

Full-day preschool linked with increased school readiness compared with part-day

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Children who attended a full-day preschool program had higher scores on measures of school readiness skills (language, math, socio-emotional development, and physical health), increased attendance, and reduced chronic absences compared to children who attended part-day preschool, according to a study in the November 26 issue of *JAMA*.

Participation in high-quality early childhood programs at ages 3 and 4 years is associated with greater [school readiness](#) and achievement, higher rates of educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and lower rates of crime. Although publicly funded preschool such as Head Start and state prekindergarten serve an estimated 42 percent of U.S. 4-year olds, most provide only part-day services, and only 15 percent of 3-year-olds enroll. These rates plus differences in quality may account for only about half of entering kindergartners having mastered skills needed for school success. One approach for enhancing effectiveness is increasing from a part-day to a full-day schedule; whether this improves outcomes is unknown, according to background information in the article.

Arthur J. Reynolds, Ph.D., of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and colleagues investigated whether full-day preschool was associated with higher levels of school readiness, attendance, and parent involvement compared with part-day participation. The study consisted of an end-of-preschool follow-up of a group of predominantly low-income, ethnic minority children enrolled in the Child-Parent Centers (CPC) for the full day (7 hours; n = 409) or part day (3 hours on average; n = 573) in the 2012-2013 school year in 11 schools in Chicago.

Implemented in the Chicago Public Schools since 1967, the Midwest CPC Education Program provides comprehensive education and family services beginning in preschool. A scale-up of the CPC program began in 2012 in more diverse communities. The model was revised to incorporate advances in teaching practices and family services and included the opening of full-day preschool classrooms in some sites.

At the end of preschool, the researchers evaluated school readiness skills (in several domains) of the children, attendance and chronic absences, and parental involvement. They found that full-day preschool participants had higher scores than part-day peers on measures of socio-emotional development (58.6 vs 54.5), language (39.9 vs 37.3), math (40.0 vs 36.4), and physical health (35.5 vs 33.6). Scores for literacy (64.5 vs 58.6) and cognitive development (59.7 vs 57.7) were not significantly different.

Full-day preschool graduates also had higher rates of attendance (85.9 percent vs 80.4 percent) and lower rates of chronic absences (10 percent or greater days missed; 53.0 percent vs 71.6 percent; 20 percent or greater days missed; 21.2 percent vs 38.8 percent), but no differences in parental involvement.

"Full-day preschool appears to be a promising strategy for school readiness. The size and breadth of associations go beyond previous studies. The positive association of full-day preschool also suggests that increasing access to early childhood programs should consider the optimal dosage of services. In addition to increased educational enrichment, full-day preschool benefits parents by providing children with a continually enriched environment throughout the day, thereby freeing parental time to pursue career and educational opportunities. By offering another service option, full-day preschool also can increase access for families who may not otherwise enroll," the authors write.

They add that these findings need to be replicated in other programs and contexts.

In an accompanying editorial, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Ph.D., of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, Ann Arbor, Mich., writes that although the associations found in this study were statistically significant, "they may not be substantial enough to justify the larger expense of full-day preschool, essentially twice that of part-day preschool."

"This must be debated and discussed by parents, educators, and policy makers and the longer-term effects and economic returns studied. But the findings are large enough to assure parents and the rest of the public that the positive benefits found for high-quality part-day preschool were found in high-quality full-day preschool to an even greater extent."

"In part, the importance of the study by Reynolds and colleagues is that it represents a contemporary sample of children and their families. As the demand for [preschool](#) programs shifts from part-day to full-day, it is important to know whether this shift is educationally valuable as well. The study by Reynolds and colleagues provides evidence that high-quality, full-day programs are educationally more valuable than part-day programs."

More information: [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2014.15376](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2014.15376)
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