The Effect of Early Education on Social Preferences

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Abstract

We present results from the first study to examine the causal impact of early childhood education on social preferences of children. We compare children who, at 3-4 years old, were randomized into either a full-time preschool, a parenting program with incentives or to a control group. We returned to the same children when they reached 7-8 years old and conducted a series of incentivized experiments to elicit their social preferences. We find that early childhood education has a strong causal impact on distributive behavior several years after the intervention. Importantly, we find that attending preschool makes children more egalitarian in their fairness view and that the parenting program enhances the importance children place on efficiency relative to fairness. The findings highlight the importance of taking a broad perspective when designing and evaluating early childhood educational programs, and provide evidence of how differences in institutional exposure may contribute to explaining heterogeneity in social preferences in society.