



Strengthening Families Through High-Quality Early Education in Tennessee

Shepherding the Next Generation is a national organization of evangelical Christian leaders who are committed to the development of strong and healthy American families, with a specific focus on at-risk families. We are church pastors, chaplains, executives at Christian organizations, and Christian leaders in other roles who seek to strengthen families and help today's children grow up to become contributing members of society and effective parents themselves. This brief examines the research on high-quality early education and its impact on building strong families.

Summary: This brief examines the research on high-quality early education showing it can help strengthen families, increase the number of men and women who marry, reduce births outside of marriage and increase the percentage of fathers who are raising their children. For example, girls who attended the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be married by age 27 and a third less likely to have babies outside of marriage.

Early Education Opportunities

Too many Tennessee children are growing up in families without both parents. Too many fathers are walking away from their families or were never there to begin with. In Tennessee, 35 percent of children are currently living in single parent households.¹ Single mothers struggle against economic odds to provide for their children.

Throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, families are central to the purposes of God. Scripture clearly teaches that parents are central in guiding their children. Churches across the state of Tennessee are actively involved in building and strengthening families in their congregations and communities. But many families can benefit from some additional help. Strengthening our families is a task that calls for a partnership of care and provision by both private and public sectors.

Research shows that early education can play a key role in helping low-income families raise children who grow up to complete high school, get married, and hold jobs. Yet too many families face significant challenges making ends meet and are unable to afford high-quality early educational programs for their children. The result is that too many at-risk

children start school already behind their classmates in early math and reading skills, and have not mastered the social skills they will need to follow teachers' directions and establish good friendships in school. These problems can create a pattern of failure that lasts a lifetime.

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

Proverbs 22:6 (NIV)

Research shows that high-quality early education produces very solid results in contributing to the development of strong families. A rigorous study of one high-quality Pre-K program, the Perry

Preschool program in Michigan, showed that girls who attend high quality pre-k are more likely to marry and less likely to have children outside of marriage:

- Women who had been in the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely to be married and living with their husbands by age 27 than women not in the program (40 percent vs. 8 percent); and
- By age 27, women who had been in the program were almost a third less likely to have had their babies while not married.²

Pre-k helps achieve those outcomes by helping young children become successful adults who have a solid foundation upon which to raise stable families. For example, high-quality pre-k increases high school graduation rates and reduces government assistance for girls; for boys, pre-k increases employment and the chances that they will grow up to raise their children:

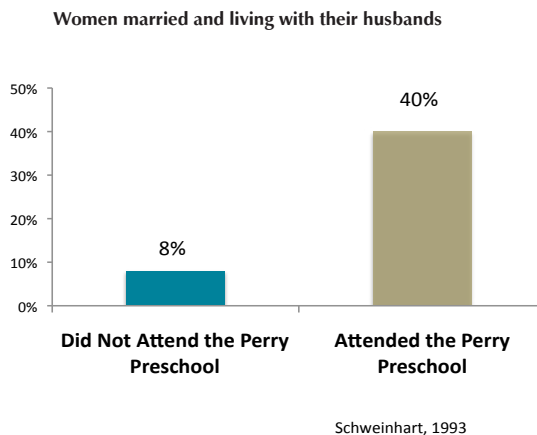
- By age 27, girls participating in the program were more than twice as likely to have completed high school;
- Similarly, the girls in the program were less than half as likely to be receiving government assistance at age 27;

- Boys *not* enrolled in the Perry program were found, at age forty, to be 29 percent less likely to be employed and 63 percent more likely to have fathered children they did not raise; and
- Overall, individuals in the program (both boys and girls) had high school graduations rates 44 percent higher by age 40.³

Another rigorously studied early education program, Abecedarian, conducted by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, found that pre-k cut teen births, increased college attendance, and increased employment. Compared to those not in the program:

- Children in the Abecedarian program were about half as likely to have had babies before they were 19;
- They were two-and-a-half times more likely to attend a four-year college by age 21; and
- They were 74 percent more likely to have a skilled job by age 21.⁴

Girls attending the Perry Preschool program were five times more likely by age 27 to be married and living with their husband.



Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K Program

In Tennessee, 18,000 at-risk children receive pre-k through Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-k Program. Tennessee's state-funded pre-kindergarten has gone from serving 3,000 students in 2004 to serving approximately 18,000 during the 2008 – 2009 school year. However, despite this progress, almost 4,000 children were on waiting lists to enter the program in September

2008 and it could serve thousands more eligible children if funding were available.⁵

An evaluation of an earlier version of the program found limited short-term gains.⁶ But it is probable that a more rigorous evaluation of the much-improved current program, and one that followed the children over a longer period of time, such as the studies cited above, would find much stronger results. Further improvements in quality are crucial, but a recent analysis showed that only

two states have reached more benchmarks for early-education quality than Tennessee.⁷

Strengthening Tennessee's Families

As Christian leaders, we are very much concerned to see families strengthened and children given every opportunity to become contributing members of society and effective parents themselves when they grow up. We urge continued and increasing funding for early education in Tennessee. Our state is only as strong as its families, so, together, let's build strong families.

Endnotes

- Kids Count. (2010). *Children in single-parent families – Tennessee*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved on May 3, 2010 from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/stateprofile.aspx?state=TN&cat=1830&group=Category&loc=44&dt=1%2c3%2c2%2c4>
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- Barnett, W.S., & Masse, L.N. (2007). Comparative benefit-cost analysis of the Abecedarian program and its policy implications. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 113-125.
- Tennessee Department of Education. (2009). *2008-2009 Tennessee Pre-Kindergarten Fact Sheet*. Retrieved on April 22, 2009 from <http://www.state.tn.us/education/prek/factsheet.shtml>. Most of those served are four-year-olds and nearly 9 out of 10 are from families in poverty.
- The report, conducted by an outside research firm for the State Comptroller's Office, made a good effort to evaluate the pre-k program's impacts thus far. However, there were several notable weaknesses to the evaluation study that undermine its validity. One important flaw of the Tennessee pre-k evaluation is that it combines data from two different versions of pre-k programs together. The study uses baseline data from the Pilot program, and only one year of data (2006-2007) from the newer Voluntary Pre-K program, begun in 2005. The program has changed since the beginning of the evaluation, and it is not accurate to draw conclusions based on the earlier version of the program and apply it to the current program. Another major limitation of this study was that the TCAP test data used were available for kindergarteners in only 10% of schools and for first graders in only 20% of schools. The small proportions of school systems that used the tests in the early grades were predominantly in small rural school systems and were not representative of the children across the state. As the pre-k evaluation report authors acknowledge, "The present study is not a means of conclusively determining whether participation in the Pre-K program causes an improvement in students' later performance on standardized assessments, and to construe it as such would be to misinterpret the goals and methodology applied here." The evaluators, limited by the data available, have post-test data only, with no measure of how each group of children (state pre-k vs. no state pre-k) performed prior to the year of pre-k entry. Strategic Research Group. (2008). *Assessing the effectiveness of Tennessee's pre-kindergarten program: Second interim report*. Columbus, OH: Strategic Research Group. Retrieved on April 23, 2009 from <http://www.comptroller1.state.tn.us/repository/RE/prekeval08.pdf>
- Two states (North Carolina and Alabama) meet 10 program quality benchmarks, and nine states, including Tennessee, meet 9 of 10 benchmarks. Barnett, W.S., Epstein, D.J., Friedman, A.H., Boyd, J.S., & Hustedt, J.T. (2008). *The state of preschool 2008: State preschool yearbook*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, National Institute of Early Education Research.

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