

Scientists say a child-centric approach is the blueprint to improve communities

December 1 2023



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Communities can prosper by providing attentive education and social services to their youngest residents—but the challenge is for leaders to work together.

That is the message of Craig Ramey and Sharon Ramey, Virginia Tech distinguished research professors of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC, who presented details of a decades-long study that focuses on [early childhood education](#) and development.

In a [research article](#) in the journal *Medical Research Archives*, the scientists discuss lessons learned from the Abecedarian Project, a study that followed the children who participated in an early intervention program initiated by Craig Ramey and colleagues in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1971.

"Coordinated education, [health care](#), and well-thought-out [social services](#) with participation from the [private sector](#) make communities more attractive, bring in new business, and improve the [quality of life](#) for the people who are already there," said Craig Ramey, an original founder of the Abecedarian Project "Each segment of the community has to be included in these efforts because it allows for the scale-up that needs to occur for places that aspire to be a more attractive destination for families and businesses."

The scientists have gathered extensive evidence of how the Abecedarian approach has improved the trajectories of children's lives and suggest the findings can be used to realize more widespread improvements.

In the research article, the scientists present a set of vital standards associated with the successful implementation of child and family programs with the aim of integrating these scientifically validated approaches into a framework that leaders can use to enhance their communities.

"We've summarized 50 years of research since the landmark study began, pointing out successful replications of key interventions," said Sharon Ramey. "We believe that what we've learned is ready for global

application. There's ample reason to keep moving forward in this direction."

The Abecedarian Project has entered its fifth decade, examining the effects of educational, social, health, and family support services on high-risk infants who are now in their 50s.

In repeated interviews and examinations, the children who originally participated in the program displayed enduring benefits that have enhanced their careers, families, and social networks.

Some of the more recent findings from the Abecedarian Project show children who were given high-quality education at an early age—starting at six weeks old and continuing through their first five years of life—are more likely to be employed [full-time](#) and have better relationships with their parents as adults.

Even more recently, researchers demonstrated that [vulnerable children](#) who received stimulating and emotionally supportive learning experiences exhibit statistically [significant changes in brain structure](#) through middle age.

The Rameys are also professors in the Department of Psychology of the Virginia Tech College of Science.

More information: Sharon Landesman Ramey et al, Early Childhood Education that Promotes Lifelong Learning, Health, and Social Well-being: The Abecedarian Project and its Replications, *Medical Research Archives* (2023). [DOI: 10.18103/mra.v11i11.4590](https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v11i11.4590)

Provided by Virginia Tech

Citation: Scientists say a child-centric approach is the blueprint to improve communities (2023, December 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-scientists-child-centric-approach-blueprint-communities.html>

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