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One Year of High-Quality Early Education Improves Outcomes for Low-Income Infants, Toddlers

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Child and Parenting Outcomes After One Year of Educare

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Children from low-income families are at substantial risk in terms of their social-emotional and academic skills at school entry, with fewer than half considered ready for school at age 5. A new study has found that infants and toddlers from low-income families who attended a high-quality center-based early education program do better in language and social skills after only one year than children who do not attend the program.

The study appears in the journal *Child Development*. It is based on research conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Chicago, the University of Oklahoma Tulsa, the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Participants were assessed after one year of participating in the program, called Educare. Children who participated had better language skills, fewer problem behaviors, and more positive interactions with their parents than children who didn't participate in the program.

"Our results are important because they offer more evidence that providing enriching experiences early in life can set children from low-income families on more productive paths," says Noreen Yazejian, senior research scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, who led the study.

Educare is an early education program for children from 6 weeks to 5 years that operates in 21 schools in 18 U.S. cities. The program is designed to reduce the achievement gap between children from low-income families and those from more economically advantaged families. It offers full-day, year-round comprehensive services, including enriching educational experiences, in infant-toddler classrooms of 8 children and 3 adults.

Educare also aims to build strong partnerships between families and schools during children's infancy. "The program has had a positive effect on sensitive and responsive parent-child interactions," notes Donna M. Bryant, codirector of the study and also a senior research scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC. Bryant says this might be due to the family support and opportunities for parent engagement that Educare schools provide.

Researchers randomly assigned 239 infants and toddlers (ages 6 weeks to 19 months) from low-income families to attend or not attend Educare at five schools (in Chicago, Milwaukee, two schools in Omaha, and Tulsa). About half of the children were African American and about a third were Hispanic. One year later, they measured the children's language skills, observed them playing with their primary caregiver (usually mothers), and asked parents to rate their children's social and emotional skills.

The differences between children who attended Educare and children who did not attend were larger than differences seen in previous studies of similar programs, such as Early Head Start or home visiting programs. The findings from this study extend those of the Abecedarian Project and other research suggesting that starting a comprehensive early childhood education program early can improve the outcomes of infants and toddlers from low-income families. The study will follow the children's progress through age 5 and at that time, assess their abilities in academic areas that predict later success in school.

Educare includes specific components that may contribute to the positive development of children from low-income families. In particular, all teachers have at least a B.A. degree, and many have an M.A. degree. They are supervised by master teachers, who provide ongoing professional development and coaching on research-based best practices. Educare staff conduct at least two home visits and two parent conferences each year. In addition, they offer meetings, activities, classes, and social events geared to parents and families.

While Educare costs more than other programs, the study's authors suggest that the program's cost may be warranted. "Given the persistence of the achievement gap and its many negative consequences, it seems overly optimistic to expect an easy or inexpensive immediate solution," notes Yazejian. Other research suggests that early investments pay off in later social savings.

The research was funded by the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, the Brady Education Foundation, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, and an

anonymous foundation.

The Society for Research in Child Development will hold its Biennial Meeting in Austin, Texas, April 6-8, 2017. Members of the media are encouraged to attend to hear presentations on the latest research. Those journalists interested in learning more about this year's conference, or obtaining a press pass, should contact hklein@srcd.org. Conference attendance is free for qualified press with advanced registration.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Child and Parenting Outcomes After One Year of Educare by Yazejian, N (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Bryant, M (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Hans, S (University of Chicago), Horm, D (University of Oklahoma-Tulsa), St. Clair, L (formerly at University of Nebraska Medical Center, now at Omaha Program Evaluation Services), File, N (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), and Burchinal, M (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). Copyright 2017 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.