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COMMENTARY

The Influence of Head Start on Parental Education and Employment

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Head Start is the oldest and largest federally-funded preschool program in the United States, currently serving more than 1 million children with almost $8 billion dollars appropriated annually. From its inception, Head Start not only provided early childhood education, care, and services for children, but also sought to promote parents' engagement in their children's schooling, their childrearing skills, and their own educational progress. Yet, much of the research on Head Start focuses solely on children's cognitive and social outcomes rather than on parent outcomes. In this study, we examine whether children's participation in Head Start promotes parent well-being, in particular, parents' educational advancement and employment.

We capitalize on the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), which was mandated by Congress in 1998 and led to the most ambitious evaluation to date. The Head Start Impact Study includes 4,000 newly entering 3- and 4-year-old children who were randomly assigned to Head Start or to a control group. Findings from the main study indicate that Head Start had less of an impact on children's academic and social development than expected. Although participating in Head Start led to short-term improvements in development, these began fading by kindergarten, continuing through the third grade. These results have received a flurry of media attention that Head Start may not lead to long-term outcomes.

In the study, we took a family systems perspective and asked whether children's participation in Head Start might encourage parents to advance their own education and employment. We took advantage of the randomized design from the Head Start Impact Study to examine this hypothesis. Our study finds that among the 3-year-old cohort, parents whose children participated in Head Start had steeper increases in their own educational attainment compared with parents of the control-group children by the time children enter kindergarten. Findings are especially strong for parents with at least some college but no degree at baseline, as well as for African American parents.

This is one of the only studies to come out of the Head Start Impact Study to demonstrate positive impacts of Head Start for parents. The policy implications of this paper's findings suggest that Head Start may provide the ideal platform to promote parents' education by offering: (1) high quality care for children that allows parents to pursue their own academic or career interests; (2) a network of parents and staff to support their success; and (3) information and access to postsecondary educational opportunities. Results may extend to other high quality early childhood education programs, including state-funded prekindergarten programs, that provide intensive learning opportunities for young children with a support for parents.

The full study can be found in Terri J. Sabol and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, The Influence of Low-Income Children's Participation in Head Start on Their Parents' Education and Employment, Journal of Policy Analysis and Management.

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