
Introduction

Humanity's most ancient dialogue—the verbal exchange between parent and young child—is at the core of The Parent–Child Home Program.

The Parent–Child Home Program is a low-cost pre-preschool intervention, developed between 1965 and 1982 using \$3 million of federal and private funding, to help low-income parents prevent their toddlers' future school problems. It first reached into the homes of families in a poverty pocket on Long Island, New York, and it has been implemented widely elsewhere since. By now, four decades of experimental research have examined the results of The Parent–Child Home Program and tested its hypothesis that children's best preparation for school is their early participation in cheerful, casual exchanges of concept-building conversation with their parents at home.

Talking to infants comes naturally to all parents and all parent substitutes. For most of them, talking to baby becomes conversation. The dialogue is often focused around the toys and books that middle-income parents can afford. The Program theorized that this verbal interaction gradually fosters a parent–child network that is both intellectually and emotionally supportive for the child, whatever the family's ethnolinguistic style.

Social and emotional bonding between parent and child is the matrix for this supportive network. Important as the parent–child bond is for the child's emotional development, it can evolve with scarcely a word being said. But exchange of language taking place within the context of that

emotional relationship creates cognitive skills that enable children to meet increasingly complex intellectual challenges. The child's growing intellectual abilities send positive messages to the parents about their own constructive roles in the child's competence, which in turn encourage parents to continue the good work by sending more of their own pleasant cognitive *strands* to the child. Child and parent together thus weave a network that has both emotional and cognitive links. The Parent-Child Home Program conjectured that this network lasts into the children's school years and reinforces their skills in accomplishing school tasks—that its support can, in fact, be crucial to children's school success.

The Program's view was that family factors linked to poverty often hamper the full development of the cognitive aspects of the parent-child network. For children who thus become at risk for educational disadvantage, an effective intervention should therefore begin at home when the children are about two years old, at the start of a key period for building cognitive skills through language. Such an intervention should center on books and toys of high quality that are gifts to the family and used as the focus of the child's reading, conversation, and play with his or her parents. The intervention must be imbued with trust and respect for the child's parents and should build on their personal and cultural strengths. Through their participation, many parents might be expected to make gains not only in parenting skills but also in self-esteem.

Pointing the Way toward a Way Out?

Through research both at the original model program and at other sites (*replications*), The Parent-Child Home Program has explored whether the way out of poverty for many disadvantaged children might start at home, long before a child enters a classroom preschool program. The research has aimed to find out whether the shared joy of young children and their parents—playing, laughing, and talking together in their own homes—could lead to the serious business of school success.

Is it really possible that a modest, low-key pre-preschool program to aid playful parent-child interaction, in the family's home, can appeal to most families, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background, and can mitigate the educational disadvantage of low-income children? Can economically disadvantaged children thus enter first grade with a more reasonable prospect of graduating from high school? And can the strengths of The Parent-Child Home Program be maintained during widespread dissemination?

This book will describe in detail the nonobtrusive, nonpedantic, inexpensive, and deceptively simple Parent-Child Home Program, as well as the systematic research that has attempted to answer these questions about

Program effectiveness. From a theoretical point of view, it was important to study whether children's school competence was indeed related to early verbal interaction between parent and child: Does the parent-child network really exist? But the most socially pressing research question was and remains whether the pre-preschool Parent-Child Home Program, predicated on that network's existence, would achieve its goal of preventing the educational disadvantage of low-income children while fostering parenting skills and self-esteem. Might the Program, in fact, be able to help point the way out of poverty for children at risk for school failure—and for their parents?