Driving Science-Based Innovation to Achieve Larger Impacts at Scale for Young Children Facing Adversity

JACK P. SHONKOFF, M.D.
Julius B. Richmond FAMRI Professor of Child Health and Development, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Harvard Graduate School of Education. Professor of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital. Director, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.

Plenary Session
Federal Reserve System Community Development Research Conference
Washington, DC | March 23, 2017
The Evidence Base: 50 Years of Research on Early Childhood Programs Show We Need New Strategies

Source: Duncan & Magnuson (2013)
The Vision: Learning from 50 Years of Progress in Treating Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia

Five-year survival rates under age 15 years

Source: Hunger, Lu, Devidas (2012)
What Can We Learn from These Contrasting Stories?

Source: Duncan & Magnuson (2013)
21st-Century Science Suggests New Ways of Thinking About Intervention in the Early Years

Attention to development should begin at birth (or even prenatally), not at age 4 or 5.

Early experiences affect lifelong health, not just learning.

Healthy development requires protection, not just enrichment.

Achieving far better outcomes for young children facing adversity requires that we:
(1) support the adults who care for them to build their own capabilities; and (2) strengthen the capacity of communities to support families raising children under difficult circumstances.
Capabilities that Promote Both Effective Parenting and Economic Productivity are Built on Foundational Skills in Executive Function and Self-Regulation

These core dimensions of adult competence include the ability to:

- focus and sustain attention
- set goals, make plans, and monitor actions
- make decisions and solve problems
- follow rules, control impulses, and delay gratification
Two Windows for Intervention: The Development of Executive Function Skills Begins in Early Childhood and Extends Into the Early Adult Years
Understanding Human Variation is the Key to More Effective Policies and Programs
Achieving Greater Impact at Scale Requires Rethinking the Criteria for Defining Evidence-Based Programs

**What We Should Ask**
- Why did this work so well for these children and families?
- Why did this work so poorly for these children and families?

**Current Approach**
- Significant mean effect earns evidence-based status
- Why did this work so well for these children and families?
- Why did this work so poorly for these children and families?
Achieving Greater Impact at Scale Requires Rethinking the Criteria for Defining Evidence-Based Programs

- Scale effective programs for similar subgroups
- Design and test new approaches for these subgroups
- Build a suite of interventions that matches different strategies to different resources, needs, and desired outcomes

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University
A Diversified Investment Portfolio Offers a Mix of Objectives, Timelines, Risks, and Rewards

Meeting standards and increasing access

Basic quality issues that must be addressed

Delivering state of the art

Adapting and scaling the most promising new strategies

Generating and testing new ideas across sectors

(Adapted from Everett Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 2003)