

## A RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

### Early childhood programs: Supporting a strong start to life



High quality early childhood programs are an important way we can help provide children with the best start to life.

This is particularly important for young children living in the most socially disadvantaged areas, where their risk of poor developmental outcomes is much higher compared to children in the least disadvantaged areas.

These programs can help ensure all children can reach their full potential. They can also assist in addressing the social and health inequalities that can emerge in the earliest years of life, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage.

#### Good foundations and clear benefits

During early childhood, the quality of a child's relationships and their experiences help lay the foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing.

By improving the quality of their environments and experiences, we can provide the crucial building blocks for a child's optimal development.

Exposure to negative experiences, such as a lack of responsive care and stressful environments, can have far-reaching consequences throughout their life.

This is why the early years are the best time to provide the building blocks for a child's optimal development, by improving the quality of their environments and experiences.



Good quality early childhood programs promote a healthy start by helping protect children from the harmful impact of adversity such as poverty.

These programs can also work to reduce recognised risk factors, to positive influence a child's developmental outcomes.

Early childhood programs are associated with better educational success, cognitive development, social-emotional development and good health behaviours among children at-risk.

These programs also benefit society more broadly by reducing the likelihood of a child becoming involved with the justice system, while also increasing their levels of social participation.

And, there are clear economic benefits with the programs delivering substantial cost savings for governments.

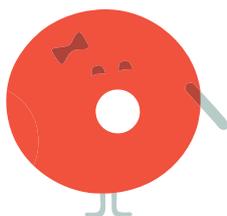


#### Reference

1. Monks, H. (2018). Early childhood programs: Supporting a strong start to life [Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/>

## Types of programs

A number of promising early childhood programs have been adopted nationally and internationally. Each differ in their approach, duration and outcomes but generally include programs with a primary focus around:



**Maternal and child health:** Improving the quality of the pre-and post-natal environment and addressing risk factors, such as poor nutrition and social isolation. Examples include: The Nurse Family Partnership program and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) special supplemental nutrition program.

**Early learning:** Promoting educational opportunities and school readiness, either in a home learning environment or within structured centre-based preschool programs. Examples include: The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPO) program, Parents as Teachers, the Abecedarian Preschool Program, HighScope Perry Preschool Program and the Chicago Child-Parent Center program.

**Positive parenting:** Enhancing the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents to care for their child, and respond effectively to their child's challenging behaviour. Examples include: The Triple P-Positive Parenting program and the Incredible Years parenting program.

## Adapting to local communities

The right early childhood program, at the right time, can have a positive and lasting impact on children's lives. However, no one program offers a one-size-fits-all solution.

For this reason, it is important programs are adapted to cultural and local contexts.

They also need to be high quality, comprehensive, well-timed and long and intense enough to be effective.

However, further research into early childhood programs is required to identify how effective they are in real-world settings over time.

More research is also needed to identify the "active ingredients" of early childhood programs that provide the best outcomes.

## Finding the right approach

Some early childhood programs focus on improving outcomes for children and families identified as being at risk due to economic disadvantage or other adversity.

However, this can have an unintended effect of stigmatising disadvantaged populations.

Others adopt a universal approach, where the program is available to all children and families who would like to participate.

However, this may mean that the programs are not as readily available for families who are most in need of these services.

By offering early childhood programs universally with the inclusion of additional services for those that are disadvantaged, outcomes for all children can be improved.

A suite of locally-relevant programs should be used to envelop the different aspects and stages of child development, and the range of environments that can influence children's development.

## Summary

High-quality early childhood programs can make a dramatic difference in the lives of children and should be available to all, with additional supports for those experiencing the most challenges.

There are a number of programs that have a sound evidence base that should be considered for implementation.



The success of these programs points to the power of prevention and demonstrates the lasting impact quality early childhood education can make in the lives of disadvantaged children.