

Sustaining Gains

HCRC Fact Brief

What is the fade-out effect?

Fade-out is a term that is often misused and easily misinterpreted. We know that in most cases, the effects that early childhood interventions have on child outcomes are greatest early on and effect sizes decrease over time. These impacts may remain significant into adulthood. This phenomenon has been referred to as the fade-out effect. Unfortunately, the fade-out effect has been misinterpreted to mean that effects always disappear.¹

“[The term] fade-out implies that children who received early childhood intervention look the same as children who did not receive the intervention. This is not true”

— Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

Research has shown that if students enter poorer quality schools after early childhood intervention, fade-out effects can occur. These effects have are greater for black students than white students, as black students are more likely to attend schools of poor quality.² The fact that poor quality schools can undermine early intervention efforts promotes the need for continuing enrichment programs in early grades to help retain initial gains.

Despite possible diminishing effects, early childhood interventions are documented to have higher successes than interventions aimed at any other period in the life course.¹ While we know it’s critical to give young children a solid foundation to start school, we can’t expect a single year of intervention to secure future outcomes.³

Given what we know about human development—that it is a constantly evolving process—a short-term intervention in preschool is more likely to permanently alter school achievement

with continued support through the elementary years.

Preschool through 3rd grade programs are an empirically validated model for sustaining the gains achieved during an early childhood program into the elementary years and beyond.



How do we structure programs to produce lasting effects?

The goal in early childhood interventions is lasting effects. Empirical evidence points to the need for comprehensive interventions that span multiple years and target key transition points as crucial elements of programs addressing children’s learning needs. Preschool to 3rd grade (P-3) programs attempt to do just that.

P-3 interventions begin in any of the five years prior to the start of kindergarten and continue to third grade. The involvement of the K-3 system during the preschool years is crucial to promoting a successful transition into school and sustaining the effects of early childhood programs.⁴

Why do we target P-3?

If children fall behind in their education, they are unlikely to catch up with their peers without intervention. Research shows that if children don’t reach benchmarks for literacy proficiency for 3rd grade, their further education may be inhib-

ited. Third grade is a critical period for literacy. While children learn to read up through 3rd grade, once in 3rd grade they are expected to read to learn. Similar benchmarks also exist for math and science.⁴

Because 90 percent of brain development occurs during the first three years of a child's life, early experiences—good and bad—create the foundation for all future learning. Children who lack a strong foundation struggle to support the integrated layers of learning.⁴

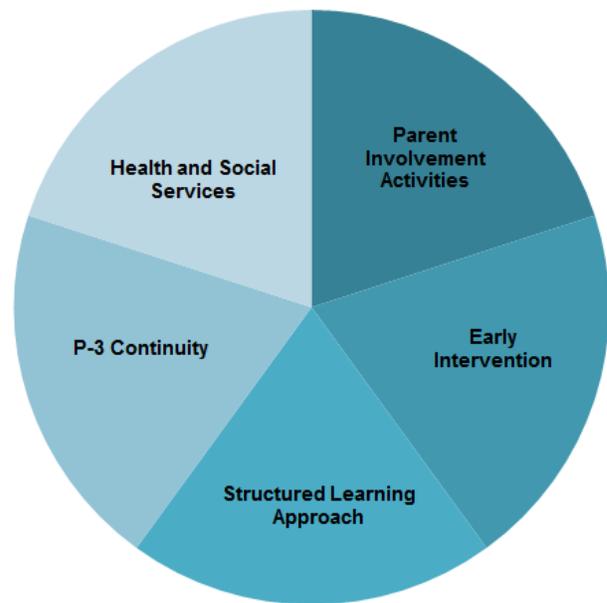
Early learning relies heavily on the relationship between child and caregiver. Thus, aligning P-3 care requires deeper and comprehensive support from the school and community, providing resources for the caregiver. Examples of partners in this alignment may represent diverse fields such as public health, medical facilities, early childhood-parent education groups, home visiting programs, community activity groups, libraries, and early intervention services.

CPCs as a P-3 intervention

The Child-Parent Center preschool to 3rd grade (CPC P-3) model is the longest established P-3 program in the nation and closely aligns with P-3 principles. The program is built on the theory that school readiness is enhanced by systematic language learning activities and family-support experiences in the form of direct parent involvement in centers.

CPCs implement P-3 education within a public school system. This allows for increased integration of the key principles of continuity, organization, instruction, and family services. With a

CPC P-3 Program Features



public school structure, CPCs have the opportunity for wide-scale implementation without the need to implement a new funding mechanism.⁵ Programs that create a continuous, aligned, education experience for the youngest children provide a mechanism through which we promote learning and maintain initially high levels of effects from early interventions. Children's development is constantly evolving. Regardless of how high the quality of an intervention is, it has to be a continuous system to promote learning and build on prior experiences of the intervention. Structuring programs to support children throughout development will promote continued effects from earlier interventions and will prevent dissipating effects.

References

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- 5 Reynolds, A. J., Magnusson, K., & Ou, S. (2006, January). P-3 education: Programs and practices that work in children's first decade. Working paper: Advancing PK-3 No. 6, Foundation for Child Development, New York.