

Poverty and parenting young children

Three panelists spoke on the topic of poverty and parenting young children. Ariel Kalil provided an overview of gaps by family income in child development outcomes, arguing that parenting is a major factor in this gap, and describing some “low-cost, light-touch” interventions that hold promise for strengthening the parenting skills of the disadvantaged. Lawrence Berger presented findings from a study looking at whether increasing income through the Earned Income Tax Credit reduces the incidence of child maltreatment among low-income unmarried families. The study found that increased income was associated with decreases in child neglect and child protective services involvement for this group, particularly for single-mother families. Helena Duch presented evidence from two programs for low-income families designed to promote school readiness through parental engagement, concluding that higher engagement is associated with improvements in some school-readiness measures, and that some simple interventions show potential for increasing the level of parental engagement. This set of articles summarizes their presentations.

The role of parenting in the intergenerational transmission of poverty

Ariel Kalil

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This article presents a brief overview of gaps by family income in some important child development outcomes. I argue that a big part of the mechanism in linking poverty to child development outcomes works through differences by family background in parenting, and I review efforts to narrow gaps in how parents interact with their children by family income. Finally, I describe my current research project, which draws on behavioral economics for insight into how parents make decisions about investing time with their children, how that process might differ by family background, and what promise those findings might hold for intervention efforts.

Achievement gaps by family background

A child’s birth circumstances have a large effect on his or her chances in life. Children of parents with high income and more education tend to have higher academic achievement and attainment than do children of parents with lower income and less education. Children who grow up in more advantaged families also have fewer behavior problems, are less likely to become teen parents, and are more likely to attend and to graduate from college. The advantages continue as children become adults; they are more likely than those who grew up poor to have jobs, their earnings are higher, their participation in welfare programs is lower, and they are healthier and live longer.

Figure 1 shows income-related gaps in cognitive and noncognitive school readiness skills for 4-year-old children

in the United States. There are large income-related gaps in all three cognitive measures (literacy, mathematics, and language test score); those in the higher income quintiles have higher scores compared to those in lower income quintiles. Although not as pronounced, gaps in behavioral dimensions of school readiness are also present, with incidence of conduct problems and hyperactivity decreasing as income rises. These gaps appear early, well before the start of formal schooling.¹ They also persist through children’s schooling years, and grow over time.²

Policy efforts intended to close these cognitive and noncognitive gaps have focused mainly on improving schools. While this school-based strategy may be more politically feasible than one that aims to change how parents choose to raise their children, it does not take into account evidence about the inequalities that already exist when children enter school, and does not address the lack of family resources, including parenting skills, that are necessary for effective early childhood development. Although high-quality school-based early childhood education for low-income children can play a role in closing skills gaps by income, it is not a sufficient solution. There has been much recent work showing that early education and care programs work to improve children’s life circumstances and are cost effective.³ It is important to note, however, that these findings are based on small-scale model programs. More research must be done to determine whether these programs can be scaled up to serve all the children who would be eligible for them.

The parenting gap

Inequality begins at home; it develops from the many differences in the ways that all parents, both advantaged and disadvantaged, interact with their children. Compared

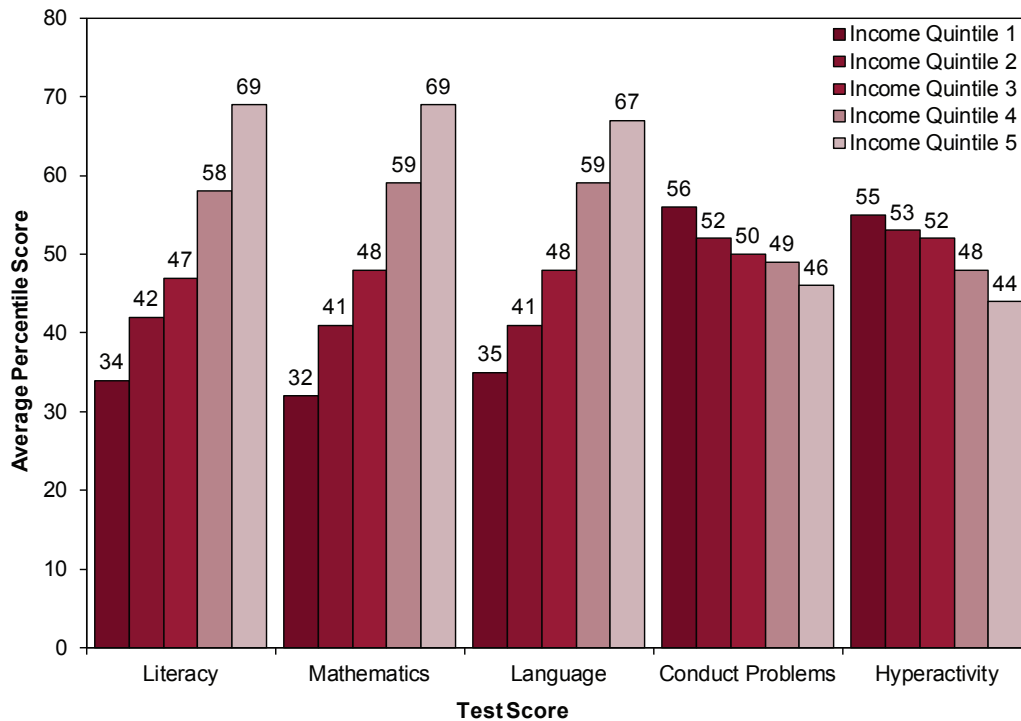


Figure 1. Income-related gaps in school readiness skills for four-year-old children in the United States.

Source: J. Waldfogel and E. Washbrook, "Early Years Policy," *Child Development Research* (2011). Reproduction of figure permitted under open access policy.

to parents with lower income and less education, parents with higher income and more education talk more to their children, are more emotionally engaged, ask their children more questions, have a less punitive approach to discipline, and use more varied vocabulary. In order to be effective, policies aimed at improving children's cognitive and noncognitive skills and closing the gap between children from low- and high-income families must recognize the importance of the family, the mechanisms through which families foster children's skills, and the stress under which many families operate.

Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook conclude that the single most important factor in explaining the poorer cognitive performance of low-income children relative to middle-income children is not income itself, but parenting style, in particular maternal sensitivity and responsiveness. They find that parenting style accounts for 19 percent of the gap in mathematics, 21 percent of the gap in literacy, and 33 percent of the gap in language.⁴ They identify the home learning environment as the second most important factor in explaining income-related gaps in school readiness, accounting for between 16 percent and 21 percent of the cognitive gap.⁵ Together, these two dimensions of parenting account for a substantial portion of the income-based gap in children's developmental outcomes.

Prior efforts to close the parenting gap

Prior research on the importance of parenting for children's developmental outcomes suggests that gaps in children's

skills could be narrowed if less-advantaged parents adopted the parenting practices of their more-advantaged peers. However, large-scale parenting interventions to date have yielded at best modest effect sizes, and often have no long-term effect on children's cognitive skills.⁶ There are a number of challenges inherent in fostering parenting and children's skills. First, some of the gaps are not obviously or readily filled by policy; as a society, we have long held the idea that parents should be able to raise their children as they wish. It is much easier to specify desired components for a model preschool program than to dictate specifically how parents should be interacting with their children. Second, most of the programs to date that we consider exemplary have been expensive. Third, many programs that are effective on a small scale may be less effective when scaled up. The final challenge is low take-up and attrition; for the most part, there seems to be a mismatch between what programs are offering and the programs parents seem to want to participate in.

While it may be tempting to conclude from past research that these challenges are too daunting and that policy interventions cannot be expected to change parenting behavior, there do appear to be lessons from behavioral science that can help policymakers understand how to motivate parents to follow the practices that parenting interventions are intended to encourage. Essentially, there are a series of behavioral bottlenecks that stand in the way of parents' aspirations for their children's development and complicate the day-to-day choices parents make in hopes of achieving those desired outcomes. For a variety of reasons, these bottlenecks may present a particular challenge for low-income parents.

One approach to closing the parenting gap: The Parents and Children Together project

A new study that I am leading illustrates the promise that inexpensive interventions hold for moving the needle on this very important issue of parent-child engagement. The Parents and Children Together (PACT) study tests “low-cost, light-touch” interventions designed to increase the amount of time that parents spend reading to their children. All parents in the study received a tablet containing a digital, recordable, story book reading application that they could use to read to their children. In addition, parents in the treatment group set weekly goals, and received daily text message reminders, weekly visual feedback on goal attainment, and social recognition when goals were met.

Over the six-week study period, parents in the treatment group spent an average of 160 minutes reading to their children, while those in the control group read for an average of 66 minutes.⁷ This 94-minute difference is statistically significant and substantial. Those in the treatment group read an average of three or four times per week to their children each week, whereas those in the control group read only once a week or not at all to their children. Follow-up work has found that this effect persists for at least three months after the end of the treatment.

Using a standard survey assessment, all parents in the sample were characterized as “patient” or “impatient.” The behavioral nudges had a much stronger effect on those identified as impatient (treatment group parents read 130 minutes longer over the study period) than those categorized as patient (treatment group parents read 19 minutes longer). This is not surprising, since the intervention was designed to remind parents of their goals and to provide a framework for them to follow through on their aspirations. “Patient” parents already understood the connections among their aspirations, behaviors, and long-term outcomes; they were thus already reading more minutes than the “impatient” parents, and did not have as much to gain from the intervention.

Policy implications

Many interventions that aim to change parental behavior have had little success, but the Parents and Children Together project shows that a low-cost approach of goal setting and reminders can motivate parents to follow through on their good intentions towards their children. These cost-effective behavioral tools offer a promising way to help parents engage with their children more often and more effectively. ■

³E. I. Knudsen, J. J. Heckman, J. L. Cameron, and J. P. Shonkoff, “Economic, Neurobiological and Behavioral Perspectives on Building America’s Future Workforce,” NBER Working Paper No. 12298, National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2006.

⁴J. Waldfogel and E. Washbrook, “Income-Related Gaps in School Readiness in the United States and the United Kingdom,” in *Persistence, Privilege, and Parenting: The Comparative Study of Intergenerational Mobility*, eds. T. M. Smeeding, R. Erikson, and M. Jäntii (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

⁵The home learning environment measure takes into account the amount of educational materials such as books or toys that are in the home; parent time spent using those materials with children, and time spent taking children to other environments such as libraries.

⁶F. F. Furstenberg, “The Challenges of Finding Causal Links between Family Educational Practices and Schooling Outcomes,” in *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*, eds. G. J. Duncan and R. J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011).

⁷S. E. Mayer, A. Kalil, P. Oreopoulos, S. Gallegos, “Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Parental Engagement: The Parents and Children Together (PACT) Intervention,” NBER Working Paper No. 21602, National Bureau of Economic Research (October 2015).

¹J. Waldfogel and E. Washbrook, “Early Years Policy,” *Child Development Research* (2011).

²M. J. Bailey and S. M. Dynarski, “Gains and Gaps: Changing Inequality in U.S. College Entry and Completion,” NBER Working Paper No. 17633, National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2011.