

Summary

Ensuring the Best Start in Life
Targeting versus Universality in Early Childhood Development
by Gillian Doherty

In the ongoing debate about the need for a pan-Canadian early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, one of the arguments often raised is that available public resources should instead be targeted to children most in need. Yet we know very little about the effectiveness of the targeted initiatives currently in place, which receive more than \$260 million per year. In this paper Gillian Doherty looks at the impact of these programs and whether they provide the highest social return in terms of public investment. This discussion leads to the larger question of whether a universal or targeted approach in ECEC is the best way to ensure that all children have the best possible start in life.

The author begins by reviewing Canadian early-intervention programs for children vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes and what we know about their impact on children's development. She reviews 13 initiatives, including parent-focused, child-focused and two-generation programs. For each, she examines the target population, services provided, duration of intervention, number of children/families receiving assistance and approach to staffing, as well as federal and provincial/territorial funding. She also assesses the relative effectiveness of these programs in terms of child development.

Based on her review of the research and evidence from Canada and the United States related to targeted programs, the author concludes that:

- Initiatives that target children directly with structured and centre-based programs have the most positive effect on vulnerable children's development.
- Although parent/family-focused interventions that attempt to improve parenting skills, education and/or employability may benefit parents by, for example, increasing their self-confidence, their effect on children's development is generally negligible.
- The effectiveness of group programs depends on their quality – that is, having well-trained staff, effective programming and appropriate staff-child ratios.
- The effectiveness of group programs also depends on the duration of intervention.

More generally, the study indicates that programs designed to assist vulnerable children are relatively few in number, and that they reach only a small number of children. Moreover, of the money invested in targeted programs, 60 percent is spent on initiatives that do not provide developmental programming and therefore have a negligible impact on the development of the children. And

since most programs are neither monitored nor evaluated, it is not even possible to determine whether they are reaching their intended clientele.

The author then examines the international evidence on the benefits of adopting a universal approach to assisting vulnerable children. She concludes that while the initial costs involved are higher than those for targeted programs, a universal approach is an attractive alternative for two reasons.

First, it would reach a higher proportion of vulnerable children. Doherty notes that while the incidence of vulnerability to poor developmental outcomes is highest among children living in the poorest families, recent research shows that children from all socio-economic groups can be vulnerable. Indeed, more than 70 percent of vulnerable children in Canada do not live in poor families. This means that programs for vulnerable children that are restricted to the lowest-income group fail to provide support to the majority of children experiencing difficulties. Experience in several countries shows that having affordable, widely available early childhood education programs results in high participation rates, which ensures that a higher proportion of vulnerable children not living in poverty are reached.

Second, the international evidence suggests that participation in nontargeted, high-quality ECEC, whether it is prekindergarten or ordinary child care, enhances the school-readiness of children from *all* socio-economic backgrounds and their subsequent academic success. The author also examines benefit/cost ratio estimates associated with targeted initiatives, universal prekindergarten and universal child care, and concludes that both targeted and universal ECEC initiatives can provide greater benefits to society than they cost.

Finally, Doherty assesses the implications of these results for Canada's policy on early childhood education. Given the lack of school-readiness of approximately 25 percent of five-year-olds, the relative ineffectiveness of targeted ECEC programs and the limited availability of high-quality child care services, she concludes that we need a change of strategy. In her view, we need to acknowledge that: (a) vulnerability to poor developmental outcomes occurs across all income levels, and that (b) there are no easily observable markers to identify all vulnerable children. Therefore, if the goal is to reach as many vulnerable children as possible, then ECEC programs must be universally available to all families who wish to use them. What is required is a nontargeted, evidence-based, cost-effective strategy and the necessary government funding and resources to make it work.