

How research in early learning can help make a decision on Election Day

Lots of studies show us that the early years are crucial for how we manage as adults. We have an election coming up tomorrow. We encourage you to think about research findings about our children's development. Please cast your vote thinking about what matters for our children.

“School readiness” is a term that refers to the skills children need when they begin school in order to have a positive educational experience. Children need to master many skills for school readiness, but chief among them are social, emotional and literacy skills. Deficits in these areas often lead to behavioural problems, which in turn compromise children's educational success.

It goes without saying that environment plays a major role in school readiness. Our research identifies the main features of a child's environment that affect two particular aspects of school readiness: language and reading. These are strong indicators of later achievement.

In our research we examined two important environments: i) family and ii) neighbourhood. Within the family, the parent-child relationship is crucial. For example, parents who are warm, sensitive and encouraging facilitate their children's mastery of language and reading skills in their first few years of life. We also know that being a sensitive parent is not easy and is much less likely to happen when families have financial worries. The research tells us that reducing the economic disparities across our society will help all children get a fair chance at school.

The second environment is the children's neighbourhood. Our research suggests that in safe and cohesive neighbourhoods children show better language abilities and reading. This is the case even after we take account how family characteristics influence children's early language and reading. Therefore, another way to improve school readiness is by providing social programs that help develop neighbourhood connectedness. Recreation programs, neighbourhood events are obvious and important ways to achieve this goal. Child-care programs, library workshops and family support programs also help promote social cohesion and, in turn, better school readiness.

We can use this research to help us determine which programs and policies are likely to benefit our children. One of the most powerful tools that we possess as individuals is the ability to vote for political candidates who represent our interests. If we value the well-being and academic success of our children, we need policies and programs that support all families and particularly those families who are less advantaged.

In the long term, better-educated children will become productive members of the workforce, thus creating economic gains through increased employment levels and reduced spending on welfare and law enforcement. These long-term gains outweigh the short-term savings that are achieved by cutting childcare subsidies, education and social services. With the benefit of research, we are in a position to make informed decisions about which parties will be effective in helping families and youth. We strongly encourage readers to use this information when making decisions about who to vote for in the upcoming election.

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