

How evidence refocused improvements to early child care in Colombia

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Highlights

Evidence impact

- Evaluation findings about potential negative effects prompted the private NGO implementer and funder, Fundación Éxito, to stop funding its nutritional component in the proposed upgrade of Colombia's childcare centres.
- Findings prompted the government implementing agency, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF), and Fundación Éxito to collaborate on a later evaluation with the research team and refocus investments to parenting support centres.
- Researchers built on the findings of the 3ie-supported evaluation to evaluate and raise support for training and supervision of caregivers for providing structured educational and nutritional inputs to young children.

Factors that contributed to impact

- The Colombian government placed an explicit focus on early childhood development through its *De Cero a Siempre* ('From zero to forever') strategy in the 2010–2014 National Development Plan, and its law mandates evaluation of every new programme, facilitating evidence uptake and use.
- Close collaboration and trust already existed between ICBF and the researchers, who were based in the University of Los Andes and the Institute of Fiscal Studies.
- Fundación Éxito was a champion and advocate for the improvements, and had a strategy to collaborate with government in funding interventions, rather than making stand-alone investments.

Impact evaluation details

Title: [Evaluation of centres for infant development: an early years intervention in Co...](#)

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Context

Policies targeting early childhood development have received considerable attention recently, with growing recognition of their potential to have lasting positive effects. The Colombian government, in its National Development Plan for 2010–2014, *Prosperidad Para Todos* (Prosperity for All), announced that early childhood development and its new ‘From zero to forever’ strategy were the centrepieces of its social policy.

One of the main components of this strategy was upgrading preschools that provided partly subsidised day care and 60 per cent of daily nutritional requirements to children from low socio-economic backgrounds. These preschools, called *hogares infantiles*, are run by the government agency, ICBF. A private NGO, Fundación Éxito, planned to provide different enhancements to the upgraded preschools.

This upgrade to *hogares infantiles mejorados* (improved preschools) included hiring more and better-qualified personnel and delivering a one-time pedagogical endowment for toys, books and other materials. Fundación Éxito’s enhancements included further nutritional inputs,

pedagogical teacher training and a reading programme for teachers, children and parents.

Researchers from the University of Los Andes and the Institute of Fiscal Studies, who had previously cooperated with ICBF to evaluate another government early childhood development programme, convinced ICBF to stagger the expansion of the preschool upgrades to allow them to do a randomised evaluation. The 3ie-supported evaluation measured effects of the upgrades on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development and their nutritional status.

According to the research team, the national law mandating evaluations, its experience conducting evaluations with the government (particularly ICBF) and the potential for the impact evaluation to support affordable upgrades to the childcare centres, based on public-private partnership, were all conditions favourable to evidence use.

Evidence

The study findings showed that ICBF's upgrade, by itself, had no impact on children's cognitive development, language development and school readiness, although the combined upgrade did. It also showed that the nutritional component that Fundación Éxito was supporting was not leading to better nutritional outcomes. In fact, children were better off with the existing nutritional component offered by ICBF, because Fundación Éxito's nutritional component put them at risk of excess weight.

Evidence impacts

Prompted changes in FE's investment programme

Informed by findings showing that Fundación Éxito's nutritional component was not leading to better nutritional status and that children were better off with the ICBF's existing nutritional component, Fundación Éxito decided to phase out its funding to the upgraded childcare centres and used further evaluation evidence to refocus its investments.

Informed subsequent early childhood care programme evaluations

Continuous engagement during and after the 3ie-supported evaluation, with support and championing by Fundación Éxito, led ICBF, the research team from the Universidad de Los Andes and Fundación Éxito to collaborate again for an evaluation of early childhood stimulation through parenting support centres, called Familia, *Mujer e Infancia (FAMI)* community homes in Colombia

Informed the design of the parenting support programme

The later study of parenting support through FAMI community homes took into account lessons from the 3ie-supported evaluation of preschools. According to the study team, the earlier research informed training and supervision for structured educational and nutritional inputs into early childhood parenting through the community centre facilitators. Encouraging findings from the later evaluation led the government to increase support for these inputs for improving family-based early childhood care.

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