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High-quality early child care and education: The gift that lasts a lifetime

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Debate continues on Biden’s “Build Back Better” social infrastructure bill offering a historic expansion of child care and universal preschool. Early childhood education is a socially popular endeavor with strong bipartisan support and impressive evidence for meaningful impacts in the short and long term. Economic research examining the return on investment for early education suggests tremendous value ranging from \$4 to \$13 in return for every \$1 spent from impacts on educational attainment, employment, health, truancy, and criminality.

Much of the data used in these projections come from classic “gold standard” interventions like the Abecedarian and Perry preschool studies. These were highly resourced projects that provided high-quality early education experiences to families from under-resourced communities. Can the findings from these studies be generalized to large-scale modern programs with children from a range of economic backgrounds? This is what is proposed in the new infrastructure bill as a universal pre-K model.

A new study published in Child Development strongly suggests that sustained high-quality early education *can* have long-lasting impacts. Using the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study of early child care and youth development as its base, this research followed 814 subjects of the original sample until the young adults were 26 years of age. These young adults had attended a variety of child care and preschool settings that varied widely in their quality of care. As this was a study of development of everyday children in everyday environments, it included families from low-, middle-, and high-income backgrounds in several locations around the country with access to high, middling, or lower quality of care when they were in early childhood.

Remarkably, children from low-income backgrounds who had access to 24 months or more of high-quality early childhood education in their first five years were more likely to graduate from college and had higher salaries at age 26. In fact, the outcomes for these young adults who experienced sustained high-quality care were statistically indistinguishable from their higher-income peers.

Community-based early care and education, delivered at scale, can provide lasting impacts, and may serve as a catalyst for children's success later in life—particularly for those from less resourced environments. Importantly, high quality was necessary for achieving these long-term outcomes. Recent findings from a [study](#) by University of Virginia Professor Bob Pianta and his colleagues make a similar point. High-quality early child care increases children's readiness for school and narrows the so-called achievement gap by half. This means access to early education is not enough. Warm, safe, supporting environments that are rich with language and conversations, and offer many opportunities to play and engage in hands-on exploration are key. Sustained access is also critical in predicting long-term outcomes. Higher salary and college graduation rates were only evident for children who had two or more years of high-quality care.

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The data are clear. Early childhood programs that are sustained and high quality can have long-lasting impacts on children, preparing them for formal schooling and beyond with the added factor that early education paves the way for parents to be in the workforce. This is a win-win-win for society. But access alone and custodial care will not sow the benefits provided by high-quality early care programs.

As we continue the debate, let us keep the science of early learning clearly in mind. We need *high-quality* early childhood care to set children on trajectories that will enable them (and society) to thrive. The new research suggests that this goal is within our grasp and that it is scalable within everyday contexts.