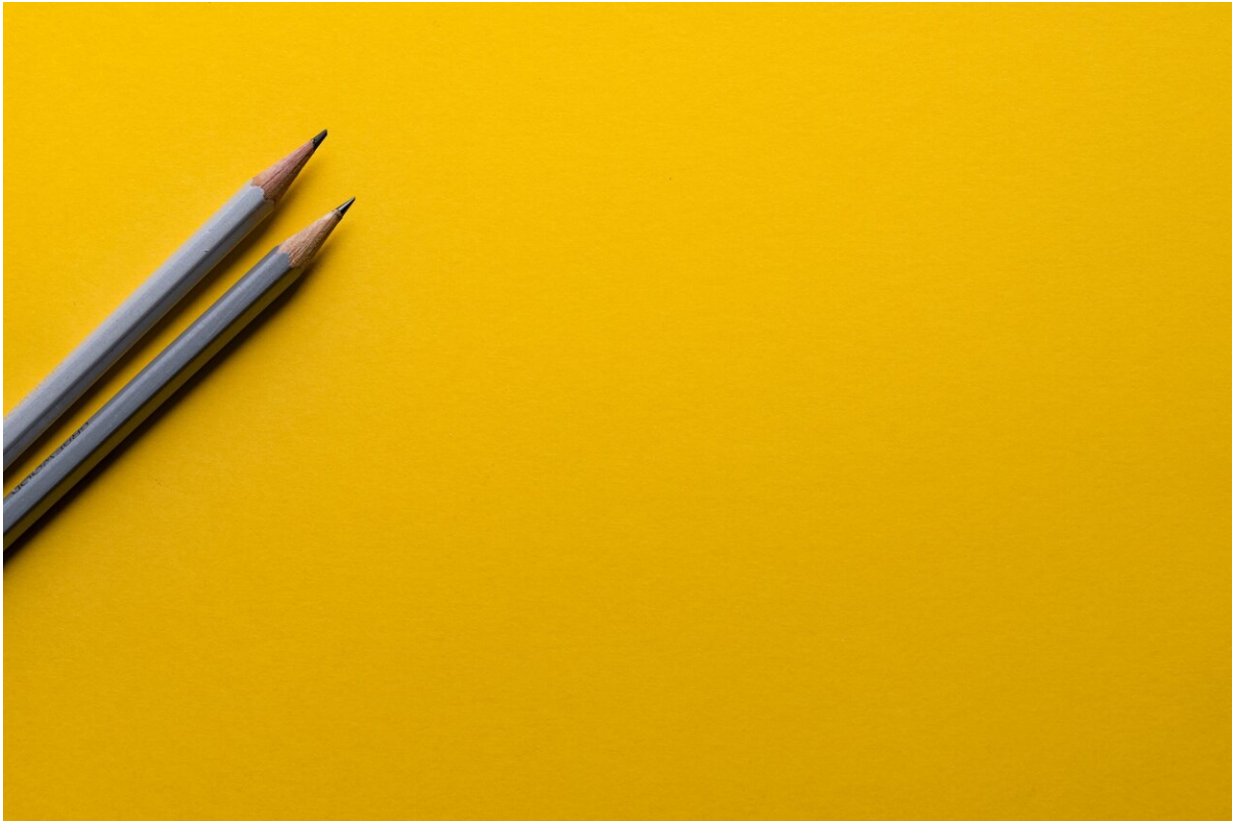


Preschool education can benefit generations of families

May 15 2019, by Jack Wang



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Early childhood education programs can impact life outcomes in ways that span generations, according to new research from Nobel laureate James Heckman.

In a pair of companion papers released this week, the pioneering University of Chicago economist found that the children of those who participated in a landmark 1960s study still saw improvements in education, health and employment. The children saw such benefits without participating in the same preschool program as their parents—suggesting that early education can contribute to lasting upward mobility and help break cycles of poverty.

"For the first time, we have [experimental evidence](#) about how a case of early childhood education propagates across generations," said Heckman, the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics, whose groundbreaking work on the benefits of early childhood education has helped shaped the field.

The papers further expand on work originally done from 1962 through 1967, when late psychologist David Weikart designed the HighScope Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Working with a sample of 123 low-income African American children, Weikart and his colleagues randomly assigned 58 individuals to enter an enriched preschool environment, one that incorporated 2½-hour weekday sessions and weekly 1½-hour home visits with a certified public school teachers.

Heckman's new research draws from analysis of survey data, which accounts for approximately 85 percent of the original participants. When compared with children of non-participants, the children of the Perry Preschoolers were more likely to complete high school without suspension (67% to 40%) and more likely to be employed full time or be self-employed (59% to 42%). They also were less likely to have ever been arrested.

The original participants showed [better health](#) according to biomedical tests administered around age 55, and were also more likely to report their own children being healthy.

These latest findings are outlined in two papers that Heckman co-authored with UChicago predoctoral fellow Ganesh Karapakula: "The Perry Preschoolers at Late Midlife: A Study in Design-Specific Inference" and "Intergenerational and Intragenerational Externalities of the Perry Preschool Project."

Growing out of a collaboration with the nonprofit organization HighScope that began a decade ago, Heckman's research validates the return on investment in early childhood education, rigorously testing data to show that even future generations can continue to reap benefits.

Heckman, who directs the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago, said the new papers offer more evidence that successful early [education](#) programs hinge on engaging with children and building social and emotional skills. Fostering those sorts of environments, he said, can lead to better life outcomes than trying to measure cognitive improvements.

He added, however, that his research should push policymakers not toward universal pre-K programs, but to design interventions tailored to populations that are most in need and stand to benefit the most.

"I don't believe we can directly talk about how children in affluent cities would benefit if they were enrolled in the Perry Program," Heckman said. "Those [children](#) have significant benefits already. We should really understand that the lesson from a lot of this research has been about targeting."

More information: James Heckman, and Karapakula, G. The Perry Preschoolers at Late Midlife: A Study in Design-Specific Inference, *Human Capital and Economic Opportunity Working Group*, 2019. hceconomics.uchicago.edu/research/design-specific-inference

James Heckman, and Karapakula, G. Intergenerational and Intragenerational Externalities of the Perry Preschool Project, *Human Capital and Economic Opportunity Working Group*, 2019.

hceconomics.uchicago.edu/research/perry-preschool-project

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