

## “We have to understand more the relationship between early childhood programmes and the role of the family”

**Professor James Heckman, of the University of Chicago, is a Nobel Laureate in economics and an adviser to President Obama on early childhood policy. He is regarded as the leading authority on the economic case for investing in early childhood programmes.**

*ECM: The theme of this edition of Early Childhood Matters is parental stress. You're an economist. So let's start with the grim economic outlook, which is surely adding to the stress that many parents already feel. It is also creating, however, a new enthusiasm for government-led stimulus programmes. Does this present an opportunity for advocates of greater public investment in early childhood?*

James Heckman: The recession is certainly exacerbating resource problems, but families were under stress long before the recession. An increasing percentage of children are growing up in families where the resources aren't there. From low-skilled immigrant families and others outside the mainstream, more and more children are emerging into society at age five or six as if from a cocoon, from family environments that are not conducive to launching them into the wider world.

Is the recession an opportunity? It should be. Keynes pointed out that you can stimulate economic activity merely by paying someone to dig holes and fill them in again, but this has a multiplier of one – in other words, it has zero longer-term effect. Unfortunately, a lot of things that are being proposed in stimulus packages now are little better. Things like repairing potholes on the

streets of my city, Chicago, are fine, but the increments of return you get there are very marginal. In comparison, the returns on early childhood programmes are extremely high.

Investing in young children gives you double benefits – stimulus from the extra spending now, and the increase in human capital in the years to come. So yes, there's an extremely good case for governments to include it in stimulus packages. It's a shame that most arguments about stimulus packages are about building bridges and roads, not building human skills and human capital.

*You've advocated that instead of the state providing universal early childhood services itself, it should give parents vouchers to use in private programs. But when we're talking about children who are disadvantaged in early life by poor parenting, isn't it overly optimistic to assume that the parents of such children will have the capacity to use such vouchers wisely?*

There are two things to say here. First, it's been well established by research done by people such as Justine Hastings and colleagues at Yale that when parents who are not well informed are first given school vouchers, the decisions

they make are not that good. They send their kids to schools that are close by, or where their friends go. But when parents are given education about which schools are better, they make wiser choices. So I completely agree that we need to educate parents to enable them to use vouchers wisely.

But there's a second part of the answer. There are a number of reasons why it's preferable to bring in other providers instead of having universal services provided by governments. One reason is that you get more resources if you involve religious groups, social groups and communities. Another is that the early years are a very sensitive time, and people are very worried about the central government inculcating values in their children that they don't agree with.

Many times I've heard people who hold more conservative values – not just evangelical Christians, but Mormons, Orthodox Jews and Muslims – say they're really worried that early childhood provision is going to teach their children values that will undermine the ones they want to inculcate in their children. We need to bring in these parents, respect their cultural sensitivities, and give them an informed choice among diverse early childhood services.

*How do you avoid the danger that early childhood services provided by religious groups might merely extend the cocoon phenomenon that you spoke about earlier?*

There's no reason why you can't teach noncognitive skills but still keep it in a cultural tradition. It is essential that these programmes should have a core concept of promoting the development of certain human abilities, but I think this can be done within a religious framework. Of course there have to be minimum standards enforced, not just a core curriculum of noncognitive skills but also to guard against the possibility of rip-offs from poor quality providers.

There will be cases of a fundamental disconnect, where some religious groups will not want certain aspects of

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the core curriculum taught. But I think even those groups would welcome many parts of the core curriculum – for example, their children being helped to become more self-disciplined and self-confident in their social interactions with others.

The majority of parents mean well for their children. There is a small percentage of parents who don't, and I'm very interested in knowing more about them – but for the majority who do, what I'm trying to do is make family supplementation programmes 'incentive-compatible'. It's essential that parents are informed and involved,

and that early childhood provision doesn't come to resemble a government bureaucracy. I have an abiding image from a trip to Amsterdam a few years ago of a centre in which schoolmarm were handing down Dutch values to North African preschool children. The children's parents were offended, quite understandably.

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*Early childhood organisations typically use two complementary, but very different, arguments to advocate for greater attention to disadvantaged children: the child rights argument and the case from cost-benefit analysis, which you've done so much to establish.*

My most important contribution has been to show that there is no contradiction between the economic case and the equity case, because the economic benefits are greatest with the children who are most disadvantaged. Former us President Harry Truman used to joke that he wanted to meet a one-handed economist, because every economist he worked with would say "on the one hand, on the other hand". Early childhood policy is a rare example of a one-handed economist argument. The case for social justice coincides

perfectly with the lessons of cost-benefit analysis.

*Within the community of early childhood advocates, there is frustration that the economic argument for investing in early childhood is seen as firmly established but is not more widely accepted and acted on by decision makers. Do you share this frustration?*

Well, there's less agreement than you might think. Broadly, yes, the economic argument is accepted. But the details are very fuzzy. Take a collection of proposed programmes – say, nurses visiting pregnant mothers, a focus on the 1–3 year age group, or the 4–5 year age group. Proponents of [each of] these programmes won't publicly attack each other, but a smart guy is going to lay all the programmes out on a coffee table and say, "hang on, there's no agreement here on what works best".

I have great respect for advocates for early childhood, but they have a tendency to think their case is 100 percent solid when it's not. Often, I think legislators are smart enough to know there's more disagreement than the advocates say, and their stridency alienates them. Early childhood advocates need to be more willing to admit weaknesses in the evidence and to be less prone to saying to each other, "we know this is important, why doesn't everyone else get it?" They should also push for more and better evidence.

*How should the early childhood community go about strengthening the details of the economic case for investing in early childhood?*

Experimentation and evaluation. There are many experiments going on in the education of older children right now – some of them are nuts, some are interesting, but all are of potential value. In early childhood programmes, we're also groping; experimentation is used, but much more is needed. We still have a long way to go.

The need for more experimentation is another argument for vouchers, by the way, for private sector diversity and choice. I worry that if Obama, or anybody else, commits too much time and investment into any one programme at this stage, we'll lose the opportunity to go forward and learn more. The best programme is almost certainly one that hasn't been tried yet.

I get the impression that early childhood advocates feel the need to put forward an appearance of unanimity, which in reality is an illusion. We need programmes openly competing with each other. One of my current projects is a book, with Craig and Sharon Ramey, looking at the hundreds of programmes that have been tried so far. The problem is that many current programmes haven't been adequately evaluated. European countries in particular are only recently starting to document properly. After all these years, the strongest data on early childhood programmes still comes from the old

American longitudinal surveys, like the Perry pre-school programme.

*You advised Barack Obama on his early childhood education policy. The president's first budget included extra funding for early education, the Nurse-Family Partnership programme and Head Start. How optimistic are you that Obama's early childhood policy will be pursued with sufficient political will to effect significant change for American children?*

Obama is serious – it's more than rhetoric. And it's not just him, but also the people around him. My paper, *Schools, skills and synapses*, was widely circulated at the Democratic convention. Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education, is also from Chicago, which by the way has been an innovative place for early childhood programmes – intellectually aggressive, a hotbed of research.

The problem is that Obama is launching this [during] an economic tempest. There are competing priorities, like healthcare, and the early childhood advocacy lobby is less well-funded and well-organised than other interest groups. I think he'll get the funds he's asking for, but against all the competing demands, I'm not sure what that will convert into – Head Start for example is usually underfunded per child, and arguably not that successful as a consequence. The danger is adding more children to programmes at a low level of quality instead of raising quality.

*Are you aware of countries where investment in young children is actually happening in the way you would like, which could be held up as an example to others?*

Until a few years ago I would have said that France, with its so-called crèche programme, was a nice example. Then I saw research by the child development psychologist Richard Tremblay that compared children of similar backgrounds growing up in Paris and Montreal, where there were no such programmes, and found essentially no difference. The French crèche programme looked good, but it turns out that it didn't achieve much.

Although we need more evaluation of different programmes, what is clear is that you need to invest significant amounts to get positive results – we're talking \$5000–8000 per child per year in the US, comparable to the costs of high school. Typically politicians are talking the talk but investing far less, maybe one or two thousand. They get the good headlines that say they're doing something, but without the long-term results. Some haven't realised that this is about more than childcare, or that bad childcare can be worse than none at all.

Also, although I haven't studied them in depth, it seems to me that family-friendly policies in the Scandinavian countries – policies like family supplements and parental leave – may have a greater positive effect on young children than many programmes that



are considered to be early childhood development in the more traditional sense.

*Apart from the economic case and the equity case, what arguments are important to persuade political decision-makers to take a greater interest in early childhood programmes?*

We need to be honest in pointing out how failed families are failing children. It's a sensitive argument, as the danger is that if you make the argument you're

accused of blaming the victims. But we have to recognise that divisions are becoming more entrenched. Children who had good parenting are becoming even better parents. Children who had poor parenting are becoming worse parents – and having more children than the better parents, too. Society is becoming more unequal – the extremes are polarising. At one end of the spectrum, the percentage of children graduating college is growing. At the other end, the percentage dropping out of high school is also growing.

Photo: Gretchen Haien

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It's interesting to note that many of the US states where early childhood programmes are most enthusiastically embraced are those with strong right-wing religious values, the people who are most concerned about the negative effects of breakdown of family structures. I'm not saying I'm endorsing the family values agenda. I am saying that we have to talk more about failed families. Here in Chicago, four in five African American children are born out of marriage. Something like 15–20 percent of all American children are growing up without ever having a second parent around. We have to talk more openly about family failure, and understand more the relationship between early childhood programmes and the role of the family.

At the same time, we have to get people to realise the value of non-cognitive skills. The Perry programme had no effect on IQ; it was the lasting effect of the noncognitive skills that made the difference. But people forget that. Go to any website that talks up the benefits of early childhood programmes, and you'll likely find that they are far too hung up on IQ, on improving academic test scores, on 'smarts'.

Evaluations of early childhood programmes need to be more rigorous and more sophisticated in evaluating their impact on noncognitive skills, because they have a huge impact on the ability to learn and succeed in life – skills like curiosity and engagement with the world, the ability to delay pleasure, the ability to relate to other people and

to tolerate criticism. We need to get that into the public consciousness.

*One problem is that 'noncognitive' is hardly a catchy word or one that's immediately understandable to the general public.*

It's a terrible word, as it's defined as a negative. It's better to talk about words like motivation, drive, ambition, personality, sociability, dignity, self-respect, and ability to co-operate and integrate. An old-fashioned word that I think is appropriate is 'character'.

*Do you have any further thoughts to share with readers of Early Childhood Matters on what the early childhood advocacy community should be doing to advocate more effectively?*

I'm often struck that a lot of child advocates haven't noticed that the discussion has moved on. They are stuck on repeatedly asserting that the early years are important. Yes. We know that. The question now is what is the best way to develop children's noncognitive skills, the best way to improve parenting. Early childhood advocates need to recognise there's nothing to fear from open competition between different ways of doing things – that's what makes the case more airtight.

I also think the early childhood community can tend to be too parochial. You hear people talking about neurons being pruned at age three, as if that's the whole story of what's coming out of

neuroscience – which it's not (neuronal changes happen all through life). Early childhood advocates need to reach out more to advocates for other life stages to develop a combined approach that advocates for ways of building skills and developing human potential over the whole life cycle.