

# Earlier always better? Child development researchers question old assumption

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It's always worth revisiting what we think we know.

In recent years, there's been a trend among early childhood researchers to keep moving the focus to earlier and earlier in children's lives. The storyline might go something like this: Sure, grade school matters, but we need to think about high-quality preschools to level the playing field. Actually, preschool is too late — the interactions kids have with their parents in the first years of life are really what's crucial for development. Then again, that may be a bit belated: A mother's experience of stress and depression when a baby is in utero can shape that child's brain and eventual mental health. Before you know it, a mother's own childhood is casting a dark spell on the unborn's future prospects for a healthy life.

Of course, that narrative is crudely fatalistic and one that any early childhood expert would take issue with. But the broader point remains: There's been a marked shift in research and policy circles towards the first few years of life, along with a growing consensus that earlier is always better for interventions designed to tackle early childhood problems.

That's what makes [two new meta-analyses](#) led by researchers at Oxford so interesting. The researchers looked at a wide range of parenting interventions — programs that focus on the parent-child relationship to improve behavior — but found scant support for the idea that earlier is always better. One of their two analyses looked at 154 studies comprising more than 13,000 children. “Both analyses found no evidence that intervention earlier in childhood was more effective; programs targeted at a narrower age range were no more effective than general ones,” the team writes in the journal *Child Development*.

That's a pretty remarkable finding. The researchers offer a few theories to try to explain why age could matter less than we've assumed. One is that children's behavior is more plastic than we thought — if parents change how they parent, their kids' behavior can change too, even as they get older. Another idea they float is that early behavioral problems may be more likely to have neurological roots and thus be more intractable, canceling out the supposed malleability of younger brains.

If the existing conversation on early childhood felt like it was leading in increasingly dire directions — the train tracks are laid down very early in life and tough to re-route later — then this study sounds a much more encouraging note. There may be more time to make a difference, at least when it comes to problem behaviors and their corollaries:

*Although it is vital not to delay intervention, so as to minimize the period of upset and suffering caused by disruptive behavior, these findings are optimistic in that it is not in any sense 'too late' to intervene later in childhood, when children are older.*

One of their other policy takeaways gets at funding for early childhood programs, which can be a zero-sum game. The headlong rush by foundations to fund programs that focus on the first few years could leave older, equally needy kids out of luck. The researchers draw a line in the sand here between their position and that of James Heckman, the Nobel-winning economist and leading early childhood researcher at the University of Chicago. Heckman is often cited for his beat-the-stock-market estimates of return on dollars invested in birth-to-5 programs. They write:

*For evidence-based parenting interventions, our overall policy message on effectiveness and cost effectiveness (“never too early, never too late”) contrasts with that from Heckman's (2006) well-known economic analysis (“the earlier the better.”)*

One or even two meta-analyses aren't enough to settle a question of policy and funding as large and important as this. It's important to note that the Oxford team looked at programs targeting children with behavior problems, not, say, language acquisition or brain development in disadvantaged kids. There may well be many areas where earlier is crucial, as Barbara Maughan and Edward Barker of King's College London point out in a nuanced response to the study in the same issue.

Even so, early childhood research is as susceptible to idea trends and herd-think as any other field, and it would be a shame if the “earlier is better” movement of recent years causes us to overlook or underfund programs for older kids who might benefit just as much.