

CRACK BABIES GROW UP (Part II)

Photostory by Ken Kobre

For some "crack" children, the slightest disruption will set-off a temper tantrum. Children in this type exhibit extreme mood swings. Because they can not use adults for solace, they become withdrawn. Researchers have learned that early intervention that provides interaction with other children, individualized work on children's problem areas and parent counseling can help at-risk children improve significantly.



At the Parent Child Intervention Program preschool, one youngster gives another a swift kick for no apparent reason. Thirty-four percent of at-risk children exhibit "extreme emotional and behavioral tendencies along with a low tolerance for frustration," according to a recent study. In one-on-one situations, most of the children were able to focus their attention. The behavioral problems occurred during less structured times.



The Parent Child Intervention Program is a preschool in East Palo Alto, California, established specifically to help prenatally drug-exposed youngsters. Teachers try to provide a carefully monitored and highly structured environment for the students. Here, a teacher's instructional aide, Inga Garland, intervenes to control a child who has just kicked a classmate. Teachers report that cocaine-exposed children are unable to deal with many different stimuli at once and tend to act out aggressively or withdraw completely when overstimulated.



To calm some of the at-risk children at nap time, a teacher stretches her legs across one child, holding the youngster down while massaging the back of another student. The first group of students in the early intervention program now being "mainstreamed" into classes with average children are showing signs of keeping up.

The Importance of Intervention

Can at-risk children be saved? Several studies indicate that, with intervention, the answer is yes. Studies show:

After providing mothers with comprehensive prenatal care and later infant development programs through two years of age, drug-exposed children caught up in weight and length but remained significantly behind in head size compared to a socioeconomically matched control group.

Crack-exposed children who went to an infant development program improved significantly in physical coordination, language and problem-solving skills. A group of crack-exposed children, whose families chose not to participate in the programs, did not improve at the time of follow-up testing.

East Palo Alto "graduates" of the Parent Child Intervention Program being 'mainstreamed' with average children are initially showing signs of keeping up.

Will society provide the intervention techniques that research indicates will help crack-affected children?

The Lowell Weicker Federal Bill PL 99-457 was designed to provide early intervention for children from birth to five years old with special needs. That law was passed and funded by Congress seven years ago. But no one at that time foresaw the onset of the crack epidemic, says former commissioner of Special Education for California Antony Lepire. "The crack epidemic has reached such proportions that it has used up all that money immediately. As a result of the epidemic there is no other source of funds and no coordinated intervention for children under five. Since the disaster started, the number of children needing services has doubled, and the money has run out." He points out that both Federal and State Health and Human Services department budgets have been dramatically cut at precisely the time the crack crisis has hit the nation's classrooms.

Note: Excerpted from an in-depth photoessay that also examines in-depth the impact on infants, the research on long-term effects, and the importance of support in the home. The photos and story were funded by grants from the Gannett Foundation (now called the Freedom Forum Foundation) and San Francisco State University. Jeff Vendsel assisted on research and printing.
