

Time Will Tell

By

William A. Palmer, Jr.

“Time will tell” is a phrase we use to acknowledge our difficulty in predicting the future. More often than not, however, the passage of time tells us that our expectations were pretty accurate. If an individual who began abusing alcohol and drugs as a teenager suffers an untimely end, or the spendthrift who can’t control the use of credit cards ends up in bankruptcy, we shake our heads and say we saw it coming. Occasionally, we’re surprised by outcomes that are contrary to our expectations, such as when the neighborhood kid who was a holy terror becomes a priest or the couple who squabbled all the way to the altar celebrate their golden anniversary. But such surprises are the exception to the rule.

Social scientists confirm the proverb, “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” Nowhere is this maxim about expectations more dramatically illustrated than in the realm of early education. In “Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications,” a 2008 report for the National Institute for Early Childhood Education, W. Stephen Barnett concluded that well-designed preschool programs not only made children better students but also helped them to become better adjusted and more successful adults. Barnett’s analysis of several longitudinal studies affirmed that quality early education is a reliable predictor of long-term student success. The passage of time tells a compelling story: Good preschool programs lead to

higher achievement test scores, lower rates of grade repetition, fewer referrals for special education, and greater educational attainment.

The benefits go beyond the classroom. The same preschool programs that set children on the road to success in school also tend to keep them off the road to crime. Effective preschool programs reduce the potential not only for juvenile delinquency but also for criminal behavior in adulthood. Societal investment in early education is more than repaid with the prospect of less crime, the need for fewer jails, and a reduced burden on health and social service systems.

What makes for an effective preschool program? Barnett concludes that the programs producing the best outcomes offer small class sizes with well-trained and adequately paid teachers. Most important, however, is that the program “be designed to develop the whole child, including social and emotional development and self-regulation.” What Barnett calls self-regulation is simply what most of us would call self-discipline or self-control. Learning to delay gratification and to control one’s impulses is every bit as important as learning the ABCs.

American society has changed dramatically over the past fifty years. In 1960, only about one child in ten attended a preschool program. Today, often with both parents working away from home, nearly three-quarters of three- and four-year-old children are enrolled in preschools. Now marking forty-five years of service to the nation, Head Start offers preschool classes for children from economically disadvantaged families. What, however, are the options for families not eligible for Head Start but still struggling to make ends meet? This is a question we’ve been

pondering at the Parent–Child Development Corporation, where we offer both Head Start and Smart Start, a fee-based preschool program. To help families who do not qualify for Head Start, our Board of Directors recently approved the development of a Preschool Scholarship Fund. This fund will assist families who would like to enroll their children in our highly regarded Smart Start program. Currently we are seeking support from community groups, businesses, and individuals who will help us make the Preschool Scholarship Fund a reality. If you'd like to know more about this initiative, please contact me at the address below.

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