

Exploring the Impact of Head Start on Parents: A Pilot Study

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PURPOSE

- The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of Head Start on parents and to do so through the use of a community partnership approach. Although the Head Start program focuses primarily upon children, several of its services and activities are designed to assist parents and/or other primary caregivers. These services are intended to foster the self-sufficiency of participating families and to help the adults involved to learn to do better as parents (or surrogate parents).

Previous research to gauge the effectiveness of Head Start programs has placed limited focus on those services meant to boost adult self-sufficiency (such as employment training and educational support). One local Head Start provider saw these kinds of services as an area worthy of closer study. This Head Start provider contacted an academic partner and together they planned and implemented a pilot study to look at some of these issues.

The researchers acknowledge that their sample was not large and that their results may not apply in all Head Start settings. The purpose of the study was to gather information to inform later research into the full impact of Head Start on families.

- The approach taken by this research group found conceptual support in a life course framework. Such a framework identifies key forces (including persons and contexts) that shape an individual's development from birth to death. The contexts that matter most to children are family and school. The model proposes that when Head Start programs have a lasting impact on parents or primary caregivers, the impact, in turn, can benefit their children.
- The specific aim of this research was to assess changes in and impacts on education, employment, and personal development for parents or other adult caregivers who had children in Head Start.
- At the time of the study, the Head Start program's base was an urban community where nearly all families were African American and had a median household income of about \$23,000.
- Thirty adult caregivers with a child enrolled in Head Start participated in interviews that took place over a 3-month period. The majority of these adults (90%) were female and their average age was 39. Fifty-seven percent of the adults were currently married or living with a partner.

During the interviews, the adults answered questions about changes in their lives since their family had left Head Start.

The questions focused upon the adults' education and work experiences. The adults also discussed what role, if any, Head Start had played in contributing to changes in their own educational and employment status. Interviewers asked the adult caregivers about the impact of several services and activities that had taken place during their child's time at Head Start.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

- The findings suggest that those Head Start services and activities geared toward adult caregivers have the potential to make a lasting difference for those adults and, therefore, for the children. If that is true, then it would seem that studying the effects on adult caregivers ought to form an important part of Head Start evaluation. This study was small and involved only one Head Start setting, so the results found here may not apply in all other such settings.

The results show that some adult caregivers experienced positive changes whereas others did not. Among those adults who had improvements in education and employment, some attributed the changes to Head Start and others did not. This variation in the outcomes for the adults, as well as differences among them with regard to attributing impact, has implications for Head Start effectiveness.

Future studies in these areas should be conducted with stronger research designs to further examine these issues and to see if these kinds of findings will emerge in other Head Start settings. It is important that such future evaluations of Head Start programs continue to take a participatory, community-based approach.

- The results of this study may also prove useful to other Head Start program providers when they consider the type of data they want to collect as adult caregivers and children move through the program and beyond it. This may be data beyond the types required by the federal government.

HOW FINDINGS SUPPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

- The findings showed that the adult caregivers had made improvements in their educational and employment status since their children had left Head Start. Several of the adult caregivers who reported these kinds of changes gave credit to the Head Start for having helped them. The findings also showed that Head Start had had an impact on the adults' lives by enhancing family relationships, caregiver-child relationships, and their own personal development. These results have set down the groundwork for more studies of this type, especially for ones carried out as joint efforts with community members.
- The research demonstrated to the providers of one community Head Start program that it is possible (despite limited time and resources) to gather useful information about their caregivers and the services that Head Start provides to them. The research project also provided the Head Start program with a data collection tool to use for future evaluation efforts.

Sydnor K, Holt M, Headen G, et al. Exploring the Impact of Head Start on Parents: A Pilot Study. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*. 2007;2:133-42. The Community Policy Brief is intended to inform community based organizations, public health policy makers, and other individuals whose primary interest is not research, but who would be interested in the application and translation of research findings for practical purposes.