



# Early Childhood Intervention

*Views from the Field*

Report of a Workshop

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL  
INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE

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## Views from the Field

### *Report of a Workshop*

Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development

Jack P. Shonkoff, Deborah A. Phillips, and Bonnie Keilty, *editors*

Board on Children, Youth, and Families

Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council  
and

Institute of Medicine

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GREG DUNCAN, Institute for Policy Research, School of Education and Social Policy,  
Northwestern University

FELTON J. EARLS, Department of Child Psychology, Harvard Medical School

ROBERT EMDE, Department of Psychiatry, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center

YOLANDA GARCIA, Children's Services, Santa Clara County Office of Education

SUSAN GELMAN, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan

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WILLIAM GREENOUGH, Departments of Psychology and Cell and Structural Biology,  
University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

RUTH T. GROSS, Professor Emerita, Department of Pediatrics, Stanford University Medical  
School

MEGAN GUNNAR, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

MICHAEL GURALNICK, Center on Human Development and Disability, University of  
Washington

ALICIA LIEBERMAN, Department of Psychiatry, University of California at San Francisco

BETSY LOZOFF, Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan

RUTH MASSINGA, The Casey Family Program, Seattle, Washington

STEPHEN RAUDENBUSH, School of Education, University of Michigan

ROSS THOMPSON, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska

CHARLES A. NELSON (*liaison from the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Early  
Experience and Brain Development*), Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

DEBORAH A. PHILLIPS, *Study Director*

NANCY GEYELIN MARGIE, *Research Assistant*

RONNÉ WINGATE, *Senior Project Assistant*



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MARY STRIGARI, *Administrative Assistant*

## WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

JACK P. SHONKOFF (*Workshop Chair*), Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University

KATHRYN BARNARD, Center on Human Development and Disability, University of  
Washington

BARBARA T. BOWMAN, Erikson Institute, Chicago, Illinois

JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN, Teachers College, Columbia University

MARY BETH BRUDER, Department of Child and Family Studies, University of Connecticut  
Health Center

DEBORAH L. COATES, Department of Psychology, The City University of New York

MARY DOZIER, Department of Psychology, University of Delaware

GREG DUNCAN, Institute for Policy Research, School of Education and Social Policy,  
Northwestern University

DALE FARRAN, Department of Teaching and Learning, Peabody College, Vanderbilt  
University

VERONICA FEEG, College of Nursing and Health Sciences, George Mason University

MICHAEL GURALNICK, Center on Human Development and Disability, University of  
Washington

BARBARA HOWARD, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

JANE KNITZER, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University

SAMUEL MEISELS, School of Education, University of Michigan

CRAIG RAMEY, Civitan International Research Center, University of Alabama, Birmingham

ARNOLD SAMEROFF, Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan

RUBY TAKANISHI, Foundation for Child Development, New York, New York

DEBORAH KLEIN WALKER, Bureau of Family and Community Health, Massachusetts  
Department of Public Health

MARK WOLERY, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North  
Carolina, Chapel Hill

HIRO YOSHIKAWA, Psychology Department, New York University



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with all phases of the workshop and preparation of this report.

This report has been reviewed in draft form by individuals chosen for their diverse perspectives and technical expertise, in accordance with procedures approved by the Report Review Committee of the National Research Council. The purpose of this independent review is to provide candid and critical comments that will assist the institution in making the published report as sound as possible and to ensure that the report meets institutional standards for objectivity, evidence, and responsiveness to the study charge. The review comments and draft manuscript remain confidential to protect the integrity of the deliberative process.

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# Early Childhood Intervention



## EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTIONS: VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

On June 24-25, 1999, the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development of the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine convened a workshop for researchers and practitioners to examine the underlying knowledge base that informs current best practices in early childhood services, from the prenatal period to school entry. The workshop was designed to provide an open forum in which leading authorities could discuss the diversity of working assumptions, theories of change, and views about child development and early intervention that currently shape a wide variety of social policies and service delivery systems for young children and their families. A central objective was to test the hypothesis that, despite the extensive fragmentation of early childhood service delivery and intervention research, this multidimensional field is guided by a common, convergent body of knowledge, derived from a rich mixture of theory, empirical research, and “practical” professional experience.

This workshop is part of the information-gathering activities that have informed the work of the committee. It is the committee’s task to conduct a formal research synthesis based on a systematic review of the empirical literature. Its full

report, which will include consensus statements about the scientific literature on early child development and intervention, will offer insights about areas of convergence, issues that remain hotly debated, and critical gaps in the knowledge base that guides developmental promotion and early childhood intervention.

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***I think we have come a very, very long way in three or four decades. . . . I think the answer is clearly yes, development can be changed.***

*Craig Ramey*

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Workshop participants were selected to represent the following distinct service streams: primary health care; child care/early education; programs for children living under conditions of poverty; child welfare services, including foster care and adoption; substance abuse treatment programs; interventions for children with, or at risk for, developmental disabilities; and child mental health services. Drawing on the diversity of perspectives around the table, the workshop planners sought to elicit both common themes that cut across multiple service streams and issues that are unique to specific areas of service delivery. Within this framework, participants were asked to summarize the cutting-edge knowledge in their respective fields and encouraged to differentiate knowledge derived empirically through systematic investigation from knowledge

based largely on either theory or professional experience.

It is equally important to understand what the workshop was not designed to accomplish. First, it did not conduct a formal or comprehensive analysis of the scientific literature on early childhood development. Second, it did not engage in a systematic evaluation of the empirical evidence regarding the efficacy or effectiveness of intervention services. Third, it did not generate specific recommendations. Rather, the workshop participants were asked to draw on their understanding of the existing science base in order to characterize the body of knowledge that guides the design, delivery, and evaluation of contemporary early childhood services. Consistent with the committee's charge, the workshop focused on the period from conception to school entry, and therefore did not cover school-age children.

To ensure productive interaction among the workshop participants, each invited speaker was asked to respond in writing to a set of questions that were provided in advance of the meeting. All responses were distributed prior to the workshop to avoid the need for extensive formal presentations and to maximize the amount of time available for informal discussion. These questions were grouped under four major topics: (1) desired child developmental outcomes; (2) family characteristics that influence child development and are amenable to intervention; (3) community characteristics that influence child development and are

amenable to intervention; and (4) the essential features of effective service programs.

The workshop program was organized around three panel discussions and a concluding integrative session. The first panel focused on universal services designed to promote child health and development, including primary health care and child care/early education. The second panel focused on targeted interventions designed to address family-centered vulnerability, such as programs for children living under conditions of poverty and child welfare services. The third panel focused on specialized interventions designed to address child-centered vulnerability (such as programs for children with, or at risk for, developmental disabilities) and children's mental health services. The workshop concluded with an integrative discussion designed to identify converging themes, specify areas of disagreement, examine distinctions among service streams, and explore the proposition that the broad diversity of early childhood policies and programs is informed by a shared, common knowledge base.

This report summarizes the major themes that emerged over the two-day meeting. Differences in the level of detail provided for each theme reflect the amount of attention each received. Quotations were culled from the written materials prepared by each participant and the rich discussion that ensued during the workshop.

During the course of the workshop discussions, two underlying perspectives became increasingly apparent. The first was the con-

siderable extent to which participants viewed early childhood issues through a disciplinary lens. Each of these lenses was crafted by a distinct research base; a unique historical experience with regard to program design, service implementation, and funding streams; and a characteristic set of professionally guided beliefs. The second perspective was rooted in the pervasive influence of personal and professional values. Thus, although the workshop participants did not always agree on their interpretation of the existing science base, they shared a fundamental investment in the health and well-being of young children and a deep sense of responsibility to use knowledge derived from theory, empirical research, and practical experience to enhance the quality of their lives.

Within this context, the workshop format generated considerable creative tension between the desire for structured discussion and the richness of free-wheeling conversation. Nevertheless, the focus remained on the task at hand—to bring together a group of experts from a wide variety of service domains to differentiate knowledge from beliefs, and to explore the underlying science of developmental promotion and early childhood intervention.

In two days of lively interchange, the workshop participants shared their conviction that human development is influenced by the continuous and inextricable interplay between genetics and experience, and that structured interventions can affect the probability (i.e., “shift the odds”) of achieving more desirable outcomes. They generally agreed on aspects of early childhood devel-

opment that can and should be changed, although they did not always agree on what it takes to achieve specific impacts. The most pervasive concept articulated throughout the proceedings was the universally supported view of child development as a continuous process influenced by reciprocal transactions between children and their caregivers, caregivers and the caregiving environment, caregiving environment and an array of external systems. The cumulative effects of these transactions over time were seen to contribute to the complexity of human development and the poor predictability of individual developmental pathways.

Perhaps most important, despite frequent disagreements about the strength of the underlying science, there was general agreement on the substance and focus of the body of knowledge that currently informs policy and practice across a wide diversity of independent service systems. Although all presenters and discussants were required to base their contributions on credible scientific evidence, specific citations have not been included in this workshop report. Thus, this document should be viewed as a reflection of the views expressed by the workshop participants, and not as a definitive assessment of the science of developmental promotion and early childhood intervention. We hope it will provide a departure point for other efforts to build a shared knowledge base that can guide greater cross-fertilization among policies and programs designed to improve the well-being and life prospects of young children.