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Children in High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Are Buffered From Changes in Family Income

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While losses in family income predict increases in behavior problems for many children, attending high-quality early childhood education and care centers offers some protection against families' economic declines, according to a new study out of Norway. In Norway, publicly subsidized high-quality early childhood education and care is available to all children, from low-income to affluent, starting at age 1. The study found that children who don't take part in such programs have more early behavior problems when their families' income drops.

The study was conducted by researchers at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, the Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development, and Boston College. It appears in the journal *Child Development*.

“Our study adds to the growing body of evidence supporting the potential power of universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care for improving children’s well-being and growth,” according to Henrik Daae Zachrisson, senior researcher at the Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development, who was with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health at the time of the study, and Eric Dearing, associate professor at Boston College and senior researcher at the Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development, who conducted the study.

When families' incomes (adjusted for family size and yearly median income in Norway) decreased, their children's behavior problems increased, the study found. Conversely, when families' incomes increased, their children's behavior problems decreased. These patterns were strongest in low-income families, so fluctuations in income seemed to matter most for those with the least. Children in both low- and middle-income households who attended high-quality centers had stable, low levels of internalizing problems (such as withdrawal and anxiety) regardless of whether their families experienced worsening or improving economic circumstances.

The researchers drew data from a longitudinal study of more than 75,000 children and their families who participated in assessments from birth through age 3. Family income data were taken from public tax records. When children were 1 and a half and 3 years old, mothers reported on children's aggression and noncompliance (externalizing problems), withdrawal and anxiety (internalizing problems), and attendance at an early childhood and care center. Children who did not attend a center or were not cared for by a parent or family member were typically cared for by a family day care, nanny, or outdoor nursery (i.e., monitored playground); these settings are unregulated. At 36 months, almost 88 percent of the children were in an early childhood education and care center.

“Even in a context such as Norway, which has relatively little income inequality and relatively strong social supports for families, children in low-income families still appear to be sensitive to acute fluctuations in income, a finding that's also been demonstrated in the United States,” according to Zachrisson and Dearing. “However, children in regulated, high-quality early childhood education and care centers appear to be protected against the negative effects of changes in income within families when it comes to internalizing problems.”

The study was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Health, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the National Institute of Neurological Disorder and Stroke, and The Research Council of Norway.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Family Income Dynamics, Early Childhood Education and Care, and Early Child Behavior Problems in Norway by Zachrisson, HD (Center for Child Behavioral Development, formerly with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health), and Dearing, E (Boston College and the Norwegian Center for Child Behavioral Development). Copyright 2014 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.