

Are Pre-K Advocates Overlooking Its Problems?

In recent years, support for preschool education has grown by leaps and bounds. After all, who wouldn't want to help adorable little kids get an early jump on success?

But the enthusiasm for Pre-K dampened a bit with the release of two studies, one from 2012 which studied children in a [Head Start program](#) and another from 2016 which studied children in [Tennessee's statewide preschool program](#). The Head Start study found that its children were more inclined to behavioral problems than those who did not participate. The Tennessee study, on the other hand, found that participants did worse academically several years into school than those who had not participated.

The news that these Pre-K programs may hurt rather than help was not received favorably by preschool advocates. And according to a recent [Brookings Institute article](#) by scholars Dale Farran and Mark Lipsey, Pre-K advocates have done their best to discredit these studies.

But as Farran and Lipsey explain, the attempts to dismiss these findings "are based on incorrect and misleading characterizations of each study."

For starters, the Head Start study is dismissed on the grounds that some participants ended up in the wrong study group. But according to Farran and Lipsey, such occurrences happen in many scientific studies, and as such, are controlled for in the final statistics. The authors caution that this does not change the fact that children who participated in the Head Start program exhibited more aggressive behavior, the most concerning factor of the study.

Secondly, Farran and Lipsey explain that the Tennessee study

is dismissed on the grounds that it is not a “high-quality” program such as those in major cities like Boston and Tulsa. However, when sample sizes are taken from each of these programs, Farran and Lipsey note that there is no major difference between the academic outcomes of each program. In other words, similarity in outcomes demands that those who dismiss the Tennessee preschool program as being low quality will also have to dismiss the programs they hold up as models.

Given this information, does it seem we need to study the effects of preschool education more before we wholeheartedly commit to public Pre-K programs? Is it possible that young children would learn more and have greater long-term success if they weren’t subjected to the classroom at such early ages?

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