

1 *Early childhood intervention: The evolution of a concept*

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The field of early childhood intervention is a model of remarkable accomplishment and unfulfilled opportunity. Its agenda ranges from scholarly reflection to service delivery. Its successes include specialization as well as enhanced cross-disciplinary collaboration. Its unmet challenges are both theoretical and pragmatic. And it draws upon a wide range of intellectual resources in child and family development, education, health, economics, social policy, and philosophy.

In recent testimony before the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources and the House Committee on Education and Labor, David Hamburg, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, closed with the following remarks:

What we do early in life lays the foundation for all the rest. The early years can provide the basis for a long, healthy life-span. Early preventive intervention can be exceptionally valuable. Health and education are closely linked in the development of vigorous, skillful, adaptable young people. Investments in health and education can be guided by research in biomedical and behavioral sciences in ways likely to prevent much of the damage now being done to children. We have learned a lot in recent years about ways of preventing damage to children – prenatal and perinatal care, early education, immunization, nutrition, and much more. The great challenge now is to be sufficiently resourceful and persistent to find ways of putting that knowledge to use for healthy child development in a rapidly changing socio-technical context. If there is a more fundamental task for human beings, I wonder what it could be (Hamburg, 1987, pp. 49–50).

That task – to merge the knowledge and insights of scholars and practitioners with the creative talents of those who design and implement social policy initiatives, and to invest the products of such an alliance in the future of our children – reflects the fundamental purpose of early childhood intervention.

The concept of support for infants and young children would seem, at first glance, to generate little controversy. One would think that a child with a disability, or one whose early life experiences are dominated by the material deprivations of poverty, or by the caregiving of a disorganized, isolated, or abusive parent, would be the uncontested beneficiary of adequately funded public services. Indeed, many have proposed that the allocation of resources for this most vulnerable and most disenfranchised group within our population should be based on its moral imperative alone (e.g., Caldwell, 1986; Edelman, 1987; Schorr, 1988; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1985). Nevertheless, evidence is emerging that an “investment” in young children will also return monetary dividends in the form of decreased subsequent need for such costly services as special education,

custodial care, welfare support, and incarceration for delinquent behavior (Barnett, 1985; Barnett & Escobar, this volume).

Despite its intrinsic appeal, however, the field of early childhood intervention has not been embraced uniformly or supported consistently. It has endured battles over the delineation of its goals and objectives (Clarke & Clarke, 1976; Ferry, 1981), the specification of program models and methods (Anastasiow & Mansergh, 1975), and the selection of service providers and recipients (Bricker & Slentz, 1988). It has tried to respond to the challenge to document its effectiveness while struggling with the methodological and logistical constraints of inadequate outcome measures, unavoidable sample attrition, limited funds to sustain long-term longitudinal studies, and ethical barriers to the maintenance of untreated control groups of children with documented problems (Meisels, 1985; Shonkoff, Hauser-Cram, Krauss, & Upshur, 1988).

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first explores the diverse origins of the field of early childhood intervention prior to the 1960s. The second section provides an overview of the dramatic advances of the past three decades. Finally, the chapter closes with an examination of the conceptual and programmatic challenges of the future.

The history of early childhood intervention in the United States illustrates the power of an idea that has evolved over time. Whereas its early roots were established in a variety of fields that have converged in recent years, its theoretical foundation continues to mature as it gains from both the successes and the disappointments of its pioneers. Standing on the threshold of the final decade of the twentieth century, the concept of early childhood intervention faces a formidable array of political, bureaucratic, and theoretical challenges and opportunities. Its antecedent pathways and their links to the tasks of the present and the future are the focus of this chapter.

HISTORICAL ROOTS AND EARLY FOUNDATIONS

The overall framework of contemporary early childhood intervention has evolved from multiple perspectives. The first part of this chapter will focus on the historical contributions of four discrete fields: early childhood education, maternal and child health services, special education, and child development research.

Early childhood education

The intellectual roots of early childhood education are often traced to the relatively recent historical recognition of childhood as a unique period in life and to the writings of the European philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Aries, 1962). Comenius (1592–1670) characterized the “School of the Mother” as the most appropriate vehicle for education in the first six years of life and advocated that the child learn “spontaneously . . . in play whatever may be learned at home” (Eller, 1956, p. 116, cited by Clarke-Stewart & Fein, 1983). Locke (1632–1704) popularized the notion of the *tabula rasa*, suggesting that children from birth are a blank slate, thereby challenging the commonly held concept of genetically predetermined behavior and competence. Rousseau (1712–1778), an even stronger advocate of the unspoiled nature of the child, urged a *laissez-faire* approach to the early childhood years in order to allow for the natural unfolding of individual talents. These views were largely echoed by the nineteenth century educational experiments of Tolstoy (1967) and by those of A. S. Neill (1960) in more recent years. In contrast to the humanistic attitudes toward child

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