

Summary

Several studies published over the past few years have shown that a considerable number of young children in Quebec risk having their educational trajectories compromised by insufficient behavioural or cognitive maturity. This study by Christa Japel allows us to gain more knowledge about the conditions in which these children grow up and to better understand the links between these and the children's later adaptation, that is, their cognitive performance and behaviour when they reach prekindergarten and kindergarten age. The author used the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD) to trace a detailed portrait of a cohort of children born in 1997 and 1998. The data were collected over seven data points when children were 5 months, 17 months, 29 months, 41 months, 4 years, 5 years and 6 years of age.

Informed by the results of several studies conducted in Canada and other countries, which made it possible to get a coherent picture of the risk factors that can compromise a child's optimal development and to determine that behaviour and cognitive skills are important predictors of later adaptation, the author examines the connections between the risk factors in the lives of this cohort of Quebec children and their scores on cognitive and behaviour tests. Cognitive performance was measured using vocabulary and numerical tests administered in prekindergarten and kindergarten, while the data on behavioural adaptation are based on information provided annually by the person who best knows the child.

The author thus profiles "at-risk" children and examines the consequences vis-à-vis their behaviour and their cognitive performance. More specifically, she examines the relationship between the number of risk factors in the children's lives at a given moment and their concomitant adaptation levels. She is also able to determine whether the risk factors that are present at the beginning of the child's life allow us to predict how the child will adapt in subsequent years. Above all, this study presents a longitudinal perspective and provides the opportunity to examine the links between the number of years that the child is in a situation of risk over the course of his or her early childhood and the indicators of adaptation in prekindergarten and kindergarten. Finally, thanks to detailed information collected about children's different nonparental care situations, it also allows us to see the extent to which at-risk children use these services and to what extent these services play a protective role for the children.

The results of this study show the following:

- In each data collection, nearly one quarter of the children surveyed by the QLSCD live with four or more risk factors.
- The majority of children in the sample were never exposed to this degree of risk. Nevertheless, more than one in five children have lived with four or more risk factors for at least three years before reaching the age of six.
- There is a steep gradient as the number of risk factors increases, both with respect to behavioural adaptation and cognitive performance.
- The presence of multiple risk factors at a very young age makes it possible to predict quite accurately these children's adaptation later in life.
- It is the number of risk factors, rather than their quality, that is associated with the child's behavioural and cognitive trajectory, even though certain factors, such as family income, mother's education and the child's health at the age of five months, have particularly significant weight with respect to the child's later adaptation.
- The score attained by vulnerable children on behavioural scales is higher by 20 to 70 percent, depending on their age and the indicator observed, than that of children who have grown up with few or no risk factors.
- Children who live with four or more risk factors are nearly twice as likely to end up in the highest quartile on the aggressiveness scale than are children who live with no risk. Vulnerable children are also overrepresented in the lowest quartile on the tests measuring vocabulary and pre-math skills.
- All children benefit from prolonged attendance at a child care service, at least in the cognitive domain. However, the more a child is exposed to a life context with multiple risks, the less likely he or she is to have attended such a service.
- Only 12 percent of the children who were growing up in families whose income was above the low-income cut-off are vulnerable (that is, they are exposed to four or more risk factors), while 45 percent of the children whose family income is below that level are vulnerable. Nevertheless, the number of vulnerable children living in families above the low-income cut-off (206) is almost as high as the number whose family income is below that level (230).

On the basis of these results, the author makes several recommendations pertaining to school, preschool and family environments, early detection, and the organization and quality of child care services.