

How to Cut Crime, Alcoholism and Addiction? It's Not Elementary, But Preschool

By Maia Szalavitz June 09, 2011



Jane Sobel Klonsky /Yellowdog Productions via Getty Images

To cut crime, raise education and income levels, and reduce addiction rates among the poor, no program offers more bang for the buck than preschool, as a new study published in *Science* demonstrates.

The long-term [study](#) followed 1,539 children born in 1979-80. They lived in the lowest-income neighborhoods of Chicago, where nearly 40% of residents live below the poverty line; most of the children were African American.

More than 950 of the families in the study participated in Chicago's Child-Parent Center Education Program, the second oldest federally funded preschool program in the country, which focuses on school-readiness, including listening skills and math and reading preparation. The kids who attended preschool started at age 3-4. Their parents were actively involved in the program. The rest of the kids in the study did not attend preschool but participated in full-day kindergarten.

After tracking the children to age 28, researchers found that those who had attended preschool were 28% less likely to develop alcohol or other drug problems or to wind up in jail or prison in adulthood, compared with kids who did not go to preschool. What's more, their odds of being arrested for a felony were cut by 22% and they were 24% more likely to attend a four-year college. Incomes in adulthood of those who attended preschool were also higher than those for the children who did not.

"We don't see these kind of results from routine programs implemented on a large scale," says lead author Arthur Reynolds, director of the Chicago Longitudinal Study, which has now followed these children for more a quarter century.

"Just funding preschool doesn't mean it's going to be effective," he adds. "You have to follow the principles of quality."

That means having qualified teachers and providing a structured but nurturing environment. In addition to the quality of the program itself, another reason the Chicago preschools may have had such a large impact is that they helped parents feel that they were part of a community and kept them involved with their children's school. This cut the number of parents who frequently moved their children from one school to another by half.

"School mobility is associated with dropout and other problem behavior," says Reynolds. "These children experienced fewer transitions. The families were more satisfied and less likely to change schools. Another mechanism is that stability and predictability in the learning [environment is] a key feature in positive child development outcomes."

"It's kind of like a chain reaction," he says. "The cognitive advantage and family support leads to a later advantage in terms of school commitment and ultimately, these kids don't get involved in the justice system."

The biggest positive effects were seen in boys and in the children of the least educated parents. Reynolds says that because boys are generally less prepared to start school than girls are, the early intervention gives them a particular advantage. Likewise, children of less educated parents are more likely to benefit from the enriched cognitive environment of preschool.

Funding preschool — as well as other early intervention programs like the [Nurse Family Partnership](#), which starts working with mothers during pregnancy — isn't especially sexy and doesn't get voters excited the way "cracking down on crime," does. But if results are what we want, preschool wins.