

Messages for Evidence Based Policy

Using the Abecedarian Longitudinal Research Results to Inform Early Childhood Policy

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Message 1. **The field of early childhood education has research of high scientific quality.**

Three related research projects (the Abecedarian Project, Project CARE, and the Infant Health and Development Program) used the same intervention approach and curriculum¹. Together, these studies are randomized, longitudinal, multi-site, and published in peer-reviewed journals. This means this body of research meets high scientific standards (Ramey & Campbell, 1984, Wasik, et al. 1990, Ramey, et al., 1992).

Message 2. **There are a variety of long-term health benefits associated with preschool participation in an Abecedarian program.**

Abecedarian preschool program attendance reduces the likelihood of reporting risky behaviors at age 18 (McCormick et al., 2006), of being a teen parent or a marijuana user at age 21 (Campbell et al., 2002), or reporting symptoms of depression (McLaughlin et al, 2007). It increases the likelihood of following a healthy life style in young adulthood (Campbell et al., 2008),

Message 3. **Abecedarian preschool programs have a positive effect on the educational attainment of teen moms.**

Teenage parents of children who receive an Abecedarian program make gains in education and employment during the program and after it is over (Ramey et al., 2000).

Message 4. **Important and rapid cognitive growth happens early in life.**

Differences in the treated and untreated children were statistically significant by the time the children were 1½ years of age in the Abecedarian Project and Project CARE (Ramey & Campbell, 1984) and by 2 years of age in IHDP (IHDP, 1990).

¹ Differences in delivery of service include: CARE and IHDP used systematic, education-focused home visits whereas Abecedarian used as-needed social work home visits. IHDP lasted from birth to age 36 months whereas Abecedarian and CARE lasted from birth to kindergarten entry.

Message 5. All child care programs do not produce the same results.

Children who went to other child care programs in the community received a small benefit, but not the strong, long-lasting benefit of those who attended an Abecedarian child care program (Burchinal, Lee, & Ramey, 1989).

Message 6. *There is good news: those who need it most reap the greatest benefits from an early education program using the Abecedarian approach.*

The greatest cognitive gains from an Abecedarian program in the first three years of life accrue to the children of mothers with the least education (Ramey & Ramey, 1998).

Message 7. Vulnerable children and parents have to get an adequate amount of a program for it to really work.

The reduction of borderline and retarded development is directly proportional to the degree of participation (child care attendance, home visits completed, and parent meetings attended) in an Abecedarian program (Ramey, et al., 1992). A moderate to high level of participation in an Abecedarian program (child care attendance) during the first three years of life is needed to produce significant effect on cognitive development for low birth weight infants at eight years of age (Hill et al., 2004).

Message 8. An Abecedarian preschool program has a positive effect on reading and math achievement in school and into young adulthood. (A school-age follow-up program involving parents adds to this preschool effect, but does nothing by itself.)

The effects of an Abecedarian preschool program on reading and math achievement are evident in elementary school, secondary school, and early adulthood. The addition of a three-year, parent/school follow-up program adds to the preschool effect on reading achievement at age eight, but does not have an effect by itself (Ramey & Campbell, 1991).

Message 9. The odds of going to college increase for vulnerable children who have attended an Abecedarian program in the first five years of life.

At 21 years of age, 36% of children who had attended an Abecedarian preschool program were enrolled in college or had attended college compared to 12% of the randomly assigned control group.

Message 10. The odds of having a better job at age 21 increase for vulnerable children who have attended an Abecedarian program in the first five years of life.

Vulnerable children who receive an Abecedarian program in the first five years have an increased likelihood of attending college and of holding a Hollingshead category 4 (e.g. an electrician) or higher job at age 21. (Campbell et al., 2002).

Message 11. In early education programs, curriculum matters! Parents need to be interested in it, children need to master it, and they need to get enough of it.

Several variables related to the Abecedarian curriculum (high parental interest in *LearningGames*, child mastery of *LearningGames*, and the number of *LearningGames* activities implemented with child) measured over the first three years of life predict the child's cognitive status at age three (Sparling et al., 1991, Liaw et al., 1995).

Message 12. We know the basic features of a program that has an extensive track record of producing positive long-term results for children and families.

The Abecedarian approach includes:

- an educational philosophy affirming that children learn in all the activities of the day
 - a child care center that is well-designed and well-supplied
 - staff who are carefully selected; receive on-going training; and have program-centered, responsive supervision
 - on-site child health care and child nutrition
 - family social support services through parent meetings and/or home visiting
 - child transportation to the child care center as needed
 - a transition to school in the summer before kindergarten
 - an Abecedarian curriculum approach comprised of
 - individualized, game-like activities
 - conversational reading
 - responsive, enriched caregiving
 - language priority
 - a comprehensive, conceptual curriculum framework (Ramey et al., In press)
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The Abecedarian studies provide strong evidence for policies that support:

- **Comprehensive and integrated family services from a single location**
- **High quality programs that include 1. individualized game-like activities, 2. conversational reading, and 3. enriched caregiving**
- **Ongoing child care and family education starting with the birth to age 3 period for the most vulnerable children**

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