



Public opinion polls suggest that 70 percent of adults want to see children receive quality education before kindergarten, partly because of the irresistible idea that “starting early,” and ensuring that children arrive in school ready to learn, is the best way to generate happy, healthy, and productive adults. In brief, quality pre-K experiences can teach children the skills that make it easier for them to learn new skills in early elementary school: that is, skills beget skills.

Studies document that those who participate in a pre-K program have a significant advantage in kindergarten in terms of educational achievement. Yet in a major puzzle for researchers, during elementary school the achievement-test scores of children who attended prekindergarten tend to converge with the test scores of children who did not, a phenomenon commonly called *fadeout*. At the same time, we see long-term effects on adult outcomes—for example, people who attended prekindergarten commit fewer crimes and attain more years of schooling.

Although some policymakers still question the value of pre-K education, the weight of the evidence presented in this issue of *Future of Children* indicates that high-quality pre-K programs can indeed play an important role in improving later outcomes, particularly for children from more disadvantaged families. At the same time, significant questions remain. Why do we see a convergence in test scores in elementary school and yet potentially large impacts on other outcomes in the long term? What produces the variation in impacts seen among more recent programs? What’s the best way to train teachers to be effective in the classroom? What are the key components of a high-quality program? These questions highlight the need for sound research that attempts to get inside the black box of a pre-K education.

This issue takes a fresh look at the evidence for prekindergarten’s effectiveness, its role in setting the foundation for later academic learning, and its integration with K–3 education—and what policy makers might do to both to strengthen preschool education and to ensure that children retain its benefits through the early elementary grades. The 10 articles examine:

- the efficacy of prekindergarten in both the short term and the long run;
- the economic benefits of pre-K programs into adolescence and adulthood, compared to their costs;
- the development and evaluation of curricula focusing on several areas of learning—literacy, mathematics and science, and attention and behavioral regulation;
- the ingredients of a quality learning experience, and the education, training, and compensation of teachers;
- successful practices for teaching young children with special needs;
- how best to teach English language learners; and

- the effectiveness of integrating parenting programs into pre-K–3 education.

Key findings from the issue include the following.

Lack of integration

Pre-K and K–3 programs seem to exist in separate silos. For example, educational preparation, compensation, and professional development look very different for preschool teachers than they do for the elementary school teaching workforce, with preschool teachers at a disadvantage in every respect. We must start considering the education of young children to be part of the educational system, and integrating it with elementary and secondary education. Because learning is cumulative, our educational system—including prekindergarten—will be most effective only when each level builds seamlessly on the previous one.

Quality is crucial, and teacher-student interactions are key

Ensuring that children learn in high-quality classrooms throughout the pre-K–3 years is important in many ways, from reinforcing the gains children make in prekindergarten to helping young English language learners succeed. The key indicator of quality in early childhood classrooms is teacher-student interactions that are characterized by teachers’ sensitivity to individual needs, support for positive behavior, and stimulation of language and cognitive development. However, we still don’t know the best way to prepare teachers to deliver high-quality interactions and learning in their classrooms. And taking high-quality programs to scale has proved difficult to accomplish.

Children can learn more

All three articles that examine aspects of curricula—literacy; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); and executive function—conclude that young children are capable of learning more than we currently teach them. Such content can be delivered in many ways. In each case, we have curricula and practices whose efficacy has been clearly demonstrated—if teachers receive the training and professional development to use them well.



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.