

Early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica yields better pay in adulthood

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A small child in Mumbai, with a shaved head, eating bread with her hand.
Credit: Wen-Yan King/Wikipedia

In the Friday (May 30) edition of the journal *Science*, researchers find

that early childhood development programs are particularly important for disadvantaged children in Jamaica and can greatly impact an individual's ability to earn more money as an adult.

The 20-year study, "Labor Market Returns to an Early Childhood Stimulation Intervention in Jamaica" by University of California, Berkeley, professor Paul Gertler, an economist at the Haas School of Business and the School of Public Health, and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman of the University of Chicago, tracks the employment status of adults who once lived in the poor Kingston neighborhood as toddlers in the 1980's. Those exposed to high-quality psychosocial stimulation have positive earnings and better economic status today.

In the program, designed by Sally Grantham-McGregor of University College London and Susan Walker of the University of West Indies, community health workers made weekly home visits and taught mothers how to play and interact with their [children](#) in ways that promote cognitive and emotional development. For example, mothers were encouraged to talk with their children, to label things and actions, and to play educational games with their children, emphasizing language development and the use of praise to improve the self-esteem of mothers and children.

Mirroring the mission of the Head Start program in the United States, this simple intervention focused on reducing developmental delays faced by children in poverty.

Twenty years later, the researchers interviewed 105 of the study's original 127 child participants who were now adults. They found that children randomized to participate in the program were earning 25 percent more than those in the control group, enough of an increase to match the earnings of a non-disadvantaged population. The intervention compensated for the economic consequences of early developmental

delays and reduced later-life inequality.

"To our knowledge, this is the first long-term, experimental evaluation of an [early childhood](#) development program in a developing country," said Gertler, who also works with the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA), a UC Berkeley-based research network designing anti-poverty programs for low- and middle-income countries.

This study adds to the body of evidence, including Head Start and the Perry Preschool programs carried out from 1962-1967 in the U.S., demonstrating long-term economic gains from investments in early childhood development.

"Head Start programs are critical to breaking the cycle of poverty," said U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), a member of the Labor and Education Appropriates Committee. "By investing in the academic and developmental needs of young children, we are preparing them to thrive in the economy of the future.

Results from the Jamaica study show substantially greater effects on earnings than similar programs in wealthier countries. Gertler said this suggests that early childhood interventions can create a substantial impact on a child's future economic success in poor countries.

"We now have tangible proof of the potential benefits of early childhood stimulation and the importance of parenting in a developing country. At a time when inequality around the globe is increasing, it is encouraging to see how much good can be accomplished with early intervention," Gertler said.

More information: "Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica," by P. Gertler et al. *Science*, [www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/ ... 1126/science.1251178](http://www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/.../1126/science.1251178)

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