



background

Report # 115

Early Head Start Benefits

April 2010

Investing in Head Start

Starting On A Positive Note

Early Head Start provides key benefits

For nearly 90,000 very young, low-income children, their parents' decision to enroll them in Early Head Start has given them a better chance of beating the odds and finding success when they enter school -- an important accomplishment in light of research that finds these children, as a group, enter school less ready to learn than their more affluent classmates.

Their gains may be modest, but noticeable improvement in cognitive and language development, family functioning and other key domains offer them a measure of preparedness other low-income children too often enter school without, according to a major study of the federal program.

The 15-year-old Early Head Start program was created in the wake of profound discoveries in the field of brain research that changed the way scientists and educators think about early development. Among the more significant findings to emerge from the studies was that the infant and toddler years are critical periods in the maturation of the brain during which experience and proper stimulation can play key roles in development.

In response, policymakers expanded Head Start to include low-income children from birth to age 3 years and offered support to pregnant women. Early Head Start services, some of which are delivered in the family's home, focus on promoting healthy pregnancies, enhancing the development of young children and improving the overall functioning of families.

Family Snapshot

The most recent data on the children and families enrolled in Early

Head Start come from the program's 2005-2006 Program Information Reports, which program sites across the country are required to submit each year. From the reports, several characteristics of Early Head Start families emerge.

Nearly two-thirds of families in the program, for example, had at least one employed parent. And in 24% of families, at least one parent was in school or in training.

Statistics indicate the program serves a diverse range of low-income children, families and pregnant women. The racial and ethnic profile to emerge showed that 42% of the families were white, 30% Hispanic and 25% were African American.

Children and families have access to a wide range of services. Those services include more than childcare and early education.

Some 65% of families, for example, took part in parent education and 60%

When the program costs and the benefits to low-income children and their parents are weighed, do Head Start and Early Head Start emerge as sound investments? Studies which looked at that question say the answer is, yes.

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accessed health education. Children received dental, medical and mental health services, and 92% of the pregnant women enrolled received prenatal and postnatal care.

Among the children who did not have health insurance when they enrolled in Early Head Start, 54% obtained insurance during their first year in the program.

Children Improve

An understanding how participating in Early Head Start affects children and families can be glimpsed from a recent, rigorous, large-scale evaluation of 17 program sites that was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The evaluation shows that, in general, low-income children and families enrolled in Early Head Start experienced modest, but positive, outcomes.

The study also found that children

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and families showed improvement in several areas that are important predictors of later school achievement and better family functioning.

Among the key findings was that Early Head Start largely sustained significant, positive impacts on cognitive development among 3-year-old children.

On average, for example, they scored higher than children in a control group of children who were not enrolled in an Early Head Start program on the mental development index of the Bayley Scales of Infant Development, a tool widely used to assess cognitive development.

The study also reported that fewer Early Head Start children scored in the at-risk range of developmental functioning than did children in the control group.

Other outcomes showed Early Head Start children scoring higher on assessments of language development than peers in the control group. And fewer Early Head Start children scored in the at-risk range of developmental functioning.

Early Head Start was also found to have favorable impacts on several aspects of social-emotional development at age 3.

Compared to children in the control group, for example, Early Head Start children were more engaged with their parents, were more attentive during play and were rated lower in aggressive behavior by their parents.

Parents Also Gain

Parents who enrolled their children in Early Head Start were found to have made progress in several important aspects of parenting.

As a group, Early Head Start

A large-scale evaluation of 17 Early Head Start sites shows that, in general, low-income children and families enrolled in the program experienced modest, but positive, outcomes.

parents were more emotionally supportive with their children than parents who did not participate in the program.

Early Head Start parents, for example, scored higher on the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment.

They were more likely, for example, to report that they read to their children every day and they were less likely than control group parents to report having engaged in negative parenting behaviors.

Early Head Start parents also reported that they used a greater range of discipline skills, including more mild strategies and fewer punitive strategies.

In addition, more Early Head Start parents participated in education or job training programs compared to control group parents, whose children were not enrolled in the program. However, such outcomes did not lead to significant improvements in family income during the study period.

Early Head Start was also found to have a favorable impact on several

areas of fathering and father-child relationships. For example, fathers in the program were more likely to participate in child development activities, and Early Head Start children were more able to engage their fathers and tended to be more attentive during play.

Such impacts were generally greater among children and parents in certain subgroups, such as African-American families and families who enrolled during pregnancy.

The evaluation also reported that Early Head Start families were more likely than those in the control group to receive a wide range of services, and were much more likely to receive intensive services focused on child development and parenting.

As with most other Head Start studies, it is difficult to determine how such impacts influence the long-term outcomes of children who are enrolled in the program today. However, research suggests that these reductions in risk factors and improvement in protective factors tend to result in children experiencing better outcomes later in life.

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OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, Ph.D.; Robert B. McCall, Ph.D.

background writer/editor: Jeffery Fraser; e-mail: jd.fraser@comcast.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development 400 N. Lexington Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

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