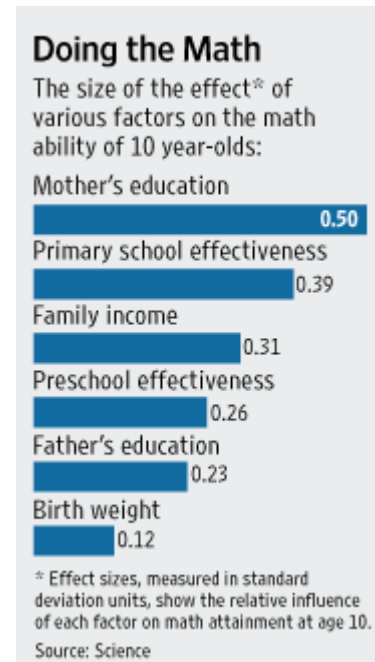


Long Division: The Debate Over the Value of Preschool

By GAUTAM NAIK

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Parents and policy makers have long debated whether preschools provide any educational benefit -- and whether it makes sense for states to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to fund them. A study appearing Friday in the journal *Science* could reignite the debate.



In the study, researchers in England found that the benefits of attending a good preschool, including improved mathematic and reading ability and social skills, can last for several years and give children a leg up when they enter elementary school. For example, 10-year-olds who had attended a high-quality preschool -- a designation based on the researchers' observations -- scored 27% higher in math than those who had attended poor preschools. That may sound obvious, but the study follows a recent one that compared kids who attended preschool with those who didn't, with similar results.

"We found that [good] preschools offer learning opportunities over and above what most homes can provide," says Edward Melhuish, a co-author of the paper and professor of human development at Birkbeck, University of London. "Children's ability to work independently improves significantly, and that's a high predictor of future academic success."

The study, funded by the British government and based on data from 3,000 children in 141 preschools across England, sought to isolate the benefit that structured learning in a nursery setting can have on a child in later years. By closely monitoring and assessing kids from ages 3 through 10, the authors measured key factors that influence mathematical ability, for instance, in elementary school, including parents' income, home learning environment and mother's and father's education levels.

Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute and a professor of public policy at the University of Maryland says that even though the British researchers took pains to separate the impact of the various factors on math ability, "we do not know whether the...effectiveness of the particular preschools was real or just a function of family factors."

Prof. Melhuish says the model was designed to isolate the impact of each factor, and concludes: "For a typical child with average ability, going to a high-quality preschool would improve their math scores by about 27% relative to the rest of the class."

The thinking is that in the right setting, kids assembled together learn effectively from each other and that teachers properly trained in early-childhood education can offer special guidance as their charges manipulate blocks or work puzzles.

The controversial issue is scarcely academic. In the U.S., nearly 70% of mothers with preschoolers work at least part time and must leave their children in the care of a family member, a nanny, a preschool or the like. About 70% of American 4-year-olds attend a preschool.

The big question is whether states should spend millions of dollars to train additional teachers and offer the program universally. Oklahoma, Georgia and Florida have made the most significant push toward universal preschool, while New York, Illinois, Iowa and West Virginia have laws in place to reach the same goal. In 2006, California voters defeated a \$2.4 billion ballot proposal to offer free half-day preschool to all 4-year-olds.

The National Institute for Early Education Research estimates that it would require \$34 billion to provide a quality preschool education to every 4-year-old in the U.S., based on an annual cost per child of about \$8,700. Nieer estimates that \$10 billion to \$15 billion is currently spent by local and state governments and the federal government on preschools.

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has laid out plans to increase federal spending on early education by about \$10 billion. In addition, he has promised to provide grants to states to implement universal preschool.

Critics complain that universal preschool education will mainly benefit teachers unions and other special-interest groups. They point out that educational gains from Head Start, the federal preschool program for low-income children, have been small at best and tend to fade away as the children get older. And while there is credible research indicating that preschool can boost school readiness and educational achievements for disadvantaged kids, there has been little proof that it helps children in middle- and upper-income groups.

Now, "emerging research contradicts that viewpoint," says W. Steven Barnett, director of Nieer and professor of education economics and policy at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., who is familiar with the latest findings in Science. "The U.K. study is one of the best examples."

In June, another study, also published in Science, found that children who participated in a state-funded preschool program in Tulsa, Okla., saw gains of nine months in prereading skills, seven months in prewriting skills and five months in premath skills, relative to their peers.

Internationally, the PISA project, or Program for International Student Assessment, overseen by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, has found that high math achievement is associated with attendance at preschools. Gains from preschool attendance have been recorded as far afield as Argentina, Uruguay and Bangladesh. Today, more than 95% of toddlers attend preschool in England, which, along with Scandinavia and France, has a universal preschool system in place.

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