

EARLY SKILL FORMATION AND THE EFFICIENCY OF PARENTAL INVESTMENT

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Early Skill Formation and the Efficiency of Parental Investment ¹

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INTRODUCTION

Investment in early childhood is increasingly recognised as a key policy mechanism for ameliorating social disadvantage. Past studies have shown that children who participate in early childhood intervention programmes grow up to have fewer behavioural problems and criminal convictions, lower dependency on welfare, increased employment, and improved health. However, little is known about the mechanisms involved in producing these long-term effects.

This paper presents evidence on the early effects of Preparing for Life (PFL), an experimentally designed, home visiting programme which targeted disadvantaged families in Dublin. The programme began during pregnancy and continued until the study child started primary school. We examine programme

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effects when the study child is age 6, 12 and 18 months. This allows us to identify the specific areas where effects manifest early in the lifecycle.

PREPARING FOR LIFE

PFL was a five-year programme developed to improve the school readiness of children in a disadvantaged Dublin community. The programme was designed as a randomised control trial (RCT) in which all families who consented to take part were randomly assigned to either a high or a low treatment group.

Both the high and low treatment groups received development packs² annually and were invited to participate in workshops on nutrition and stress reduction. Both groups also had access to a support worker who could provide families with information on services available to families.

The high treatment group received two additional services. Firstly, each family was assigned a mentor who visited families in the home every fortnight. The role of the mentor was to build a good relationship with parents, provide them with high quality information and to be responsive to issues that arose. Secondly, parents in the high treatment group were invited to participate in a group-based parent training course. This course did not begin until the study child reached age 3, which is after the time period studied in this paper. By comparing outcomes of the low and high treatment groups, this paper investigates the impact of the mentoring component on child and parent outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our estimates indicate that the treatment effects are concentrated on parental decisions relating to the quality of the home environment and the level of care mothers provided for their children, with small to moderate effect sizes found.

Specifically, parents who received the home-visiting mentoring programme were more likely to have suitable learning materials in their home and carried out more activities with the child. Improvements were also observed in relation to the quality of care provided to children. However, with respect to the direct impact on children, little evidence of improvements in child development were found by 18 months.

In home visiting programs such as PFL, parents are conceived as the primary mechanism for change. This paper finds that the PFL programme improved some dimensions of parenting skills within a relatively short time frame, particularly regarding the level of appropriate care provided to children and the quality of the home environment.

² By the time the study child had reached 18 months of age, participating families had received the first and second development packs. The first developmental pack included a number of safety items, such as corner guards, angle latches, and heat sensitive spoons, plus a baby gym/play mat. The second pack included developmental appropriate toys such as puzzles, activity toys, and bricks.

The findings suggest that it takes time for these new parenting strategies and skills to have a direct impact on infant behaviour and development. Indeed, there is little evidence of improvements on key dimensions of child development by 18 months.

There are a number of potential explanations which may account for the absence of short term effects on child outcomes. Within the first 18 months of life, there is considerable variability in the rate at which children develop. Such variation makes it difficult to detect differences in problematic developmental delays within the first two years. This may explain why this study, similar to the majority of the home visiting literature, fails to identify early effects on child development.

This paper is part of a larger evaluation of the PFL programme. It is important to note that an evaluation of child outcomes when children were age five found significant positive effects on child health and development. This suggests that the early effects of the PFL programme on parents, which are presented in this paper, translated into benefits for children at later development stages. The PFL programme is now being rolled out in three communities. The final results can be found at the following website: <http://geary.ucd.ie/preparingforlife/>

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