Investing early in human resources

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Vancouver Coastal Health
Promoting wellness. Ensuring care.

Early investment in our human resources pays off economically and socially — we should do more of it.

While heavily paraphrased, this statement is at the foundation of a recent policy paper prepared by the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), an interdisciplinary collaborative research group based at UBC. Their report "15 by 15: A Comprehensive Policy Framework for Early Human Capital Investment in BC," presents investing in early childhood as one of the keys to BC's long-term economic success.

A measure of early childhood development often used is school readiness when children enter kindergarten. According to HELP, only 71 per cent of children arrive at school meeting all the developmental benchmarks to success both now, and in the future.

The early years of life play a role far beyond childhood. Many challenges faced as adults have their roots in early childhood: mental health problems, obesity, heart disease, criminality, literacy and numeracy. A poor early start means not being ready for school and this leads to challenges later in school, in adolescence and later in adulthood. To quote the HELP report: "…children who do not benefit from optimally nurturing early environments risk genetic adaptations that will limit their life-long well-being and productivity."

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One strategy has been to think (or hope) that we can compensate for a poor start with increased investments in the later school years, expanding job skills training and offering post high school programs. The truth is that while well-intentioned, these efforts are far less effective as investments in human capital than those made in the early years. It costs far more to remedy these problems than to have avoided them in the first place.

From the perspective of the labour force, we need to realize that early child development is a critical issue for business and government because the years before age six set in motion factors that will determine the quality of the future human capital.

HELP makes a number of recommendations in their report focussed on improving early childhood development and opportunity. They call for extending maternity and paternity leave to 18 months so as to enrich the new child's environment. For children over 18 months, consideration should go to subsidizing full-time workers to work shorter hours but at the same total wage. Income support policies need to reduce poverty among families with children. And they also recommend finding ways to make services for children up to kindergarten age affordable on full- or part-time basis, as parents choose.

HELP identifies the biggest loss of potential and future resources coming from poor early starts for children. Investing early will pay off for individuals, communities and the overall economy. Enduring social change and reducing inequality in child development demand universal access to supportive environments, not just 'fixing' things down the road.

Dr Paul Martiquet is the Medical Health Officer for Rural Vancouver Coastal Health including Powell River, Sunshine Coast, Sea-to-Sky, Bella Bella and Bella Coola.