

Because an orphanage in the mid-1930s had no room, two “hopeless” baby girls, ages 13 months and 16 months, were transferred from an orphanage to a ward of adult women in an institution for persons with mental retardation. “The youngsters were pitiful little creatures. They were tearful, had runny noses, and coarse, stringy, and colorless hair; they were emaciated, undersized, and lacked muscle tone or responsiveness. Sad and inactive, the two spent their days rocking and whining” (Skeels, 1966, p. 5). At the time of their transfer, the two children had IQs estimated between 35 and 46, which classified them in the moderate to severe range of mental retardation. After living with the older women for six months, the girls’ IQs were measured at 77 and 87, and a few months later, both had IQs in the mid-90s.

Such regular intelligence testing was not a common procedure in those days, but because of their unusual placement, the two girls were observed closely. Hearing of the girls’ remarkable improvement, Skeels and Dye looked for possible causes. They learned that the children had received an unusual amount of attention and stimulation. Ward attendants had purchased toys and books for the girls, and residents had played and talked with them continuously. Excited by the possibilities, Skeels and Dye convinced state authorities to permit an unusual experiment.

Thirteen 1- to 2-year-old children were selected. All but two were classified as mentally retarded (average IQ of 64) and, because of a prevailing state law, were judged unsuitable for adoption. The children in this experimental group were removed from the unstimulating orphanage and placed in the one-to-one care of teenage girls with mental retardation who lived at the institution. Each adolescent “mother” was taught how to provide basic care and attention for her baby—how to hold, feed, talk to, and stimulate the child. The children also attended a half-morning kindergarten program at the institution. A group of 12 children, also under 3 years of age, remained in the orphanage. Children in this contrast group received adequate medical and health services but no individual attention. The children in the contrast group had an average IQ of 86 at the beginning of the study; only two were classified as mentally retarded.

Two years later, the children in both groups were retested. The experimental group showed an average gain of 27.5 IQ points, enough for 11 of the 13 children to become eligible for adoption and be placed in good homes. The children in the contrast group who stayed in the orphanage had lost an average of 26 IQ points.

Twenty-five years later, Skeels (1966) located all of the subjects in the original study. What he discovered was even more impressive than the IQ gains originally reported. Of the 13 children in the experimental group, 11 had married; the marriages had produced nine children, all of normal intelligence. The experimental group’s median level of education was the 12th grade, and four had attended college. All were either homemakers or employed outside the home, in jobs ranging from professional and business work to domestic service (for the two who had not been adopted). The story of the 12 children who had remained in the orphanage was less positive. Four were still institutionalized in 1965, and all but one of the noninstitutionalized subjects who were employed worked as unskilled laborers. The median level of education for the contrast group was the third grade. Skeels (1966) concluded his follow-up study with these words:

It seems obvious that under present-day conditions there are still countless infants with sound biological constitutions and potentialities for development well within the normal range who will become retarded and noncontributing members of society unless appropriate intervention occurs. It is suggested by the findings of this study and others published in the past 20 years that sufficient knowledge is available to design programs of intervention to counteract the devastating effects of poverty, sociocultural, and maternal deprivation.... The unanswered questions of this study could form the basis for many life-long research projects. If the tragic fate of the twelve contrast group children provokes even a single crucial study that will help prevent such a fate for others, their lives will not have been in vain. (p. 109)