

Study shows preschool benefits middle-class kids, with biggest boost for black youngsters

May 31 2017, by Kathleen Maclay



Credit: University of California - Berkeley

Preschools that strongly promote academics boost the early literacy and math skills of children from middle-class families, according to a nationwide study released today by researchers at the UC Berkeley.

"This is the first time that we have seen remarkable gains for the average preschooler nationwide," said Bruce Fuller, a UC Berkeley professor of education and public policy, who directed the research.

Educators and scholars have long agreed that quality preschool yields sustained benefits for poor [children](#), while earlier studies revealed disappointing results from average pre-K programs for middle-class peers.

Today's results, reported in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, tracked 6,150 youngsters from birth to 5 years of age. Researchers discovered marked gains when middle-class kids attend preschool classrooms where teachers spend considerably more time on oral language, pre-literacy skills and knowledge of mathematical concepts.

The early surge powered by pre-K continues to lift children from both middle-class and low-income homes during the kindergarten year, researchers said. These facets of cognitive development accelerate by at least three months for the average child nationwide after attending an academic-oriented preschool for one year, compared with children who remain at home during these early years.

"Many parents worry about undue pressure on young children when instantly pressed by teachers to tackle academic skills," Fuller said. "But preschool teachers who purposefully advance these proficiencies yield stronger gains for middle-class youngsters."

Black students in pre-K

The study finds that academic preschool packs the strongest punch for [black children](#) from low-income families, accelerating their pre-literacy and [math skills](#) by over four months in knowledge of math concepts,

relative to peers who remain at home through age 4.

The amount of time spent in pre-K is important, the researchers found. The average American child gains slightly from attending an academically oriented pre-K for more than 20 hours a week, relative to peers attending less often, while black children reap the most potent gains in pre-literacy and math skills when attending full-time.

The researchers observe that black children are more likely to be enrolled in publicly subsidized, academically oriented preschools, along with children in the South, while children of better-educated mothers are less likely to enter academically intense preschools.

"We have known that pre-K differently benefits poor and middle-class children," the authors write in the journal. "But much less is understood about what kinds of preschools lift the average American child." The UC Berkeley study begins to fill in this picture.

As many American families, while middle-class, are becoming more diverse in their ethnic or cultural heritage and literacy traditions, the researchers urged educators and fellow scholars to widen their search for how differing features of pre-K may benefit all children.

Social development questions

The UC Berkeley results also inform a widening debate about whether pre-K classrooms overly concentrate on academic or mental skills, while ignoring the nurturance of social skills.

"We can detect no advance in children's social development when attending preschools that stress academics, rather than learning through less structured play," said Fuller. At the same time, he emphasized that preschools stressing academic skills did not slow children's maturing

social skills.

The UC Berkeley team concludes that more must be learned about how complementary dimensions of pre-K quality, especially teacher-child interactions, might elevate social-developmental gains in academic-oriented preschools.

The findings arrive as pre-K advocates step up their calls for increased funding, from New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to President Trump's daughter and adviser, Ivanka.

De Blasio announced in April that he aims to provide universal pre-K access to all 3-year-old children citywide. Meanwhile, Ivanka Trump is urging expansion of tax credits to offset the high cost of child care, a device that would mostly benefit middle-class and affluent families.

This peer-reviewed report was co-authored by Fuller and a team of sociologists, psychologists and a methodological expert. Their work stems from the Latino Contexts and Early Development Project, directed by Fuller and established to identify mechanisms alive within integrated neighborhoods and schools that advance children's early growth. The latest work is largely funded by the Chicago-based Spencer Foundation.

These findings stem from a nationally representative sample of 6,150 children born in 2001, then tracked during the first five years of life. Oral language, along with growing understanding of words and mathematical concepts, were assessed in children's homes at about 2, 4 and 5 years of age.

More information: Do academic preschools yield stronger benefits? Cognitive emphasis, dosage, and early learning, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appdev.2017.05.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.05.001) ,

[gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default ... s_Fuller_May2017.pdf](https://gse.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Fuller_May2017.pdf)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Study shows preschool benefits middle-class kids, with biggest boost for black youngsters (2017, May 31) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-05-preschool-benefits-middle-class-kids-biggest.html>

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