

**Decision Making on the Job, Career and Family, Childcare**  
**What Happens Next – 10.24.2021**  
**Elizabeth Cascio QA**

Larry Bernstein:

That's really funny. All right, let's get started with how to think about the pre-K experience. When there's a new child in the family, and the mother stays at home with the young child, there's a question as to the value add associated with that, versus putting the child immediately in childcare. And you said it was, our society doesn't recognize it enough of the importance; they view it like a vacation. Many households recognize, and maybe the mother says, "You know what, I'm going to take some significant time off work, even though it's going to cost me substantially in my career," as Claudia and David were saying earlier, "Because I really value this special time with the child, and I think that I can contribute greatly to the personal growth of that child." And there are other people who think that that the mother is not going to do that much value add; she's better off putting that child in childcare. How do we evaluate the importance of the mother, versus an institutional or third-party child care provider?

Elizabeth Cascio:

I mean, that's a great question. I mean, most of the evidence that we have on early childhood programs comes from public programs where, we think that the counterfactual to what a child would be experiencing in childcare is much, much worse. So historically, as I kind of was alluding to there, public programs have served disadvantaged children. So, like the federal Head Start program targets children from lower income families, many state pre-K programs are also targeted toward disadvantaged children. The model preschool interventions that have been studied a great deal, for example, by Jim Heckman, those targeted very disadvantaged children. And in all of those cases, it's really about what the quality of time outside the home looks like, relative to the quality within the home, and in many of those cases, especially in the time periods where the literature has been concentrated, it really appears that the time outside the home was relatively more productive.

Now, as you move up the sort of income ladder, we do think that families are either able to buy better programs outside the home, or make better investments in their children, either directly, through the time they spend at home, or through other resources that they might be able to invest in. And maybe the return to care outside the home is lower, but it doesn't mean that it's not worth engaging in. And in fact, it's really only the highest income families that can afford to pay out of pocket for center based childcare these days, because it's so expensive.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim Heckman, I think recommended disadvantaged children to get this kind of child care support, but didn't recommend it as a policy matter for non-disadvantaged children. How do you think about that? Because what's being proposed right now in the reconciliation bill is more of a universal program than just helping the disadvantaged.

Elizabeth Cascio:

Right. I mean, I've spent a lot of the last five years of my career kind of thinking about this question and I was kind of on, I guess Team Jim Heckman for a long time. The concern is, why should we spend public resources on families that would've otherwise been doing this spending, sending their children to childcare on their own. There's substantial crowd out of private programs, for the public option. And I've even shown that in the context of the two earliest pre-K programs and work with Diane S in Oklahoma and Georgia; these are both sort of universal pre-K programs that were established in the 1990s. And we show that for less advantaged children, it really looks like they move from home based care into the program, and they benefit in terms of higher test scores. Whereas, children from more advantaged environments, they look like they would've otherwise, would've been in school, anyway, and they're not getting any benefits. So it really looks like, potentially a real waste of resources. And I think, even though Heckman doesn't study universal programs directly, it's that kind of thinking that that can weigh in.

Elizabeth Cascio:

The one question that was lingering after I did my work with Diane Schanzenbach on Oklahoma and Georgia was: what if a universal program delivers larger benefits for disadvantaged children than a targeted program would? So by, "Targeted" here, I mean, there are age guidelines for enrollment, but we're also selecting students to go to these programs based on family income, or mother's education or some other kind of measures of disadvantage. It really looks like the programs that are universal might actually have a higher return. So that's the paper that I sort of mentioned in my presentation and the one that you also were referring to earlier on it. In that paper, what I tried to do was to compare universal and these targeted programs kind of on the same basis, using kind of exactly the same data, the same kind of empirical approach. That hadn't really been done before, and that research showed that the gains for disadvantaged children of universal programs were significantly larger than in targeted programs, programs that were just sort of serving them only, and that the returns were actually large enough to justify the additional spending on these, quote, or so-called things for "marginal children," who had a high probability of going to a program, anyway.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to ask you a question about the value of pre-K education. I understand that this is a controversial subject in terms of the research findings. There's been two major studies, one done on Head Start. There was a very large randomized experiment in Tennessee. What both of them seemed to show was that when you got from pre-K to kindergarten, there were some very substantial statistically significant benefits to those children that engaged in pre-K. But then by third grade, a lot of those gains had completely disappeared. In the Tennessee study, they found that pre-K actually had negative returns for those students. The reasons that they gave in the findings was that being in an institutional setting at such a young age may have created self-regulatory problems, created behavioral problems, and that the benefits of associated education, which might be recognizing letters or early spelling, may not have long-

term benefits relative to some other problems. What are your thoughts on the lack of continuation of benefits associated with pre-K?

Elizabeth Cascio:

Yeah, really great to bring this up. So, both of the studies that you're referring to, so the first one was the Head Start Impact Study, and there was then the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K Study. Both of those studies were special because they used random assignment, so lotteries for slots at oversubscribed centers. This is basically the gold standard of program evaluation, where the kids who are able or have the opportunity to attend really on average look the same as the kids who don't, and we can follow them over time.

So, there is kind of an important difference between these two programs. So in addition to the one being Head Start and the other one being this Tennessee pre-K program, they both were targeted programs, but that experimental protocol for the Tennessee program actually kind of fell apart, because they couldn't actually follow up on a sort of balanced sample of kids who continued through the program. So I feel like those results are a little bit compromised and maybe not as believable.

However, fade-out is kind of endemic to early childhood intervention. It appears in work on the Perry Preschool Project and the Carolina Program. Those are the two that Jim Heckman has worked a great deal on. Dave Deming in his excellent work on Head Start finds evidence of this as well in Head Start, comparing siblings. So that isn't surprising. One of the things we have seen, though, in sort of research on these older programs is that despite the fade-out, kids really do appear to do better later in life along a variety of dimensions. For example, they're more likely to stay in school or maybe are more likely to go to college and less likely to be on public assistance and more likely to be employed.

Maybe we could talk a bit about why that's the case in a little bit, but one thing also that is different about the Head Start Impact Study and the Tennessee program relative to those earlier studies is today, precisely because more women work, the alternative to one program is another program. There is this kind of substitution from a private program into the public program, for example. The counterfactual here actually matters quite a bit. There's some really excellent work by Pat Cline and Chris Walters on the Head Start Impact Study, which it's a pretty technical study, but demonstrates that in the Head Start Impact Study, kids who would have otherwise been in home-based care actually do benefit a great deal from Head Start. But there isn't that much of a benefit for kids who would have otherwise already been in a program of some sort. I think that that actually makes a lot of sense. It's also the case in their study that they find that the benefits of Head Start still outweigh the cost.

Claudia Goldin:

I want to ask a question about universal and community, because in reading your work, what I take from it is that even if children are from more well-to-do families, would go to very good programs, when we split the group up, even though we have highly income-segregated neighborhoods, when we split the kids up and we have some kids in one group that go to the

private and one going to the public that we lose something in terms of community and parental involvement, and that is why universal is so important. Can you speak to that?

Elizabeth Cascio:

Yes, I'm glad you brought that up. Yeah. I mean, it's really hard for me to nail down in the study that I do on universal versus targeted, but there is this sense in which these programs are better. They're higher quality along dimensions that are difficult for us sometimes to observe as researchers, but they're higher quality because there's more community kind of investment of time and effort into them or higher parental expectations of what is supposed to happen in those programs. Higher income parents are much more aggressive in terms of making sure that educators and caregivers know what they're expecting from them, whereas I think it's been much more difficult for lower income families to be as heavily involved in their children's education, which could leave programs which only serve lower income children not to kind of live up to the same standards. So that's one of the things, I think, that is going on in the background here, for sure, but it's very difficult to test. I'm trying to think about ways to test it directly.

Larry Bernstein:

David, just to bring you into the conversation, you've done some research on Head Start and pre-K. I recently read a paper by one of your students analyzing kids that were in Head Start as they age into the workforce. What they're finding is that there's little to no improvement in earnings relative to being either in a pre-K or not in a pre-K. Liz was commenting about the implications for pre-K later in life. What are you seeing in the research out there that we find as you grow into adulthood?

David Deming:

Yeah. So I think just to circle back to some of the themes from the earlier conversation, so as you mentioned, my student who wrote this, funny story, actually. So his paper was actually a replication of my original study that Liz mentioned earlier. I remember he came to my office one day and was stammering, nervous that I was going to kill it because it didn't find something that was consistent with my original study. I said, "Of course not. This is science, and we update our beliefs." So when for replication and extension and understanding the results, I don't have any stake in Head Start being good or not. I think it's important. I do think it's important. I mean, I have a stake in it because I want it to work for people, but I don't have a stake in being right in terms of my research. I think important to contextualize this study is that the nature of his replication was that he looked at people whose mothers were older at the time when they had children. So it's a different sample of children.

Elizabeth Cascio:

Right.

David Deming:

So in my study, because I did it earlier, I was looking at very young mothers with disproportionately firstborn kids.

Elizabeth Cascio:

Right.

David Deming:

Those mothers tended to be poorer as well and tended to be more likely to be single mothers. So I think the way to reconcile the studies is to just point out that for those kids, Head Start was a better alternative to either being at home or being in a different preschool if you're in a low-income area. Depending on the alternatives available to you, they might not have been as good, whereas children of older mothers who have more sophistication, have maybe sent other kids to preschool already know what they're doing. So, when they end up in Head Start, that may not have even been their first choice. They may have preferred something else.

So, the lesson is this is not done in a vacuum. Liz mentioned the Cline and Walters paper. What their paper essentially shows is that you need to compare your evaluation of the program to what the alternative is. The alternatives have really changed quite a lot over the generation. So, the answer is not, "Head Start is bad." The answer is, "Head Start is about as good as the current existing state pre-K programs or private pre-K programs that are out there, but it's still a heck of a lot better than nothing."

So that's, I think, a consistent lesson I draw from all this research, which is that almost all of the benefits of delivering pre-K is getting more kids into a reasonably high-quality program, not so much spending a lot of money on making it a Cadillac, supersize program that has an incredibly small teacher-student ratio and does lots of bells and whistles. It's really about making sure that kids are able to come to kindergarten, ready to learn, are able to be in a supportive environment at an early age.

Elizabeth Cascio:

I agree with that completely. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

the alternative I think is you can either be in pre-K or you can do a private alternative or you can be at home with your mother, doing who knows what?

David Deming:

Or father.

Larry Bernstein:

Yes, fair enough. Being at home with a parent or another caregiver.

David Deming:

Yeah, exactly.

Larry Bernstein:

I spent a lot of time in school in my life, and obviously you've spent even more time. School is good, and it has its benefits, but there's also benefits of not being in school, of enjoying your childhood, spending time with your parents, and learning from them directly in some sort of experience. David particularly, you were talking about the soft skills, so not necessarily purely intellectual skills, but how to work in teams or having good social skills, all these interesting environmental issues. Why do we think that being in an institutional environment versus being in a home environment is better in the long run for the child at that age where there's not a lot of intellectual engagement?

David Deming:

Yeah. So a great question, Larry. I mean, I don't think it's always true. It depends on the situation. But let me give you a couple reasons why I think it might be better than you think. So one reason is that if you think about what happens in preschool that can't be replicated at home, the big thing is interaction with other kids. So if you look at the results of the Perry Preschool Project, and indeed what these programs are mostly trying to do, they're not focused on academics. They're not focused on teaching people letters and numbers. They're actually focused on teaching kids how to play well with others, how to regulate yourself, how to not hit other kids when they take your toy. If you've been in a preschool classroom recently, a common trick they use is to have a number at each table. It's like, "Okay, only three kids can be at this table," and so the kids have to negotiate if there's a really desirable table who gets to be there and we take turns and this and that.

So those are all lessons you don't learn at home that you learn in school and don't really show up on tests of ... If you look at the tests that people use to evaluate the Tennessee program or others, they're extremely basic vocabulary tests. Who really cares if a kid learns vocabulary at age five or age six? It really doesn't matter in the long run. But what does matter is do they learn these social skills that are actually directly valuable in the workplace and really aren't taught that much in a third or fourth grade classroom? So maybe preschool is the place to get it.

So that's just one example. I mean, when I think about sending my own kids to preschool and why we did that, despite both ... My partner and I are highly educated. Why did we do that? We did it because we wanted them to be with other kids and we wanted them to learn in a group environment, in a rich environment that we didn't feel we could replicate, even with our bundles of degrees. So at the same time, we want to complement some of that at home and talk about what happened in school. So it's not like we're just handing the kids over. I think it's really about understanding that you live and work and learn in a society of people, and if you're just home all the time, you are missing a little bit of that. So not to suggest that being home is bad, but I think there are some trade-offs.

Elizabeth Cascio:

I agree with that completely. Kids are not sitting in neat little rows. At this age, they're playing, and they're learning how to exist in a society with other people.

Larry Bernstein:

A question for Claudia. In your book, you mentioned that women have been delaying childbirth to much older ages in order to enhance both education and career development. I wonder the pros and cons of that and whether or not we should encourage women to have children at a slightly younger age and not run out of time or have to go into IVF, et cetera. How do you view the costs and consequences of timing? What is a good age to start having kids?

Claudia Goldin:

Yeah, so delaying of childbearing has many different reasons and many different consequences. So yes, women can have children at 12 and 14, but when is the optimal time for the individual to have children? It's also when is the optimal time for the individual to form intimate and hopefully long-lasting, stable relationships? I think that that is part and parcel of the issue of childbearing. If women just went into a little box and formed a baby and then came out with it, we might have a different sense of when optimality was. But this has to do with a relationship, and if you do not yet know who you are and what your identity is and where you think you're going, you're going to form a relationship with a person, and in general, we have heterosexual relations, so I can say a woman would form a relationship with the man.

We know from very, very good studies that relationships that are formed early tend to be less stable than relationships that are formed later. Now, you may say, "But later, later, how much later?" Well, it turns out that the delay in marriage that we saw in the 1970s in the US, that we've seen in just about every country, including in Asia, that that delay in marriage led to a delay in childbearing, and we've continued to delay. Then in fact, we see that women who are in their forties now have more children, have a higher fraction, I should say, of women with children than the same age group in a previous cohort. One of the reasons is enormous desire and the use of assisted reproductive technologies. So I know that there are individuals in child development and in health who might say it's healthier for a woman to have a child when she's 19, but it's unhealthy for her personally. It's unhealthy for the stability of the relationship, hopefully the two parents that are producing and taking care of the child. So I don't think we can treat the child itself in a vacuum.

Larry Bernstein:

I was reading your book it seemed you sort of encouraged the delay into the late thirties, because you thought that would be better for both education and career development. I wonder about the tension associated with that relative to the health of the child, and the probability that you may be unable to have children. As a parent, I have a son and a daughter, and I was speaking with my daughter. I discussed with her, "What are you thinking about in terms of when do you want to have kids?" Obviously, she was very uncomfortable with the conversation, but I kept saying, "I recommend something in your mid to late twenties as a good spot, and waiting until your late thirties is a little late."

My wife and I had children when we were 33 and 35, and I viewed that as we were playing with fire a little bit. I wasn't suggesting 19 for my daughter. I was suggesting mid to late twenties. How do you still think about ... because you spend a lot of time thinking about how to plan your career, how to maximize lifetime earnings, but there's also decisions that you make for the children.

Claudia Goldin:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

How should we weigh those costs?

Claudia Goldin:

So the first thing, let's just put it on the table, I never tell people to do anything, what to do, when to do it. I am talking about what has happened and why it has happened. I am describing. I'm a historian, not a psychiatrist. But let us realize the facts, Larry, that my generation graduating college from the late 1960s to around 1980, we were the ones who went out and said, "We can delay childbearing and pay no price. We can go and get the high degrees." That generation, among all college graduate women, had rates of childlessness that were exceptionally high.

But the next generation graduating college from the 1980s and beyond, we know what they've done. They're already 45 years old, and they have continued to delay. Yet they have childbearing rates that are monumentally higher. So where there's a will, there's a way, perhaps. So in fact, they didn't have fewer children or a lower percentage of them didn't have children. In fact, a higher percentage of the group had children. So delay in this group does not necessarily mean that you're not going to have kids, but yes, it's going to reduce the probability, no question.

Larry Bernstein:

All right. I end each show on a note of optimism, and so I want to go to each speaker and talk about what they're optimistic about. Claudia has listened to the show, so I'll start with Claudia first, because maybe she won't be as blindsided by the question.

Claudia Goldin:

Sure.

Larry Bernstein:

Claudia, what are you optimistic about?

Claudia Goldin:

Okay. So rather than talking about optimism, I want to talk about gratitude very quickly. I'm grateful to the American economy in April of 2020 that it did not enter a Great Depression of



lasting unemployment. I thought it would. I am grateful to a group of incredible scientists who created vaccines and treatments. I am grateful to a very different group of essential workers who delivered food and goods to the nation's families at their risk, and I am grateful to many in our nation who came together to protest deep-seated inequities, such as systemic racism and gender inequalities in caregiving and gave voice to these wrongs at a time when it was dangerous. Finally, I am grateful that some amazing technologies have enabled us to be remote and yet productive. The return to a new normal at work and at home makes me cautiously optimistic.

Larry Bernstein:

Wonderful. David, why don't you go next?

David Deming:

How do I follow that up?

Larry Bernstein:

I don't know.

David Deming:

I think Claudia, that's so well put. I think in addition to everything Claudia said, which I fully endorse, I'm optimistic as well about some of the changes that I see happening in our ... I'll call it workforce development system, so education and training institutions, the way that employers are seeing religion in terms of investing in workers, creating pathways for people to have meaningful, family-sustaining careers, rather than just dead end jobs. When you look at the jobs that make up the so-called Great Resignation, it's a lot of service sector jobs that are relatively dead-end jobs. I think the fact that we're finding ways to maybe even automate those jobs away is actually a good thing, because they're not very good jobs. If we can find a way to get people on track to have careers that are meaningful to them, that give them opportunities for development of skills, I think that'll just be better for everyone. I think we're in the midst of that transformation now, maybe even in the early stages of it. I'm quite optimistic about some of the innovation I see out there in the world.

Larry Bernstein:

Great. Liz, do you want to end on a note of optimism?

Elizabeth Cascio:

Sure. Thanks, Larry, for forcing me to think about this, because it's easy to get so kind of caught up on the fact that it's so difficult for us to take collective action on issues that are so important for the future of humanity. But if I have to say something, I would say that my two daughters, who are nine and twelve years old, they give me great cause for optimism. They are the children of two parents who've done their part to maintain couple equity and gender equality, and they're also products of a really high-quality early care and education system here locally.

They're confident, smart, creative, and fearless. So I think everyone should watch out, and I think we should be confident in the future.