

# Preschool Child-Initiated Learning Found to Help Prevent Later Problems

Young people born in poverty experience fewer emotional problems and felony arrests if they attended a preschool program that focused on child-initiated learning activities rather than scripted academic instruction. These are the key findings of a new High/Scope monograph *Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study Through Age 23* by Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart.

The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study assesses which of three theoretically distinct preschool curriculum models works best. Conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation since 1967, the study has followed the lives of 68 young people born in poverty who were randomly assigned at ages 3 and 4 to one of three groups, each experiencing a different curriculum model:

- In the **Direct Instruction model**, teachers followed a script to directly teach children academic skills, rewarding them for correct answers to the teacher's questions.
- In the **High/Scope model**, teachers set up the classroom and the daily routine so children could plan, do, and review their own activities and engage in key active learning experiences.
- In the **traditional Nursery School model**, teachers responded to children's self-initiated play in a loosely structured, socially supportive setting.

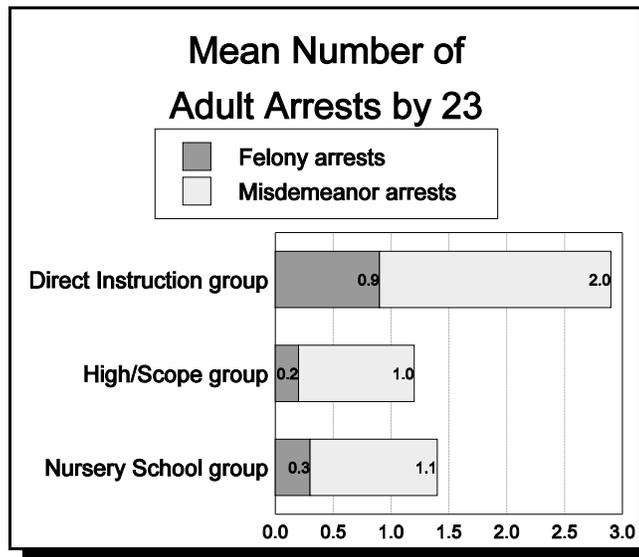
Program staff implemented the curriculum models independently and to high standards, in 2½-hour classes held 5 days a week and 1½-hour home visits every two weeks, when children were 3 and 4 years old. Except for the curriculum model, all aspects of the program were nearly identical. The findings presented here are corrected for differences in the gender makeup of the groups.

**By age 23, the High/Scope and Nursery School groups had ten significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group – both groups had two advantages, the High/Scope group alone had a nother six advantages, and the Nursery School group alone had two additional advantages. However, the High/Scope**

**and Nursery School groups, after controlling for gender makeup, did not differ significantly from each other on any outcome variable (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).**

By age 23, the High/Scope and Nursery School groups both had two significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group:

- Only 6% of either group needed treatment for emotional impairment or disturbance during their schooling, as compared to 47% of the Direct Instruction group.



- 43% of the High/Scope group and 44% of the Nursery School group had ever done volunteer work, as compared to 11% of the Direct Instruction group.

The High/Scope group had six additional significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group:

- Only 10% had ever been arrested for a felony, as compared to 39% of the Direct Instruction group.
- None had ever been arrested for a property crime, as compared to 38% of the Direct Instruction group.
- 23% reported at age 15 that they had engaged in 10 or more acts of misconduct, as compared to 56% of the Direct Instruction group.
- 36% said that various kinds of people gave them a hard time, as compared to 69% of the Direct Instruction group.
- 31% of the group had married and were living with their spouses, as compared to none of the Direct

Instruction group.

- 70% planned to graduate from college, as compared to 36% of the Direct Instruction group.

The Nursery School group had two additional significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group:

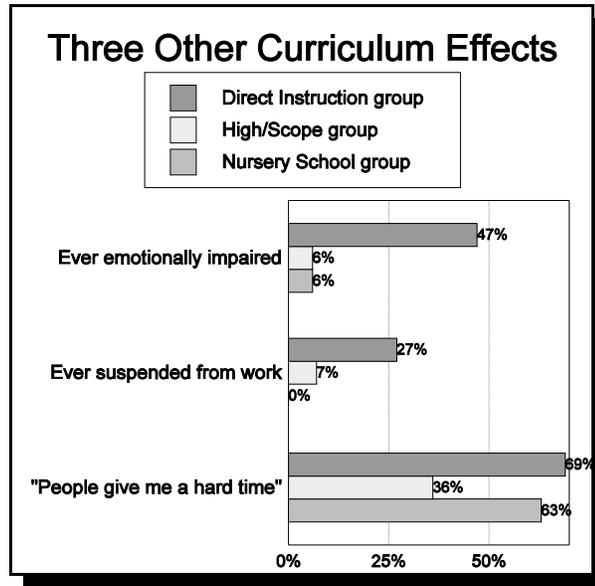
- Only 9% had been arrested for a felony at ages 22 - 23, as compared to 34% of the Direct Instruction group.
- None of them had ever been suspended from work, as compared to 27% of the Direct Instruction group.

Through age 10, the main finding of this study had been that the overall average IQ of the three groups rose 27 points from a borderline impairment level of 78 to a normal level of 105 after one year of their preschool program and subsequently settled in at an average of 95, still at the normal level. The only curriculum group difference through age 10 was measured as the preschool programs ended: the average IQ of the Direct Instruction group was significantly higher than the average IQ of the Nursery School group (103 vs. 93). Throughout their school years, curriculum groups did not differ significantly in school achievement, nor did their high school graduation rates differ significantly. The conclusion at that time was that well-implemented preschool curriculum models, regardless of their theoretical orientation, had similar effects on children's intellectual and academic performance. Time has proved otherwise.

Scripted teacher-directed instruction, touted by some as the surest path to school readiness, seems to purchase a temporary improvement in academic performance at the

cost of a missed opportunity for long-term improvement in social behavior. Child-initiated learning activities, on the other hand, seem to help children develop their social responsibility and skills so that they less often need treatment for emotional impairment or disturbance and are less often arrested for felonies as young adults.

While the High/Scope and Nursery School groups did not differ significantly on any outcome variable at age 23, the High/Scope approach is easier to replicate than the Nursery School approach because of its documentation, training program, and assessment system. The Nursery School approach used in this study was the unique product of teachers trained in a general child development approach. For this reason, it is unclear whether these results apply to children who experience other versions of the Nursery School approach developed by their own teachers.



These findings constitute evidence that early

childhood education works better to prevent problems when it focuses not on scripted, teacher-directed academic instruction but rather on child-initiated learning activities. Because biweekly home visits were part of each program, it seems that home visits by themselves do not account for these differences. These findings suggest that the goals of early childhood education should not be limited to academic preparation for school, but should also include helping children learn to make decisions, solve problems, and get along with others.

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