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Enhancing Early Childhood Development in Latin America: The Role of Conditional Cash Transfers and Autism Screening in 'Chile Crece Contigo'

Abstract:

The early years are pivotal for child development, requiring policies that address both economic and health-related aspects of children's developmental trajectories. In Latin America, conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs like Brazil's Bolsa Família, Mexico's Prospera, and Chile's Chile Crece Contigo (ChCC) have emerged as innovative strategies to combat poverty while promoting educational and health outcomes for children. These initiatives offer financial incentives for low-income families contingent upon fulfilling health and education-related criteria, such as regular school attendance and health check-ups, thereby fostering a favorable environment for child development.

This study by Roman-Urrestarazu et al. exemplifies the integration of specialized health interventions within such CCT frameworks. Focusing on Chile's ChCC, the study explores the adaptation of the Quantitative Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (Q-CHAT-25) into a condensed 10-item version (Q-CHAT-10) for efficient use in primary healthcare. Involving 287 children categorized into Controls (125), Developmental Delay (149), and Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) (13), the Q-CHAT-10 displayed high internal consistency (Cronbach's α : 0.85) and a significant correlation with the Q-CHAT-25 ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.0001$). Its sensitivity (92.86%) and specificity (76.86%) in the Developmental Delay group affirm its efficacy as a screening tool in resource-limited settings.

The integration of the Q-CHAT-10 into routine health assessments within the ChCC program underscores the value of including targeted health screening tools in CCT programs as a tool for developing add on programmes that are both scalable and based on preexisting policies that use CCT. This approach not only aligns with global health priorities and the sustainable development goals, but also provides a scalable model based on contact platforms that aid in enhancing early detection and intervention in developmental disorders and health pediatric conditions across Latin America. The study highlights the potential of CCT programs not just in alleviating poverty but also in improving early childhood health outcomes, setting a precedent for incorporating specialized health screening tools into broader early childhood policies in the region.