The Future of Children
PRINCETON-BROOKINGS

Helping Parents, Helping Children: Two-Generation Mechanisms

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It's a stark fact: Despite decades of efforts to give them a leg up through preschool and other early-childhood initiatives, children from poor families still show up for kindergarten far behind children from wealthier families, and they fall further behind during the school years.

Poor children's school problems start with the quality of the home environment. Parents and the home environment they create exert a powerful influence on children, beginning before they are born and continuing throughout childhood. Study after study has shown large differences in the home environment by income, all of them favoring children from more affluent families. For example, among many other disadvantages, poorer children spend less time reading or being read to, spend less time talking with adults, and hear far fewer words each week.

Because the home environment is so important for children's development, many people think that "two-generation" programs, which serve parents and children simultaneously with high-quality interventions, can be more effective (and perhaps more efficient) than programs that serve them individually. The hope is that we can work through parents to make preschool interventions more effective, while helping parents at the same time. Several promising demonstration programs are under way.

This issue of *Future of Children* assesses past and current two-generation programs. But it goes much further than that. The editors identified six widely acknowledged mechanisms or pathways through which parents, and the home environment they create, are thought to influence children's development: stress, education, health, income, employment, and assets. Understanding how these mechanisms of development work—and when, where, and how they harm or help—should aid us in designing interventions that boost children's intellectual and socioemotional development, strengthen families, and help close academic gaps between students from poor and more affluent families. Here's an overview of what we found, along with the implications for public policy:

Two-Generation Programs

Programs that enroll parents in education or job training at the same time that they enroll their children in high-quality child care have potential to enhance children's development. The most promising programs combine three elements: they building strong connections between components for children and adults, rather than confining children's and parents' programs to separate silos; they ensure that children and their parents receive services of equal duration and intensity; and they incorporate recent advances in both education and workforce development.

Stress

Severe stress in young children's lives—whether from violence, harsh parenting, or the burden of poverty itself—can undermine their neurobiology in ways that disrupt their health, social competence, and ability to succeed in school and life. But there is hope for children who experience chronic stress in their homes and neighborhoods, because the effects of stress can be

minimized or ameliorated by adults—including parents, foster parents, and teachers—who have been trained to give the children sensitive, warm, and consistent caregiving. High-quality preschool programs, as well as high-quality home-visiting programs, have been shown to help reduce the developmental harm that stress can cause.

Education
Parents' education strongly affects their children. Better-educated parents have children who are themselves better educated, healthier, wealthier, and better off in almost every way than children of parents with less education. Thus programs that increase parents' education levels can strengthen many aspects of their children's development.

Health
Parents' health and children's health are intimately linked because of the genes, physical environments, and behaviors they share. Because of this close connection between parents' and children's health, programs to improve parents' health can improve their children's health as well, with far-reaching effects—healthier children go further in school and earn more as adults.

Income
Parents living in poverty can't afford important resources that would support their children's development, with a host of negative consequences. Income supplements to poor parents can help, but the timing is important—developmental neurobiology strongly suggests that increased income would have the greatest effect during children's early years.

Employment
Despite its financial and other advantages, parents' (and especially mothers') work can also be bad for children, particularly when parents work long or nonstandard hours at stressful, low-paying jobs and place their children in poor-quality care. We can ameliorate the problem by expanding workplace flexibility; providing high-quality child care; and helping low-income parents train for, find, and keep a well-paying job with benefits.

Assets
Programs that help poor families build assets show promise for helping children succeed, especially savings programs that match disadvantaged parents' deposits. The most promising programs share several features: they are opened early in life; they are opened automatically, with no action required from the recipients; and they come with an initial deposit.

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The Future of Children is a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. For more information on *The Future of Children* please visit: www.futureofchildren.org.