



**The Prevention of Mental Health Disorders,  
Delinquency, and Problem Behaviors  
through Intervention  
in Infancy and Early Childhood:  
Current Status and Future Directions**

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**Some emerging innovative programs targeting understudied risk and protective factors or implemented in understudied settings.**

# Definitions and Scope of Review

- Interventions during prenatal to age-5 period
- Numerous types of intervention
- Mental health and behavioral outcomes
- Exclude interventions for children with diagnosed disorders or disabilities
- Universal and selective targeting
- Emphasis on randomized controlled trials but strong quasi-experimental methods (e.g., regression discontinuity, instrumental variables, propensity score analysis, family or individual fixed-effects) included

# Conceptual and Theoretical Basis: Risk and Protective Factors for Externalizing Disorders and Substance Use

## **Family**

- Family poverty and parental employment
- Family conflict
- Parenting quality
- Cognitive stimulation
- Responsiveness / sensitivity
- Warmth
- Harsh parenting
- Consistent discipline
- Child abuse and neglect
- Domestic violence
- Parent mental health
- Depression
- Parental criminality and antisocial behavior
- Parental substance use and abuse

## **Child**

- Early verbal and general cognitive ability
- Early behavior problems
- Early emotion regulation problems and executive function
- Early prosocial behavior
- Genetic influences and gene-environment interactions

## **Neighborhood**

- Neighborhood-level income and poverty
- Neighborhood-level social capital

## **Child Care and Preschool Contexts**

- Structural quality
- Process quality

MISSING from generative evidence base:

Service-system or program-level characteristics aside from child care and preschool quality

# Interventions Targeting Family Risk/Protective Processes

- Parenting Practices
  - Home visiting: Mixed evidence
    - Targeted and more intensive programs: larger effects
  - Center and home-based services: Early Head Start
- Family Poverty and Parental Employment
  - Welfare-to-work programs (e.g., New Hope, Minnesota Family Investment Program)
  - Earning supplements produce promising results

# Interventions Targeting Family Risk/Protective Processes

- Child Abuse and Neglect
  - Programs with specific targeting in general more promising than broader poverty targeting
  - EIFC, parent-child interaction therapy
- Domestic Violence
  - Some limited evidence from employment/ income policies
- Parent Mental Health
  - Few interventions target depressed parents (exception: Collaborative Head Start program); few treatment studies examine potential effects on children
  - Other disorders neglected
- Parental Criminality & Substance Use
  - Few studies assess criminality as outcome (exception: NFP)
  - Controlled trials limited in studies targeting parental substance use

# Interventions Targeting Child Risk/Protective Processes

- Early cognitive and language skills
  - Preschool education
    - Quality (e.g., highly skilled teachers, small class sizes) important
    - Effects on early behavior problems mixed; long-term most promising in combination with intensive parent component
- Early behavior problems through social problem-solving skills, classroom behavior management, positive classroom climate
  - Preschool PATHS program, Incredible Years,
- Early indicators of executive function:
  - Tools of the Mind
- Combination academic and socio-emotional curricula:
  - Head Start REDI

# Interventions Targeting both Family and Child Risk/Protective Processes

- Incredible Years Curriculum
  - Positive classroom management, social competence +parent training
- Early Head Start
- Chicago Parent-Child Centers
  - Preschool program+ intensive parent programs
- Perry Preschool Program

# Neighborhood and Service System Risk and Protective Factors

## Neighborhood

- Neighborhood-level income and poverty
- Neighborhood-level social capital

## Child Care and Preschool Systems

- Structural quality
- Process quality

## Other Service Systems

Few evaluation studies, with the exception of intensive professional development in some preschool curricula (e.g., group trainings followed by weekly in-classroom coaching)

# Promising and Emerging Interventions

- Promising
  - NFP for first-time moms
  - High-quality preschool programs
  - Preschool curricula focused on classroom climate, social problem-solving skills, and behavior management
  - 2-generation programs with intensive parent-focused components
  - Wage supplements that increase both employment and income
- Emerging
  - Parenting / literacy programs implemented in well-child clinics
  - Preschool curricula integrating academic and behavior management; curriculum targeting dimensions of executive function
  - Combinations of early childhood education, parenting support, and income support

# Common Processes Targeted by Successful Interventions

- Early cognitive and language skills
- Early externalizing behaviors through social problem-solving skills and classroom management practices
- Parenting quality
- Family income

# Common Features of Successful Interventions

- Targeting both parent and child risk / protective processes
- Intensity of services
- Staff supported by intensive professional development
- Relatively high rates of take-up and family engagement (attention to family and community preferences re: modality and setting)

# Innovative Settings

- Well-baby clinics
- Welfare system; workforce development system
- Foster care system

# Future Directions: Implementation, Quality, and Fidelity at the Program Level

- Implementation / fidelity studies rarely conducted
  - Early Head Start implementation study an exception
- Quality improvement interventions not evaluated re: MH, behavioral outcomes
- Policy supports for setting-level quality not evaluated
  - Studies linking state policy to structural child care quality, Head Start county- and center-level expenditure study are exceptions

# Increasing Implementation Quality: Emerging yet Understudied Approaches

- Ratings systems for improving child care
  - Smart Start
- Intensive professional development for childcare providers and preschool teachers
  - Project Upgrade (but no evaluation of socio-emot outcomes)
  - Head Start REDI
- Training, technical assistance, and service system development with a mental health focus
  - Approaches reviewed in Knitzer paper

# Other Challenges and Future Directions

## 1) Overlooked risk and protective processes

- Substance use; domestic violence; parent MH; parental criminality; community-level processes

## 2) Overlooked populations

- In addition to 1), specific immigrant groups; undocumented immigrants; Native Americans

## 3) Overlooked outcomes

- Internalizing / depression in childhood and adolescence; early substance use

## 4) Overlooked settings and systems

- Criminal justice; child welfare; workforce development
- Data infrastructure systems; screening systems for tailoring interventions to targeted R&P processes

## 5) Overlooked developmental stages

- Late early childhood (kindergarten); 0 to 3 (aside from home visiting)

# Thanks!

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  - Jack Shonkoff, Greg Duncan, Katherine Magnuson, Deborah Phillips, Helen Raikes, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Bernie Guyer
- Some material drawn from National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation (2007), *A science-based framework for early childhood policy*. Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.