

Phone conversation between Invest in Kids (Executive Director Lisa Merlino) and GiveWell (Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson) on August 5, 2010

GiveWell: After looking at the evidence of effectiveness of the Incredible Years (IY) programs, we have only found evaluations with short-term follow-up (up to 1 year after the intervention ended). This raises the question of what we can say about the long-term impacts of IY. Our view is to be skeptical of there being long-term impacts when only short-term impacts have been studied.

Invest in Kids: It's a great question which I'm thinking about a lot. We plan to discuss this with Carolyn Webster-Stratton [the developer of IY]. Her view is that the number of trials of IY and the consistency of the results from those trials show that IY has effects that can be extrapolated; that is, if children are doing something in a given grade then we can expect how they will fare later. Carolyn doesn't believe in not treating children who have been identified as needing treatment just to have a long-term control group, so she made a very conscious decision to treat those children instead of getting the longitudinal data.

We also plan to talk to Delbert Elliot at the University of Colorado, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence. The Center reviewed over 700 violence prevention programs and lists IY as one of the 11 blueprint model programs that they've found to have a proven impact on violence. Delbert was also the editor of the Clinton report on preventing youth violence, and he's funded by Department of Justice to investigate and replicate these programs.

We believe that the randomized controlled trials of IY, which were run on many different populations and over a long period of time (trials of IY has been going on from the 1980s until today), combined with the fact that IY is replicable, allows us to advocate for IY.

But, because we don't have longitudinal data, every year our board has looked at the IY to see if the implementation data is good enough to continue running it, and every year we've chosen to keep running it.

Also, in Colorado, there isn't data that is relevant to IY in the same way there is data relevant to the Nurse-Family Partnership program. For example, we can compare birth rate of participants in the Nurse-Family Partnership program to state collected data on the average birth rate in Colorado, but there isn't the same data on socioemotional outcomes, which would be interesting for IY.

We are thinking about doing our own collection of data from children in the same district as IY participants but that aren't benefiting from the IY program. With this kind of data gathered before and after the IY programs, one could compare (with all the appropriate caveats), for example, test scores of children in IY with scores of their peers.

GiveWell: Have you thought about doing your own long-term follow-up of children in your IY programs?

Invest in Kids: It is beyond our scope. We look for opportunities to collaborate but we've never fully considered initiating our own study.

The State of Colorado is working on giving children identification numbers so that children can be tracked. We've pushed the state to do that at birth, so that we can track babies from the Nurse-Family Partnership program and see if they're in an IY preschool.

We'd be happy to share our data to assist in long-term tracking of IY participants.

GiveWell: Is the following a correct summary of your perspective? You recognize that there is a lack of long-term follow-up of IY but you understand Webster-Stratton's [the developer of IY] reasons for not doing long-term follow-ups since her view is to not hold off treatment of children who need treatment. You plan to discuss IY with Carolyn Webster-Stratton and Delbert Elliot. And you monitor your implementation of IY carefully partly because there is less long-term data.

Invest in Kids: Yes, that is accurate.

GiveWell: Are researchers basing their view of the long-term effects of IY on research other than the formal evaluations of IY? For example, is there some other set of research about changing child behavior and the impacts it might have on long-term life outcomes?

Invest in Kids: Good question. I'm happy to talk to Delbert Elliot, Carolyn Webster-Stratton, and David Olds [whose work Nurse-Family Partnership is founded on] about that. David Olds could give you a more thorough response.

GiveWell: Here is our preliminary view of Invest in Kids: Invest in Kids seems like an outstanding organization, but given the questionable evidence of long-term impact of IY, it is hard to say IY is a proven way to improve life outcomes. Do you think our view is fair?

Invest in Kids: I think that is very fair, but I would add more context. There is much ongoing research on IY, also internationally, and it is important to stay current. I believe that in the last few months new, long-term data came out in the Netherlands.

GiveWell: Did the OMNI evaluations of your IY programs in Colorado evaluate all your IY programs?

Invest in Kids: Yes.

GiveWell: Can you tell us more specially about your IY activities, for example your parent training?

Invest in Kids: The parenting program we run is a 14 week parenting course. There is a treatment and a prevention model of the child training program, and we only run the prevention model.

GiveWell: Could you share with us a budget that breaks down your allocation of funds to the different IY components?

Invest in Kids: Yes. And I can say now that there is much greater demand for the child-teacher component, with which we serve teachers of approximately 4,500 children, compared to the parenting component, which serves approximately 400 parents in parent groups.

GiveWell: Do you have any requirements for the schools you choose to work with?

Invest in Kids: We look at poverty of a district and at free and reduced lunch eligibility. We're serving whole classes, so many children might be typically developing. Demand has been profound and we have been responsive to demand so we haven't sought out the poorest school in Denver and tried to serve them.

GiveWell: Have you ever turned down a district?

Invest in Kids: We turned down Douglas County, which is the richest county in Colorado. Since we don't want to spend money there, they implement IY without us, and IY has in fact been shown to work across economic statuses. Most children we serve are in Adams County (approximately 2,800 out of 4,000).