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For immediate use

Oct. 21, 1999 -- No.639

'Landmark' study shows early education efforts can still be seen in young adulthood

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UNC-CH News Services

CHAPEL HILL -- Spanning more than two decades, a landmark study that provided high-quality child care to children almost from birth until kindergarten shows the positive effects of such preschool educational interventions last at least until age 21.

Young adults who had had the early educational child-care program known as the Abecedarian Project consistently scored higher on periodic tests of mental development from age 1 onward than others who did not receive the systematic early education, researchers found. The former also fared better on reading and mathematics achievement tests and were more likely to attend college.

Results of the study, conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center and the most intensive of its kind ever done, are being released Thursday (Oct. 21) at the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C. Investigators hope the findings will convince national, state and local officials that preschool education is valuable and worth funding.

"Our study provides solid scientific evidence that early childhood education significantly improves the scholastic success and educational achievements of poor children even into early adulthood," said Dr. Frances Campbell, principal investigator of the Abecedarian Project Age 21 Follow-Up at the Frank Porter Graham Center. "The importance of high-quality, educational child care from early infancy is now clear."

The research began in 1972 with 111 infants. To be included in the study, families had to meet certain guidelines that included having low incomes and living within commuting distance of the Graham Center in Chapel Hill. Researchers randomly assigned 57 to high-quality child care that included individualized activities designed to promote social, emotional and thinking development, especially in language skills. The other 54 had a variety of child-care arrangements, ranging from being at home with mothers to attending other full-time child-care centers.

The Abecedarian Project was founded by Dr. Craig Ramey, formerly a UNC-CH developmental psychologist and now co-director of the Civitan International Center at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. Key contributors to the early program also were Dr. Joseph Sparling and Isabelle Lewis, who designed the curriculum.

Ninety-eight percent of the child participants were black.

Researchers tested and compared children over the ensuing years to learn whether the extra efforts made any measurable differences in how they fared. Study staff maintained close contacts with the families to reduce attrition. Of the 111 original subjects, 104 participated in the most recent evaluation, which was completed last spring.

Besides the long-lasting academic test score differences, which were greater for reading than for mathematics, researchers found that:

- Thirty-five percent of those receiving interventions were either still attending or had graduated from a four-year college, compared to 14 percent of controls.
- Of the "treatment" group, 65 percent held jobs compared to 50 percent of controls.
- On average, the former had their first child at age 19 as opposed to age 17 for the latter.
- No significant differences appeared in high school graduation or delinquency rates.

"These data are significant not only for parents, but also for policy-makers seeking to make a difference in children from low-income families and for directors and administrators of child-care programs," Ramey said.

Compared with other studies, the new results are especially convincing since the Abecedarian Project was so rigorously controlled, children were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions, and the project began in early infancy, he said. Children were given full-time, high-quality child care from infancy to age 5 and had a systematic infancy and preschool curriculum during that time.

Campbell said welfare reform has increased the likelihood that children in poverty will need early child care.

"Education for children needs to begin in the earliest months and years of life," she said. "The educational stimulus value of these early care-giving years must not be wasted. We must especially not lose the opportunity to furnish poor children high-quality child care containing the kind of early learning experiences that will increase their chances for later success."

Support for the research came from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Maternal and Child Health Bureau, the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Branch and the State of North Carolina funded earlier phases of the work.

- 30 -

Note: Graphics and more information can be found at www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc. Campbell can be reached at (919) 966-4529 or frances_campbell@unc.edu, Ramey at (205) 934-8900 or Cramey@uab.edu

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