Chicago study seals the health and education connection

25 June 2009

Latest findings from a long-term study of children’s educational progress in Chicago suggest that social-emotional learning programs should not only be the cornerstone of educational policy, but of health policy too.

A research team, including Arthur Reynolds from the Institute of Child Development at University of Minnesota, has found a strong association between educational achievement and later health outcomes.

They say the linkage can be traced back all the way through a child’s school career, to their initial adjustment to life in elementary school.

Published in the journal *Prevention Science* the study draws on data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study which has followed over 1,500 children from deprived areas of the city, from their early childhood until age 24.

The team found that those who completed high school were significantly more likely to lead healthy lives as adults. They fared better on each of four indicators of adult health – smoking, drug use, depression and health insurance coverage.

To try to unravel the root causes of the connection between health and attainment, they retraced the children’s lives through middle school to elementary school, drawing on extensive data from administrative records (such as school reports and social services documentation) and parent and teacher interviews, as well as collecting information from the participants themselves.

A clear pattern was uncovered. Those children who – by the time they were in middle school – were able to deal with frustration, read well and had ambitions to go to college, were far more likely to finish high school and to be leading otherwise healthy lives.

The team suggest that investing in children’s school lives could have a knock-on effect. “Implementation of evidence-based practices that promote high-
school completion might not just represent good education policy but also
good public health policy."

Certain parallel findings from Chicago research confirm the possibility. Some
children included in the longitudinal study also took part in the Chicago Child
Parent Center preschool program, an initiative promoting language acquisition,
learning and parental involvement.

It emerged that they were less likely to smoke or have no health insurance in
later life.

So, getting children and families to invest in their school careers early on means
better grades and healthier lives. But there are already many programs fulfilling
this niche, such as the Perry Preschool Project, and Abecedarian.

So Reynolds and his team followed the trail even further back to the very
beginning of the children’s school careers. They discovered that how children
adapted socially and emotionally to life in the classroom, between the ages of
three and six, played a key role in future school outcomes and a healthy
lifestyle as an adult.

Bearing all of this in mind, they question whether the current crop of
interventions is lacking something. “School interventions solely targeting
cognitive domains may miss other important components of school success
that influence adolescent and adult functionality,” they argue.

Their findings confirm that social and emotional learning programs such as the
PATHS curriculum may provide a way forward. These interventions could
contribute to improvements in education and health, and potentially other
outcomes as well.

Reynolds and Co. are not alone. They point out that leaders in fields as diverse
as economics, neurobiology and prevention science, all speak in unison over
the importance of social and emotional development to long–term well–being.

Downloaded on July 29, 2009 from
http://www.preventionaction.org/research/chicago-study-seals-health-and-education-connection/1284