

## **Pre-K Counts a prescription for safer communities**

Letter to the Editor Pottstown Mercury

07/12/2008

Every day we read news reports of increasing violence and expanding prison populations in our region. After years of experience as a local prosecutor, I know there is no substitute for tough law enforcement. To keep our communities safe, we must keep dangerous criminals behind bars. I have also learned over my years in law enforcement that we will never just arrest and imprison our way out of the crime problem.

Our crime prevention arsenal has one extraordinarily powerful and proven effective tool. Quality pre-kindergarten programs for kids at risk have staggering crime prevention benefits by intercepting at-risk children before they become hard wired by a culture of crime.

Think about the kinds of lessons young children learn in pre-school. They learn to share. They learn to treat others the way they want to be treated. They learn to keep their hands to themselves. They learn not to take things that belong to someone else. They learn that they cannot always get what they want and they have to learn to deal with disappointment. In short, they learn how to be good citizens and participants in a community.

It is precisely this focus on community and working with others that is often lacking in adults who commit crimes and victimize other people. Imagine how short our criminal dockets could become if more people learned, and followed, the "golden rule" of "do unto others as you would have them do to you." No one would ever suggest that preschool will solve all of our crime problems, but high quality preschool programs are proven to be successful tools in reducing anti-social and criminal behavior.

In the landmark study of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program conducted in Michigan, researchers found that at age 27, those at-risk 3 and 4-year-olds who had not attended the program were five times more likely to be chronic lawbreakers than similar children who attended the program. In the same study, by age 40, children denied Perry Preschool Program services were four times more likely to be arrested for drug felonies and more than twice as likely to become career offenders.

Over the 35 years of the Perry Preschool Program study, economists found that the preschool program caused a direct reduction in the costs of administering the criminal justice and welfare systems. This was because the kids in the program received the strong start in early childhood education when their contemporaries did not.

Last year, the Pennsylvania General Assembly approved a \$75 million investment ("Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts") to serve 11,000 at-risk 3 and 4-year-old children statewide. Montgomery County received almost \$1.8 million to provide approximately 216 children with high quality pre-kindergarten at private early learning centers in Norristown, Blue Bell, Ardsley, Jenkintown and Abington; as well as in the Pottstown School District. Impressive as these gains are, only 22 percent of Pennsylvania's 3 and 4- year olds are receiving some form of publicly funded quality early childhood education.

We see crime on our streets and we feel less safe. We see prison populations exploding and wonder what can be done. We cannot, and never will, let offenders get away with crime. What we can do, however, is fight the problem at its core. We can engage at-risk children at the earliest possible age and try to guide them to becoming responsible citizens. We can give kids the tools they will need to become decent, hardworking, honest members of our community. We can make an effort to prevent kids from becoming criminals by providing them with a solid base.

Investing in at-risk children today to prevent them from becoming tomorrow's criminals is a necessary component to any effective long-term solution to help prevent crime and reduce violence. Quality pre-school is the right tool for the right reason. The sooner we start, the sooner we will realize the benefits.

If you would like more information on how to get your child into a high quality preschool program contact the Montgomery County Child Care Consortium 610-617-4550 ext. 3045 or visit [www.papromiseforchildren.com](http://www.papromiseforchildren.com).

The author, Risa Vetri Ferman, is the District Attorney of Montgomery County Pennsylvania. She has been a prosecutor since 1993.