

Examples of Developmental Science that Have Informed Public Policy



Society for Research in Child Development

Early Childhood Programs

Developmental science, neuroscience, and program evaluation research by experts with the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has been synthesized and translated to help policymakers make legislative decisions regarding early childhood at the state level, including the development and passage of legislation in three states. In Nebraska, researchers on the National Council on the Developing Child provided scientific evidence in March, 2005 that contributed to the unanimous passage of June, 2005 legislation (LB 577), nearly doubling funding for early childhood programs for children from low-income families; subsequently, a successful state constitutional amendment established an endowment to support early childhood education. In Washington state, the Council provided legislative testimony in late 2005 that helped generate bipartisan support for the February, 2006 establishment of a cabinet-level Department of Early Learning (HB 2964). In Kansas, the Center's mid-2007 work with the Governor and staff, the Speaker of the House, and state legislators helped build a science-based foundation that allowed opposing political parties to find common ground. In May, 2008, comprehensive legislation was passed (HB 2946 2008-184) that expanded early childhood education, extended eligibility for child health insurance, and increased child care availability. At the federal level, the Center helped Speaker Pelosi plan the May, 2007 National Summit on America's Children, and researchers on the Council made presentations to Congress. The Council's term "toxic stress" appeared in the 2007 Head Start reauthorization bill.

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Head Start

Developmental scientists have been involved with the national Head Start program since its inception in 1965. Most recently, researchers worked on Head Start's reauthorization. The Zigler Center's Head Start Division reviewed draft legislation and advised policymakers on details of the bill. The bill passed in 2008. Research was critical in defeating a proposal to issue a waiver to eight states to run their own early childhood programs funded with federal Head Start grants. Developmental science was also key in the inception of the Early Head Start program. The Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children incorporated this research into its widely-disseminated report "Starting Points." Ed Zigler then worked with Senator Kennedy to write legislation for the Early Head Start program, which passed Congress in 1994.

Select References

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Child Welfare

Findings from the *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Midwest Study) informed the recent passage of federal legislation focused on youth aging out of foster care. This study is the largest prospective longitudinal study of youth leaving foster care and making the transition to early adulthood. Since 2002, the study has followed foster youth in the three Midwest states and compared them to adolescents in the general population. The study also compared the outcomes of young people leaving foster care before age 21 with those who stay in care longer. The study's findings suggest that extending care may result in a greater likelihood of youth going to college, having increased earnings, and delaying pregnancy. However, when compared with adolescents not in foster care, youth aging out of the child welfare system are faring poorly as a group. Findings from the Midwest Study contributed to the October, 2008 passage of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351), which extends eligibility for federal reimbursement of foster care maintenance until age 21, provided youth meet specified education or employment criteria.

Select References

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Child Labor

In 1982, the Congressional testimony of Ellen Greenberger, Research Professor at the University of California, Irvine, helped to block the passage of the U.S. Department of Labor's proposed regulatory changes that would have weakened restraints on child labor. Greenberger testified at hearings of the House Subcommittee on Labor Standards concerning the proposed changes, which would have increased the permissible number of hours young teenagers could work when school was in session and extended the curfew on school-night employment. Based on four years of research conducted by Greenberger and colleague Laurence Steinberg, Greenberger testified that the proposed regulatory changes were a threat to young people's development and, as such, to the well-being of the nation. Specifically, Greenberger and Steinberg's research showed that while the benefits associated with working (e.g., increased sense of responsibility) could be reaped without intensive employment, the costs (e.g., decreased school involvement, increased drug and alcohol use) were directly related to long hours of work per week. The Labor Department withdrew its proposal after Greenberger's testimony and before the second day of hearings, citing the need for further consultation during an extended comment period of 180 days.

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Juvenile Justice

Research on psychological development during adolescence was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 2005 decision to abolish the juvenile death penalty (*Roper vs. Simmons*, 03-633). Arguments were grounded in research which describes the developmental differences between adults and adolescents. Research has illustrated that adolescents may be deficient in terms of decision-making, even if they are cognitively mature. The majority opinion cited arguments from an *amicus curiae* brief filed by the American Psychological Association in reaching its conclusion. Research and expert opinion presented in the brief focused on the developmental characteristics of late adolescents, including characteristics such as less mature decision-making, impulsivity, risk-taking, peer orientation, temporal perspective, and vulnerability to coercion and false confession. The Court's 5-4 opinion, delivered by Justice Anthony Kennedy, ruled that executing juvenile offenders who committed murder while younger than 18 is "cruel and unusual punishment" prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.

Select References

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Mentoring

A random-assignment study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) community-based mentoring model showed that BBBS' high-quality mentoring had tangible and significant effects on the lives of youth. Researchers examined the lives of 1,000 10- to 16-year-olds who applied to BBBS for mentors. Half were matched with a mentor, while the rest stayed on the waiting list. Eighteen months later, those who met weekly (on average) with a mentor for one year had a lower likelihood of starting to use drugs or alcohol, enhanced peer and parent-child relationships, fewer absences from school, and improved confidence about schoolwork. The findings of this research contributed to the expansion of mentoring programs. For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention began its juvenile mentoring program (JUMP) and the U.S. Department of Education continues to fund school-based mentoring. Mentoring initiatives are now located in the Departments of Justice, Education, and Health and Human Services.

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Child Safety

Research on child passenger safety has been influential in the development of policies that have improved child passenger safety across three decades, from 1977 to the present. Beginning in the 1970's, dozens of practitioners around the U.S., including pediatricians and psychologists, conducted preliminary research on child passenger safety. Publication of research findings, along with outreach initiatives, has helped to dramatically improve child passenger safety. Research findings were introduced at the state, regional and national levels, and used to lobby various state legislators to get child passenger safety legislation passed. For example, published research has found that: seat-belted children ages 2 to 5 are 3 ½ times as likely to be injured in crashes as those placed in child restraints and booster seats; booster seat use decreases the risk of injury by 59 percent in children ages 4 through 7 as compared to seat belts alone; and children ages 2 to 6 placed in child restraints were 28 percent less likely to be killed in a crash than children restrained in seat belts alone. Since 2001, two federal laws and 42 state laws have been enacted that utilized data from Partners for Child Passenger Safety to improve federal motor vehicle safety regulations and state child occupant restraint laws. Between 1999 and 2007, overall child restraint use increased from 51 to 80 percent among children younger than age 9. Virtually all of the states have implemented child passenger safety legislation.

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Children and the Media

Developmental research has been instrumental in informing ongoing policy actions focused on television and its effects on children's learning, including the passage of the Children's Television Act of 1990 (CTA). Although the Communications Act of 1934 mandated that broadcasters must serve the "public interest," regulatory efforts before the passage of the CTA did little to ensure that programming served the needs of child audiences. Research findings were central in the development of the CTA.

Communications researchers served on the Congressional subcommittee that was responsible for developing the bill. Several developmental scientists testified before Congress and addressed the potential benefits for children exposed to high quality educational programming. Efforts by the FCC to rely on market forces (i.e. consumer demand for children's programming) were rejected by the federal courts, citing the work of several researchers. The FCC established further rules in 1996, again citing the work of researchers as supporting the CTA, and stating that "children's educational television is a valuable resource that should be made more widely available" (Wilcox, 2003).

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Disabilities

In the 1960s, education of deaf children was controlled by "oralists" who demanded that all deaf children not use signs but learn to speak and read lips. It was believed that language was essential for thinking. Developmental science showed that deaf children were cognitively competent, even those who did not have a functional language. This work was supported by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (now within HHS) and had a direct impact on policy. By the 1970s, American Sign Language was encouraged for parents and used in schools. The classroom of 1975 was radically different from its counterpart in 1955 and thousands of deaf children benefited as did their families. Today, of course, American Sign Language is taken for granted and the earlier era of oralism has been forgotten.

Select References

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Mental Health

Developmental research and program evaluation have been instrumental in improving the standard of mental health care provided to children, adolescents, and families at the state level. Findings and consultation from researchers at the Connecticut Center for Effective Practice have influenced the development of several mental health and juvenile justice initiatives in Connecticut. Following the release of research on Multisystemic Therapy, an evidence-based practice designed to treat children and youth with behavioral health needs and juvenile justice involvement, Connecticut enhanced support of in-home evidence-based practices. Researchers also made recommendations based on the review of the state's implementation of the Extended Day Treatment model of care and Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services program. As a result of these recommendations, new practice standards were developed, including the standardization of Extended Day Treatment programs across sites. Recommendations concerning the state system were also made based on interviews with providers in the behavioral health and juvenile justice systems. Since the publication of these recommendations, children are being referred less often to costly residential treatment facilities and instead are receiving services in their own homes and communities. Additionally, recommendations by researchers have contributed to improvements to the screening and assessment of children and youth in the juvenile justice system, including the implementation of a model for court-based assessments and referrals for youth.

Select References

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SRCD wishes to acknowledge the many researchers who provided examples of research that has informed policy. We also wish to thank the members of the SRCD Committee for Policy and Communications who helped to select the diverse examples included here for the purpose of illustrating the link between developmental science and policy.

Additional examples may be sent to SRCD at communications@srcd.org.