mechanisms and relationships that transport across environments over the long term, this research reveals the power of parenting programs that foster the home life of children, and, thereby, promote social mobility within and across generations.

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