

A Stitch in Time: What Works with Troubled Preschoolers

A Research Brief by FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS

This brief is from **FIGHT CRIME: INVEST IN KIDS**, an anti-crime group of over 2,000 police chiefs, sheriffs, prosecutors, victims of violence, youth violence experts and leaders of police associations.

Research shows that many children with high levels of aggressive behavior will later experience high rates of school failure and delinquency. Research also shows that investments in early intervention for these children can significantly reduce their disruptive behaviors, taking them off the path to delinquency and crime.

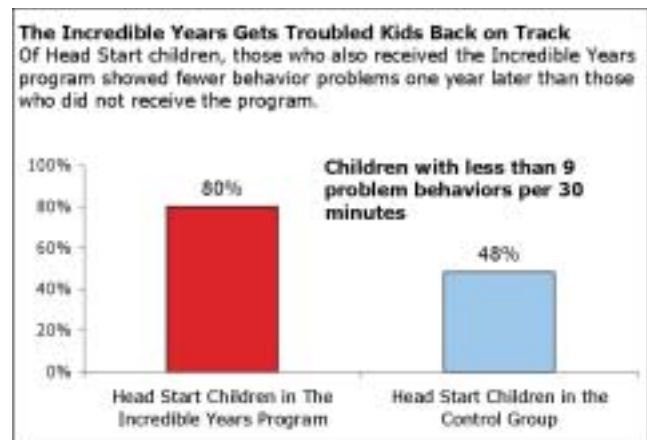
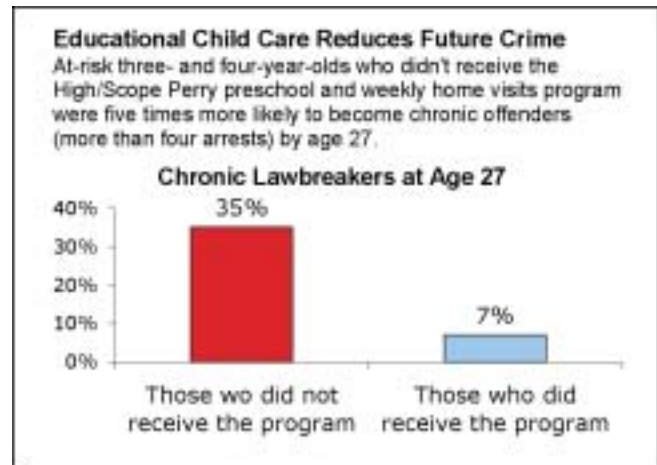
The Concern

Seven to 20 percent of preschool and early school-age children have levels of disruptive, aggressive behaviors severe enough to qualify for a mental health diagnosis.¹ Data show that approximately 60 percent of these children will later manifest high levels of antisocial and delinquent behavior.² These numbers are disturbing, yet efforts to treat emotional problems in children younger than school-age are still few and far between.

The Promise

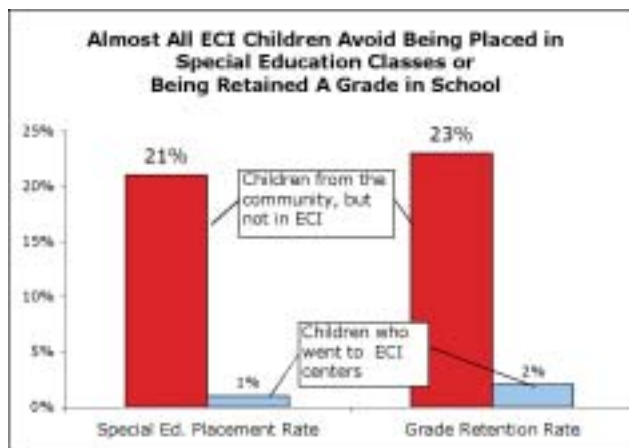
Quality preschool programs have been shown to decrease the likelihood that children will later become criminals. They do so in part by helping children achieve healthy emotional development. There are several examples of successful programs.

- In Michigan, children from low-income families who were randomly assigned to a control group were five times more likely to be “chronic offenders” with more than four arrests by age 27 than those who attended the **High/Scope Perry Preschool**.³
- The **Chicago Child-Parent Center** preschool program has already served 100,000 children in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods. In a study of the program’s effectiveness, children who did not receive the program were 70 percent more likely than participants to have been arrested for a violent crime by age 18.⁴
- **The Incredible Years Program** was originally designed for children, ages two to eight, with high levels of aggressive behavior. The program, which trains parents and children in problem-solving skills and non-aggressive social skills, has significantly reduced aggression for approximately two-thirds of the treated families.⁵ The Incredible Years has also been tested as an intervention for all young children



in over 40 preschool and early elementary school programs, including Head Start. In this version of the program, parents, teachers and family service workers receive training. One year after the program ended, Head Start children who also received The Incredible Years program had fewer behavior problems than those who did not receive the program. Specifically, 80 percent of the participants were below the problem behavior cut-off (fewer than 9 problem behaviors per 30 minutes) compared to only 48 percent of non-participants.⁶

- **The Early Childhood Initiative (ECI)** in Pittsburgh helps improve the quality of childcare centers. Rather than treat troubled children outside the school, the program teaches caregivers to work with troubled children and their parents in the school setting. At the start of the program, 18 percent of the children in the ECI centers demonstrated social skills delays and behavioral problems severe enough to merit a mental health diagnosis. After one year in ECI, these children showed dramatic increases in social skills and decreases in problem behaviors with scores that placed them in the healthy, age-appropriate range. ECI also reduced grade retention, and the percentage of children from the ECI program who were later placed in special education was 1 percent compared to 21 percent of children in the surrounding community. The savings are obvious when you consider that the average cost of placing one child in special education for 12 years in that school district is \$100,000.⁷



Investing in these ‘stitch-in-time’ programs will benefit the children with behavior problems, their families and classmates today. It will ensure the public safety in the future by preventing many more children from growing up to be aggressive, violent adults. We can’t afford to wait. It is time to invest in programs that have been proven to work.

¹ Webster-Stratton, C., et al. (2001). *The Incredible Years: Parent Teacher and Child Training Series*. In D. S. Elliott (Series Ed.). *Blueprints for violence prevention: Book eleven*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

² Campbell, S.B., Shaw, D.S., & Gilliom, M. (2000). Early externalizing behavior problems: Toddlers and preschoolers at risk for later maladjustment. *Development and Psychopathology*, 12, 467-488; Nagin, D., & Tremblay, R.E. (1999). Trajectories of boys’ physical aggression, opposition, and hyperactivity on the path to physically violent and nonviolent juvenile delinquency. *Child Development*, 70, 1181-1196. Both as cited in Raver, C. C. (2002). Emotions matter: Making the case for the role of young children’s emotional development for early school readiness. *Social Policy Report*, 16(3). Washington, DC: Society for Research in Child Development.

³ Schweinhart, L.J., Barnes, H.V., & Weikart, D.P. (1993). *Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

⁴ Reynolds, A.J., & Robertson, D. L. (2001). Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285(18), 2339-2380.

⁵ Webster-Stratton, C., et al. (2001). *The Incredible Years: Parent Teacher and Child Training Series*. In D. S. Elliott (Series Ed.). *Blueprints for violence prevention: Book eleven*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence.

⁶ Webster-Stratton, C., Reid, M.J., & Hammond M. (2001). Preventing conduct problems, promoting social competence: A parent and teacher training partnership in Head Start. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 30(3), 283-302.

⁷ Bagnato, S.J. (2002). *Quality early learning-key to school success, A first-phase program evaluation research report for Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Initiative, Executive Summary*. Pittsburgh, PA: SPECS Program Evaluation Team, Children’s Hospital. See also the full report by the same name released in October, 2002.

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