

Development

Investing in Childhood

Major investment into early childhood development is currently taking place in Ireland. Dr Orla Doyle speaks to Danielle Barron (BSc2005) about a groundbreaking new programme in UCD, which is using a multidisciplinary team to evaluate the full socio-economic benefits of this type of investment.

"In Ireland we traditionally have not invested enough in early childhood, compared to other countries in the EU," explains Dr Orla Doyle, Senior Researcher at the UCD Geary Institute and lecturer in the School of Public Health and Population Science.

Research has proved that the first couple of years of a child's life is the most important period, and is the time when investment is crucial, adds Dr Doyle.

"This is when children are at the most receptive stage of development and when they are most rapidly developing and changing."

"If you want children that are happier and healthier, are more cognitively aware, have better socio-emotional skills, can interact with other children better, then you have to tackle these issues early in life. It's all about prevention," she explains.

A major new early childhood initiative, jointly funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Office of the Minister for Children, has recently been launched in Ireland. This programme will see many new intervention programmes taking place all over the country. The task for Dr Doyle and her multi-disciplinary research team at the UCD Geary Institute, involving economists, developmental psychologists and clinical epidemiologists, is to evaluate the first of these interventions called 'Preparing for Life'.

The Preparing for Life (PFL) programme was devised by the Northside Partnership and the team at the Geary Institute will be evaluating its success. The programme aims to improve levels of school readiness in three designated disadvantaged areas of North Dublin. The programme begins during pregnancy and continues until the children start school.

While there is some evidence, based on studies that were done in the US in the last 40 years, to suggest that early investment provides the most benefits, there is also a need for data specific to the needs and behaviours of Irish children.

"Just because something works in the US, that doesn't necessarily mean it will work here," says Dr Doyle.

"The only way that you can know that a programme works or not is to carry out a rigorous evaluation and the best way to do that is with an experimental design."

"We are currently involved in recruiting the participants and we will be surveying them every six months, collecting a whole range of data on the parents and also on the children, once they are born," says Dr Doyle.

Parents that agree to join the study are randomly assigned to be in one of two different groups. Depending on which group they are in, they will receive a different set of supports, explains Dr Doyle.

While both groups will receive developmental toys for the children and public health information, "one group will have a family mentor who calls to their house every week for five years and helps with key parenting and child development issues, which differ depending on the needs and age of the child."

This arm of the study is a very intensive intervention, admits Dr Doyle.

The other group will have an information officer who can help them access other services, so that they will receive a different experience to that of mentoring.

Having commenced in the past few weeks, Dr Doyle envisions that it will take up to two years to recruit the full cohort of 200 participants for the study. After the first five-year period for which the programme has received funding, she hopes that the children involved will be monitored through adolescence, early adulthood and beyond.

The study is the first of its kind to be carried out in Ireland, explains Dr Doyle.

"It is very innovative and has attracted the attention of world-renowned researchers in the area to UCD, she explains.

Working with Dr Doyle is Professor James Heckman, the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at The University of Chicago and winner of the Nobel Prize for economics in 2000, as well as Professor Richard Tremblay, Professor of Psychology, Pediatrics and Psychiatry and the Director of the Research Unit on Children's Psycho-Social Maladjustment at the University of Montreal, who have both taken up positions at the university.

Dr Doyle's background is in economics, having studied for her BA and PhD at Trinity College Dublin.

She admits however, that she is not a traditional economist.

"What I do is applied microeconomics so I use the rigorous statistical tools and apply them to certain issues."

Dr Doyle has previously used these techniques to explore issues such as breastfeeding, cognitive ability and childcare from an economist's point of view.

"With PFL, what we are trying to establish is when do you invest - is pregnancy the optimum time to invest and do you have to supplement that investment later on?"

Dr Doyle is hoping that this study will answer some of these questions.

"It may or may not work but that's why we are evaluating it in such a manner. If it does work then the idea is that it may be rolled out on a national basis."

A cost benefit analysis of the study will be carried out, but the full range of benefits may not be obvious for some time.

"We may not see these results for 10, 20 or even 30 years. We would like to see results such as if these kids stay in school longer for example- we hope to follow these children right through to adulthood."

Danielle Barron is Clinical Editor of the Irish Medical News

Dr Orla Doyle

