Citations: Head Start’s Impact on Social-Emotional Learning

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Key Takeaways:
- Head Start children are more prepared to participate in kindergarten classrooms. They show fewer behavioral problems, are less hyperactive, and are less aggressive.
- Head Start children are less likely to engage in criminal activities as young adults.

Measurable Impact:
- Early Head Start children showed lower child aggression at ages 2 and 3.
- Early Head Start children had significantly fewer social behavior problems.
- Head Start children are able to pay better attention and have more positive approaches to learning.
- Head Start participation reduces engagement in criminal activities for young adults, as they are 31% less likely to have been in a correctional facility by ages 20-21.

Why is social-emotional development important?

Social-emotional development refers to a child’s ability to create and sustain meaningful relationships and his or her ability to engage with his or her own emotions and the emotions of others.

Positive social-emotional development in a child’s early years provides a critical foundation for lifelong development and learning. As young children develop, their early emotional experiences become embedded in the architecture of their brains. Children who are more socially competent display better learning engagement and tend to form more positive relationships with teachers and peers, whereas children who exhibit aggressive or oppositional behavior and attention problems often struggle both socially and academically. In the long-term, social-emotional functioning is associated with key adult outcomes related to education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health.

Head Start children may be more likely to struggle with social–emotional development, due to the environments in which they often live. Poverty often increases children’s exposure to multiple stressors, including family instability, crowded living conditions, and community violence. More than 40% of Head Start children have a parent who reported symptoms of depression, which may adversely affect parent-child interactions and family functioning. In 2009, 31% of Early Head Start children scored above the risk cutoff on a measure of behavior problems, which may be rooted in undiagnosed trauma or mental health needs.

How does Head Start promote social-emotional well-being?

Supporting children’s social and emotional well-being is an integral part of Head Start’s comprehensive health services. Head Start does not allow for suspension or expulsion based on children’s behavior. Instead, programs use mental health consultants and establish collaborative partnerships with mental health professionals in order to support children and families. The use of on-site mental health consultation to recognize and address social and emotional needs among Head Start children has been shown to reduce problem behaviors.

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Research has shown that positive parenting practices can protect children against the effects of adverse family environments. Head Start improves children’s social and emotional wellbeing both directly and indirectly by: 1) buffering the family from stress through connection with support services; 2) promoting positive relationships between parents and children; and 3) directly enhancing children’s social-emotional skills, such as self-control and managing emotions.

Bullets:

- Male Head Start participants are less likely to show symptoms of depression at ages 16-17 and are 22% less likely to engage in criminal activities. As young adults, they are also less likely to be both unemployed and not in school.
- Head Start children have better executive functioning skills and demonstrate more social skills, fewer behavioral problems, and more positive approaches to learning by the end of the program.
- Early Head Start children are more engaged with their mothers at ages 2 and 3.
- Head Start families have fewer family conflicts and fewer parent-child dysfunctional interactions, which in turn, reduce children’s aggressive behaviors.

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