The Philadelphia Human Development Project: Studying the Determinants of Early Childhood Development

Statement of Problem

Large gaps in cognitive and socio-emotional development, which are critical to positive child outcomes, exist across socioeconomic groups and emerge early in children's lives. Although differences in income can partially explain these gaps, a substantial fraction are due to factors correlated with, but also distinct from income, such as levels of maternal education.

Maternal knowledge about the benefits of investing in early childhood may determine how much time and resources the mother devotes to raising her child in the first few years of his/her life. At PolicyLab, we recognize that the health and beliefs of caregivers can impact the health and development of the child. Unfortunately, there have been no studies that have systematically analyzed maternal beliefs, maternal investments and child development, making it difficult to parcel out how maternal beliefs influence investment choices made by the family. The Philadelphia Human Development Project (PHD) is a longitudinal study that seeks to fill this gap in knowledge – eventually through the provision of intergenerational family services – regarding the determinants of early childhood development.

Description

The PHD is a prospective longitudinal study that will follow 882 women from pregnancy until their child is approximately two years old. During the course of the study, we will interview women three times.

The first interview will occur during pregnancy in a prenatal clinic. At this interview, the study team will collect information about maternal beliefs regarding how quickly children are able to learn certain physical (e.g., crawl or walk) and mental tasks (e.g., talk and count). The team will also collect data on maternal views about childcare, work, money spent on toys, books and other resources for children, socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education, partnership status, paternal characteristics), pregnancy experience, depression, self-control, risk taking and patience.

The second interview will take place when the child is approximately nine months old in the home or in a place convenient to the mother. In this interview, the study team measures the mother's "investments" in her child by asking mothers to report how much they spent on educational goods and the amount of time they spend interacting with their child on learning activities. The team also collects information on the family's economic resources, which may be determinants of investments and may be correlated with beliefs. Finally, parents are asked to use the Language Environment Analysis (LENA) digital language processor to measure the quality of the language environment.

The third interview will take place when the child is approximately two years old at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) or in a place convenient to the mother. In this interview, the study team repeats the questions asked in the first interview regarding maternal beliefs about how fast children develop. The team also

measures child development using the Bayley Scales of Infant Development-3, an assessment of a young children's cognitive, language and motor development.

Next Steps

This study is ongoing. The findings will help to determine whether education or other intergenerational family services might help mothers obtain information that is beneficial for the development of their children. We also hope the results inform programs that can help mothers take care of their children in a way that is beneficial for children's early development.

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