

# **The Early Years**



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## **Child Well-Being and the Role of Public Policy**

*Edited by*

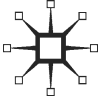
Samuel Berlinski and Norbert Schady

**Inter-American Development Bank**

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THE EARLY YEARS

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## Preface

As the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean face an increasingly challenging economic environment, governments have a singular opportunity to help one of our most precious resources—our youngest children. There are about 50 million children in the region under the age of 5, who will eventually be the core of our workforce and our social and political leadership. It is in our best collective interest to make sure their foundations are solid as we will all be standing on those foundations in the future.

This book looks at what governments can do to more effectively help our youngest flourish in the early years. It is based on the broad consensus that quality interventions during the first 8 years of life will help our children become not only more productive but also more fulfilled citizens of the future.

In many ways, we have made great strides. Boys and girls in our region are less likely to die at childbirth or when they are very young than they were just a few decades ago. They enjoy better health and nutrition. Almost all attend school. In the year 2000, two out of every five of the region's children lived in poverty. Today, just over one out of every five is poor. Over the past 20 years, the IDB has helped countries bring about these important improvements through more than 150 grants and loans involving early childhood development, for a total in excess of US\$1.7 billion.

But, as this book explains, Latin American and Caribbean children continue to lag behind in the critical areas of language and cognition. The problem begins in the first five years of life, when many children are not receiving the stimulation required to ensure proper cognitive development. Tests show that poor children know

fewer words than their richer peers, and that children in our region know fewer words than those of more developed nations. This also means that too many of our boys and girls are just not ready when they begin school.

This book forcefully argues that this deficit is not just the responsibility of parents. Governments can—and should—make a major positive difference. According to a landmark study, simple parenting interventions by social workers decades ago in Jamaica produced adults who not only did better in school and earned higher wages, but were also less likely to resort to a life of crime.

An investment in a well-crafted government program, using the tools that we know today to be highly effective, can have a huge development impact. Early childhood development programs are the foundations for successful social investments over the lifetime of an individual, especially for the poor. Investing more in this area is one of the most effective ways governments can improve economic mobility.

Many governments are taking this lesson to heart and have increased investments in the early years. However, the evidence indicates the region is still spending too little. On a per capita basis, for example, governments are spending three times more on children aged 6–11 than on those aged 0–5. Moreover, early childhood investments tend to disproportionately favor physical infrastructure such as daycare facilities, while neglecting vital training and human capital. Recent research shows that some of the biggest returns on investment can come from modest programs that focus on improving the critical early interactions between young children and adults, be they parents, teachers, or caregivers.

Finally, in most of the region's countries, no one actor clearly "owns" the issue of early childhood development. The absence of coordination between multiple actors and levels of government creates a daunting obstacle to improving the quality of services.

Today, the challenge is to ensure that we have smarter institutions capable of directing investment toward programs that have a measurable impact on early childhood development. It is not an easy



path, but it is the right one if our countries are to harness the full potential of their citizens.

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