

REAL QUESTIONS ABOUT UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE

Since the start of the pandemic, calls for universal child care have picked up steam. Before pursuing this policy approach, however, there are important questions to answer. These questions pertain to all aspects of child care—accessibility, quality, and cost. Every family is different, and child care needs and desires vary.

Will a federally funded, universal system be able to meet these needs?

THE QUESTION: DOES NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING ECONOMIST JAMES HECKMAN SUPPORT UNIVERSAL DAYCARE?

Heckman says clearly that he does not. Yet he is often misquoted on this point, likely because he speaks in favour of *targeted* investment in the early years. Everyone interested in child care believes that quality care and investment in the early years are important. Where people disagree is in the kind and type of investment needed.

Heckman clarified the point in a recent interview:

Interviewer: “Your work on early childhood education is constantly cited as a justification for universal preschool education. Is that a policy you have recommended or what is your main focus and potential solution when you promote the importance of early childhood education?”

Heckman: “I have never supported universal pre-school. The benefits of public preschool programs are the greatest for the most disadvantaged children. More advantaged children generally have encouraging early family lives. The ‘intervention’ that a loving, resourceful family gives to its children has huge benefits that, unfortunately, have never been measured well. Public preschool programs can potentially compensate for the home environments of disadvantaged children. No public preschool program can provide the environments and the parental love and care of a functioning family and the lifetime benefits that ensue.”¹

Heckman believes that families matter and that targeted interventions can help some families. He states, “Families are the primary producers of skills, and policy makers should institute policies aiming to support families in engaging and nurturing their children.”²

THE TAKEAWAY

Professor Heckman’s work supports targeted interventions, not universal ones. Research shows there should be broad skepticism about the ability of universal programs to deliver high quality in the same manner as a small-scale, targeted intervention.

1. James J. Heckman, interviewed by Gonzalo Schwartz, “Nobel-Prize Winning Economist Dr. James Heckman on Social Mobility, the American Dream, and how COVID-19 Could Affect Inequality,” *Archbridge Institute* (blog), April 23, 2020, <https://www.archbridgeinstitute.org/2020/04/23/nobel-prize-winning-economist-dr-james-heckman-on-social-mobility-the-american-dream-and-how-covid-19-could-affect-inequality/>.

2. Heckman, “Nobel-Prize Winning Economist.”