



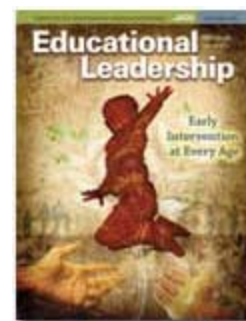
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Giving Intervention a Head Start

A Conversation with Edward Zigler

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During a career spanning five decades, Edward Zigler has combined scholarly research with public service to promote federal and state policies that are good for all children. In 1965, he served on the National Planning and Steering Committee of Project Head Start under Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1970, he became the first director of the Office of Child Development, which administered the fledgling Head Start program. He has written more than 800 scholarly articles and is the author or editor of 38 books, including A Vision for Universal Preschool Education (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and The Tragedy of Child Care in America (Yale University Press, in press). In this interview with Educational Leadership, Dr. Zigler expresses his views on Head Start, universal preschool, and child care.



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Your career has reflected a concern for the welfare of young children, especially poor children. What inspired you to become an advocate for children?

You know, everybody's life is influenced by their own experiences. I'm the son of immigrants, growing up in deep poverty during the Great Depression. When I was a little boy, I never thought I'd wind up a Sterling Professor at Yale. So I have a built-in empathy for poor children, as well as a deep belief, based on my own life, that just because you're poor that doesn't mean you're inadequate. We all know how devastating poverty is, but if we help children, they can overcome poverty and move upward and onward.

I am basically an academic, not an advocate for children. I have done hundreds of studies on children. When I was being socialized as a scholar, I learned the way this game was played: You formulated the query; you developed hypotheses from it; you tested those hypotheses in rigorous studies; then you reported your findings in good journals, and about 300 of your colleagues read your report. If you did enough of this and were successful at it, you were promoted and given tenure. And that was your life.

I rebelled against this at a fairly early age. I thought, our subjects in all these studies are children. They are our partners in this learning enterprise, and we have a special responsibility to use this knowledge—not to fill up journals, but to make the lives of these children better. And that's what I have done with my life.

What did you and the others who designed Head Start in 1965 envision as its purpose?

Frankly, I wish we had been clearer. One of the great problems Head Start has had over the years is ambiguity concerning its goals. Clearly, nobody on the committee thought that by working with 4-year-olds we were going to end poverty in America. The goal was simply to

help kids avoid poverty later in their own lives by making them more ready for school, but we didn't state that in our planning document. It wasn't until 1998 that Congress officially said that Head Start's goal was school readiness.

In the meantime, there was a kind of vacuum. And because school performance is heavily correlated with IQ, people decided that the goal was to increase children's IQs. That misconception was very harmful for Head Start, and we're still seeing it today. Politicians are trying to turn Head Start into a literacy-skills program focused on cognitive development. But cognitive development is just one part of human development.

There's been a debate going on for 50 years between the cognitive child approach and the whole child approach. In the former, the emphasis is on literacy, numeracy, getting back to the basics. We saw it when they sent up *Sputnik*. Hyman Rickover [U.S. Navy nuclear engineer] was saying, "Sure the Russians beat us—they're studying to be engineers, and our kids are finger painting."

The opposing view, which the Head Start planners held, is that you have to take a whole child approach. The brain is an integrated instrument. To most people, the brain means intelligence. But the brain mediates emotional and social development. Emotions and cognition are constantly interwoven in the lives of children. That's why the planning committee was determined that our program would be a whole child program.

There were two great achievements in the design of Head Start. First, the program emphasized social and emotional development. It emphasized health, comprehensive services, and social services to families. Our second victory was to introduce parent participation. Probably the most important single determinant of a child's growth is the behavior of the parents. Lots of research demonstrates that the more involved parents are in the education of their children, the better the children's education and performance. This is true of middle-class children, poor children—every child. Head Start pioneered this approach in a two-generation program with a great deal of parent involvement.

What can we say for sure, on the basis of the research, about the effects of Head Start?

It depends on what you want to read. Some people look at the evidence—for example, Doug Besharov at the American Enterprise Institute—and tend to be negative about the value of Head Start. These people, though, are a minority. The positive evidence is overwhelming.

The National Impact Study—a huge, rigorous, random-assignment experiment—is the best single study that we have, although it's only in its first year. I was one of its planners, and I worked with this administration to monitor it. The Bush administration and Besharov and a few others have pointed out how small the effects are. On the other hand, the Society for Research and Child Development has interpreted its findings as very healthy and positive.

But I don't look just at the National Impact Study. Deborah Phillips and Jens Ludwig at Washington University have written what I consider to be the best analysis to date; they conclude that Head Start is worth every dollar we've been spending on it. Other studies, like the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey, show that when Head Start kids get to kindergarten, they experience a boost, and they continue their learning through kindergarten.

You know, you look at a little 3- or 4-year-old child, be they black, brown, or white—they're all lovely. The last thing you think about is delinquency and criminality. But here's one of the most surprising findings about early intervention programs: The children who were in high-quality programs are less likely to become delinquent and criminal later on. When we began Head Start, we had no way to predict that. That is a huge savings for society.

If anything, the evaluations to date have underestimated the benefits of Head Start. One thing that's always bothered me—and it's true to this day—is that the evaluations don't look at effects on children's health. When I was running Head Start, we found that 34 percent of children were showing up in need of some kind of medical services. Many of these children hadn't been to a physician for the two years before Head Start entry. Many had never seen a dentist. I feel we've had a huge impact. Does anyone really believe that the health of a child is not important in determining his or her performance in school and later in life? Of course it is. If you just inoculate children, you're going to get a huge savings. If simple measures of health were included in these evaluations, Head Start would look a lot better.

The other big weakness in Head Start evaluations is that we never mention the siblings. Victoria Seitz and others have collected considerable evidence that shows that if you can get that mother involved and make her a better socializer and teacher to her own children, that benefit will accrue to the younger children. I'm still waiting for somebody to look at the siblings of Head Start children. I'm sure we'd find what studies of other programs have found—that it's helpful to siblings, too.

You support the idea of providing universal preschool, as opposed to just making targeted programs available to more disadvantaged kids. Why?

I sure do, loud and clear. This surprises some people because of my association with Head Start and my own poverty background. Why not worry about our most needy kids? I have an ongoing debate with economists James Heckman and Arthur Rolnick. They're pushing hard for directing preschool efforts to poor children alone. But my experience in Head Start tells me that approach is wrong.

Now, I always take my direction from research, and research does show that you'll get bigger benefits for poor children from preschool than you will for middle-class children. If you're interested in more bang for your buck, you're going to get a bigger payoff by putting resources into preschool for poor children.

Why, then, am I such a tough proponent of universal preschool? One reason is that in a targeted program, you're never going to get funding to serve all the children who need it.

John Merrow, a champion of preschool education, wrote a paper that startled me. He asserted that Head Start was a failure. But when I read this piece, I realized he was right. He said Head Start has been alive for 42 years and is only serving roughly 50 percent of eligible children. By definition, we have failed.

We know this program is good for poor kids. The evidence indicates that it works. Why aren't we funding it? Because poor people don't give money to congressional campaigns. They're not the voices that we listen to closely. We listen to powerful, rich people.

There's nothing wrong with a state starting a preschool program by serving poor children, like Connecticut is doing right now. Oklahoma and Georgia, two of the states that adopted universal preschool education early on, both started with poor children. But they learned the same lesson: If you want to get the state legislature to maintain and continue funding the program, the program has to have a constituency. Over time, you need to expand it to include all children. The only way you are going to have a preschool program that's safe from budget cuts and that gets funded for all the poor is by giving it to everybody.

And you'll be helping middle-class children—not as much as the poor children, but all children will benefit. The gap between middle-class children and rich children in school performance is just about the same as the gap between poor kids and middle-class kids. Our middle-class kids could do a lot better. Research shows that a good preschool program benefits them as

well.

There is one final reason why I champion the universal approach. I'm not sure that it's moral to segregate children along socioeconomic lines. I'm not sure it meets John Dewey's notion of educating children to live in a democracy. If you put kids from all social classes together, they get the benefits of learning about one another. And research now indicates that poor children's education accomplishments are greater when they are in classes with middle-class children than when they are in classes only with other poor children.

What lessons have we learned about the best age to provide support for preschool children?

One lesson is to start earlier. It troubles me that most of the states are starting preschool at age 4. Most middle-class families send their children to preschool at age 3. That's when a child is ready for a preschool experience. It's particularly important for poor children. We have evidence from the National Institute of Early Education Research demonstrating that two years of intervention give you more benefits than one year. So we want a program for 3- and 4-year-olds.

But we have to reach down even earlier, as we did with Early Head Start. We've known for a long time the importance of the foundation years. Conception, not birth, is when development starts. The Early Head Start findings demonstrated that when mothers are pregnant, they're extremely interested in information and instruction.

After laying that foundation, we also need to have a good, solid, high-quality preschool program for 3s and 4s. And when they get to school at age 5, don't quit. You have to have a program that goes up through the 3rd grade. That's a turning point in children's lives and their school performance. If children are behind then, their chances of ever catching up are next to nil.

That's why I've been arguing for a conception-through-age-8 program. For years we've kept looking for some critical period of development, thinking if we could just get in there with a great program, we could fix everything. We've been ridiculous about it. Human development is a long and continuous process—stage built on top of stage. And at each stage, kids need different environmental nutrients.

Is it practical for public schools to provide the kind of continuous support you're talking about?

People say, "Oh, sure, some college professor's sitting there in his Ivy League sanctuary—he can spin pipe dreams for us all." Well, I'm a pragmatist. Everything I recommend is now being done in 1,400 schools across the United States that participate in the School of the 21st Century initiative.¹ Those schools provide early education, health services, parent support. And they meet what is probably the greatest need of U.S. parents—child care.

Why should public schools get involved in child care?

The United States has no system of child care like other industrialized countries have. We have a hodgepodge of for-profits, not-for-profits, family day care, kith-and-kin care. The average quality of care in this country is somewhere between poor and mediocre, and a certain percentage is downright awful.

This nonsystem is compromising children's school readiness. A child's experiences before age 3 are among the most important factors in healthy development. Thirty-five percent of U.S. children show up at school unable to learn optimally. For poor kids, that's probably close to 50, 60 percent.

It's a tragedy because we're hurting our own children, who don't deserve this. And it's a shame because we came so close to developing a system of child care in the United States. Back in 1971, when I was head of the Office of Child Development, we wrote a bill that provided federal funding and set standards that every child care setting would have to meet to get funding. We were very far along. The bill passed both houses of Congress. But it was vetoed by President Nixon.

Just think where we would be today if we had put that system in place back in 1971. We would have had a system just like Denmark and Sweden have.

Great demographic changes have affected children's growth and development since World War II. One change is the number of women working outside the home. And the second is the number of children being raised by single-parent families. Society has got to build into its infrastructure the supports for the new kind of family that we now have in the United States. We're the only great industrialized country that has paid so little attention to this need. The same demographics exist in other countries. They decided to do something about it, and we decided not to.

And the child care crisis doesn't end with young children. Children need child care until they're 12, 13, 14. That's one promising area where we have made progress—school-age child care. Congress has provided funding for after-school care through the 21st Century Community Learning Center program, although our current president tried to cut it by 40 percent. I worked very hard, and Senator Arlen Specter worked very hard in his hearings, and we held that off.

That program covers school-age child care for poor families, but we need it for all families. We know what high-quality after-school care is. It isn't two or three more hours of schooling. That's the mistake many schools make—they're determined to get those literacy scores up. But interestingly, recent research by Joe Mahoney has demonstrated that kids in programs that have a recreational, fun orientation, enriching the life of the child, show more academic progress than kids in after-school programs with a hard-nosed, academic approach—which this administration champions.

What accomplishments so far have you been the most proud of? What would you like to be remembered for?

I think my greatest contribution is the work that I've done with my own students. I helped create a new field called child development and social policy, which combines our knowledge base with social action on behalf of children and families.

One of my students is the dean of the School of Education at Stanford. Another is the dean of the School of Education at Harvard. And I can give you 50 others who are national and international authorities. So they will change the world. I gave it my best shot. I've worked very hard in Washington and in state capitals to achieve some of these things, and I've failed more than I've succeeded. But I can go to my reward knowing that my students are making it all happen—200 to 250 absolutely top-notch people I've mentored are out there changing the world.

What current trends give you the greatest concern about the future of children? What trends give you the most hope?

The greatest enemy of children today is poverty. We're not doing enough. Our infant mortality rate has gone up for the first time in 40 years. And many of the younger people working in our field are now depressed because we've had a terrible time the last few years as far as progress for kids.

But there's always hope. They just held a wonderful children's summit on Capitol Hill. Many

members of Congress came, and a lot of solutions were offered—ways federal policy could reflect scientific findings about child development. We know how to do it.

I tell my students, whatever your favorite cause, if you do not intend to pursue that effort for 25 years, do yourself a favor—don't start. You have to be prepared to hang in there for the long run. We couldn't get a reauthorization of Head Start through the last two Congresses, and Head Start suffered as a result. But we're finally getting one in this Congress.

I'm not partisan—I'm not talking Democrats or Republicans. We didn't do all that badly in the Nixon administration, except for the day-care bill. I have worked in some capacity for every administration since Lyndon Johnson. I'll work with anybody who would like to improve the lives of children.

Here's the strategy that I have used. It's taken me decades to learn it, and it has worked: In the good years, work very hard to win everything that's possibly winnable. In the bad years, work just as hard to keep your losses to a minimum. There are good times, and there are bad times. But you have to stay in the game.

Sources Mentioned in this Interview

Endnote

¹ The School of the 21st Century initiative was launched in 1988 and is sponsored by the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University. For more information, see www.yale.edu/21C/index2.html.

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