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The Future of Our Children

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The *Journal of Applied Research on Children* is proud to publish this special issue “The Critical Years: Research and Progress in Early Education and Early Brain Development” to disseminate data-oriented articles on the most pressing early brain development and early education related issues and what programs and policies are needed.

A proven connection exists between a child’s early experiences and his or her later mental, physical, social and emotional progress. In alliance with these findings, there has been some shifting of the responsibility for educational achievement (or lack thereof) from the schools, which do not usually begin instruction before age 5, to the parents, caregivers and child care centers. It is these forces that most influence the learning atmosphere of a child’s initial years. There is a growing realization among educators, policy-makers, researchers and public service organizations that achievement gaps begin far earlier than once thought and earlier redress is crucial. However, for many parents, finding, let alone affording, quality early education is very difficult.

Researchers, academics, and practitioners often proclaim the latest challenge revealed by research to be “the most important issue” facing children. In this case that emphasis may be justified; early education is that significant but the barriers to equal access are also substantial. For a majority of families, either parents, or the single parent, are working outside of the home as a necessity. Yet still, in many parts of the country the belief pervades that government assistance with early education, child care, pre-school programs and the like are not only unneeded, but that they represent the insidious encroachment of a “nanny state”. For public policy, this sentiment is one of the most daunting obstacles in the path to true educational equality.

It is crucial, then, to impart a better understanding of both the vast size of the low-income population for whom early education is essential, and the reality that for this group especially, early education and child care in our country are far less than optimal in quality and even availability.

Children At Risk recently completed two pieces of research in the area of early education in Texas. One focused on subsidized child care and the other on the impact of Pre-K on third grade reading scores. In the first study, funded by the Kellogg Foundation, we found that the State of Texas receives over \$500 million a year from the federal government for subsidized child care. Despite this large sum, Texas did not emphasize best practice standards for quality child care.

The second study, funded by the Meadows Foundation showed that high quality, full-day Pre-K, followed by high quality K-3 schooling were associated with significantly higher reading scores for low-income

children. While this isn't the first study of its kind, it does nicely illustrate the potential disconnect between what the data demonstrate and public policy.

Some may view the work of early education as taking care of low-income children, yet the stakes are actually significantly higher. Early education is likely the easiest—perhaps the only— way to break the circle of poverty and ensure that the next generation is as prepared as possible to compete in an increasingly competitive global environment. Most importantly, this is something that is relatively low cost compared to the tremendous implications for the future of our children.

The articles presented in the issue of the journal add to the already immense body of work that support the conclusion that we are doing far too little to insure the success of our youngest low income children. The articles in this issue span the subject of early education from behavioral and developmental science, early language development, early childhood interventions, and provide fresh insights and data that should fuel the desire to improve the state of early education in the United States. We hope that it will inspire all readers to take action for children.