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❧ MYTH 29 ❧

**The benefits of preschool and kindergarten programs are not convincing
and thus not worth the investment.**

Are the arguments against supporting preschool and kindergarten credible? Darcy Ann Olsen (2006), formerly of the Cato Institute and now president of the Goldwater Institute in Arizona, writes, "For nearly 40 years, local, state, and federal governments and diverse private sources have funded early intervention programs for low-income children, and benefits to the children have been few and fleeting. There is also evidence that middle-class children gain little, if anything, from pre-

school. . . . Public preschool for younger children is irresponsible, given the failure of the public school system to educate the children currently enrolled" (p. 1). Elsewhere she concludes that kindergarten as well as early education have little to recommend them (Olsen & Snell, 2006). Olsen is not alone. Elizabeth Cascio (2010) wrote, "Kindergarten had no discernible impact on many of the long-term outcomes desired by policymakers, including grade retention, public assistance receipt, employment, and earnings. . . . These findings suggest that even large investments in universal early-childhood education programs do not necessarily yield clear benefits, especially for more disadvantaged students" (p. 68).

A common but misleading argument used by those against kindergarten and preschool education is that the benefits of these programs do not last. The argument drags a red herring across our path! The residue in later performance of students who have taken geometry and algebra, or studied Chaucer and chemistry, is also hard to demonstrate, even when the immediate benefits were easily demonstrable. For low-income students, gains from preschool may fade for another reason, such as attendance at regular public schools with high concentrations of other low-income children, affecting their school academic climate and safety. The schools these children attend also are likely to be staffed with younger and less well-trained teachers, and society spends less money per student on their education. It may not be preschool or kindergarten that has no benefits; rather it may be that preserving these benefits when children attend inadequate schools is hard to do.

Some anti-preschool and anti-kindergarten critics are producing junk science. The report by Olsen and Snell was determined by the National Education Policy Center to be an unreliable source of information, providing an inaccurate view of research on early childhood education (Barnett, 2006). And the blatant bias of some critics against the poor and minorities is as common as it is nasty. For example, Robert Weissberg (2013) wrote, "We cannot assume that low-income parents actually want their children's vocabulary upgraded or exposed to the art and music favored by the upper middle class. For these low-income parents, a physically safe, clean and nurturing environment with flexible hours is probably paramount. Narrowing academic gaps is undoubtedly far down their list for 'quality daycare.'"

Mr. Weissberg must be made to answer to John Dewey (1907): "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 19). Although we are not sure they are the best and wisest parents, it is clear that the wealthiest parents in the United States pay handsomely

for preschool and kindergarten. Tuition at the Horace Mann School in New York City (ironically, named for America's greatest proponent of free public education) currently costs \$39,100 annually. Would Olsen, Snell, and Weisberg call these parents stupid?

President Obama recently asked Congress to fund early childhood education for all children. The president draws on a large, convincing (although not always a consistent) body of research to support his recommendation. His proposal for a 10-year, \$75 billion appropriation for early childhood programs is supported by a group of presumably wise people—350 retired generals and admirals. What convinced these hard-headed decisionmakers, to whom we entrust the safety of our nation, to support these allegedly ineffectual programs?

One recent study by economists in the United Kingdom examined data from the international test called PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment (Mostafa & Green, 2012). They used data from the United Kingdom and Sweden, both of which had extensive programs of early childhood education, but the programs were not universal. That is, among the 15-year-olds tested in 2009, about 30% had not attended preschool. Not surprising, when they were younger, participation in early childhood programs was correlated with social class. The children of wealthier families, throughout the Western world, participate in preschool education at high rates. The researchers asked what the effects would have been on PISA literacy scores if *all* the children had gone to preschool, not predominantly those from the higher social classes. Their conclusion? In the United Kingdom, students in the lowest social class grouping benefited from preschool on average by an increase of 9.2 points on the PISA test, while those in the top social class grouping benefited by 5.5 points. Similarly, in Sweden, individuals in the lowest social class grouping benefited from preschool by an increase of 7.8 points on PISA, while those in the top social class grouping benefited on average by 4.1 points. Universalizing preschool apparently helps all children, but it helps the poorest children the most. These researchers estimate that the United Kingdom would have improved 12 ranks and Sweden would have improved 7 ranks, had their nations had universal preschool.

Green and Mostafa (2011) found that in all of the 34 countries in the European Economic Community, students at 15 years of age who had attended pre-primary education for more than 1 year outperformed those who did not, by an average of 54 points! Even after controlling for social background, attending preschool for more than 1 year increased performance on average by 33 points. These researchers found no strong evidence that early childhood education reduced inequalities in performance between those who were high and those who were low

in social class standing. As a function of attending high-quality preschool programs, all students score higher on academic measures over a decade later. These researchers also discovered that in most countries high-quality preschool allowed more people, particularly women, to be employed. From their research they estimate that a 10% increase in availability of high-quality day care leads to a 6.1% increase in female employment, providing both a boost for the economy and a reduction in payments for unemployment.

A U.S. study of the universalization of preschool in Oklahoma supports these international findings (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2004). The Oklahoma preschool programs are housed in public schools; all lead teachers are college educated and certified in early childhood education; and the teachers are paid at the same rate as other public school teachers. The independent evaluation of the program assessed children at entry to kindergarten with three standard readiness tests. It was found that all children benefited substantially from the preschool program, but the poorest children and Hispanic children benefited the most. One analysis used equivalent kinds of children: those whose birthday was just before the cutoff date to enter preschool, and compared them with those whose birthday was just after the cutoff date to enter preschool. For these two groups of children, almost exactly the same age, those who were allowed to attend the preschool program showed advantages amounting to approximately 7 months on a test of letter-word identification, showed 6 months greater gain on a test of spelling, and also showed 4 months greater gain on a test of applied problem solving.

Other high-quality studies examined other high-quality preschool programs (see Barnett, 2008; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornberg, 2009). They all tell the same story, suggesting that preschool critics misrepresent the data. For example, in the Abecedarian study, full-day child care was started at an early age, and more than 100 children were followed through to age 21. Initial gains in IQ at age 4 for those that were in the Abecedarian project were large, and although more modest, the advantages in IQ were still present at age 21. Significant and relatively large gains in mathematics and reading were noted for the attenders as they entered regular public school. These academic advantages were slightly smaller but still present at age 21. Further, the rate of high school graduation, excluding GEDs, was 16% higher for the Abecedarian attenders. Fourteen percent of the control group, the non-attenders, went on to a 4-year college. But 36% of the children who had been enrolled in the Abecedarian preschool went on to a 4-year college.

Another high-quality study of a high-quality program is the Perry Preschool Study. Compared with its control group, those who attended

the Perry preschool had many fewer special education needs in public school, had many fewer arrests by age 19, were much more likely to graduate high school, were more likely to attend college, were much more likely to be employed, and at age 27 were earning over 50% more in income.

A third well-controlled study, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers study, found that the attenders of this preschool program, compared with comparable children who had not attended the program, had about half the special education referrals, about a third fewer were retained in grade, and about a third fewer were arrested by age 19. The attenders also completed more courses in high school, graduated at higher rates, and were about one-third more likely to attend college than the children who did not have preschool experience.

The Abbot preschool evaluation in New Jersey tells the same story. This program decreased rates of special education and grade retention, reducing the costs of education quite substantially. Compared with students who had not had the program, the students who were in the preschool program showed large effects on tests of language arts and reading, mathematics, and science. In fact, the magnitude of the test score gains from 1 year in an Abbot program is equivalent to roughly 10–20% of the achievement gap between minority and White students, while the gains from 2 years in the Abbot program are equivalent to 20–40% of that achievement gap.

The studies cited above all have faults, and any one of them alone would not make a powerful case for the positive effects of preschool. But the studies are remarkably consistent and conform to a common-sense idea that when young children get attention, instruction, and affection from a caring adult, benefits will be found.

Three of the programs cited were analyzed to see whether they were cost-effective. In 2002 dollars, what was returned to society was substantial (Temple & Reynolds, 2007). For every dollar invested in enrollment of a child in the Abecedarian preschool program, society gains \$2.69 in benefits (higher employment rates, thus more taxes paid by the attenders; lower crime rates, thus lower incarceration rates by the attenders, and so forth). For every dollar invested in the Child-Parent program, society gets back \$6.87. And for every dollar spent on tuition at the Perry preschool, society earns \$7.16. There are no other programs for disadvantaged youth that have such convincing impact per dollar spent. Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has his own estimates of these effects (see Heckman & Masterov, 2007). He finds that the effects on American society of investments in education at all levels, but especially an investment in preschool education, make such investments one of the wisest policies to implement.

His estimates are that for every dollar invested in the Perry Preschool program and the Child-Parent program, the return to society is \$9.19 and \$7.77, respectively. In the present fiscal environment, what other investments pay dividends of around 8 or 9%?

Kindergarten data, like the preschool data, also are mixed. The generally negative findings of Cascio, cited earlier, were not entirely negative. For White students, she found a small decrease in dropping out of school as a function of kindergarten, and a large decrease in the rates of incarceration of White students later in life. Some of Cascio's negative findings were confirmed by another economist (Dhuey, 2011), but more positive results also were found: The experience of kindergarten decreased retention in later grades by almost 8%. This effect was most noticeable for students who were male, Hispanic, and poor, the kinds of students we might expect an introductory year of schooling to influence the most. A third economist (DeCicca, 2007) actually found strong positive effects for all students at the end of kindergarten, but then discovered that those results fade quite a bit by the end of 1st grade, a common occurrence when assessing young children, using different tests months apart. Despite conflicting data and fading effects in some studies, as with the preschool data, there still exists a large and convincing body of work about the positive effects of kindergarten. This existing research base garnered support for kindergarten from such diverse nonpartisan groups as the government of British Columbia and other Canadian provinces; TD Bank, second largest in Canada; the Education Commission of the States; the Department of Defense; and even the Department of Education in our own state of Arizona, which is both conservative and among the lowest spending states in the union. At a minimum, kindergarten gives the gift of time in a school environment, a gift especially important for poor and minority children, and those who speak another language. Arguments about the kindergarten experience exist over the appropriateness of half-day and full-day kindergarten, the amount of academic work versus the socialization experiences to be included in the curriculum, and whether children derive any benefit from being red-shirted (starting kindergarten a year late). But evidence of belief in kindergarten's positive educational experience is everywhere: Kindergarten is almost universal in the United States and Canada, and paid for publicly; it is common in other Western nations; and it is extensively subscribed to by wealthy families, willing to pay exorbitant amounts for private providers.

Of course, there are cautions to think about when we work with young children, particularly because not all programs suit all children, and determining what constitutes high-quality programs is not easy. We have learned that preschool and kindergarten probably do not

have as many benefits for middle-class children as they do for lower class children. It is also likely that some middle-class preschoolers might be better off socially and emotionally had they not been in preschool for more than 6 hours a day (Loeb, Bridges, Bassoka, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007). We also should be concerned that an overly academic focus in preschool and kindergarten may harm children's motivation to learn; that the pressure felt by program providers to test young children may too often yield unreliable and invalid results, as well as unnecessary anxiety by parents and their children; and that an increased failure rate for kindergartners, under the pressures for schools to score higher on tests, is unconscionable and may hurt a failed child's life chances (see Myth 18).

Cautions and disagreements about interpreting preschool and kindergarten benefits exist because we are working with young and vulnerable children, and definitive answers to important questions are not easy to come by. But those who simply are against investments in preschool and kindergarten are either not reading the research, deliberately misconstruing the facts, or blowing the cautions and negative effects way out of proportion. The conservative ABC network newsman John Stossel is one of those. He argues that universal public preschool, of the type that president Obama is promoting, is a scam (Stossel, Brosseau, & Kirell, 2009). His major source of information is a private for-profit preschool provider, apparently afraid that if the government provided preschool funding, she would lose her paying customers. Stossel also cites another "authority" who condemns preschools for being ineffectual, but then notes that private preschools can do the job right! Why would some of the private providers of preschool, the parents who support them, and John Stossel not want what they think best for some children to be available to all children? Alfie Kohn (1998) argues that knowledge of this kind is not widely shared because too many parents believe in providing advantages for their own children, and do not think often enough about, or do not want to share those advantages with, other people's children.

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