

Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.



Head Start Explainer

Impact on Child Welfare

Key Takeaways

1. Head Start children have lower rates of abuse and neglect and are less likely to be involved in the child welfare system.
2. Head Start provides parenting training opportunities, improves parent involvement and parent-child relationships, and decreases parental distress.
3. For children already involved in the child welfare system, Head Start enhances school readiness and social-emotional outcomes and decreases their subsequent child welfare encounters.

Measurable Impact

Child welfare

Early Head Start children have significantly fewer child welfare encounters when they reach the ages of 5-9 years old and lower rates of reported physical or sexual abuse.

93%

Head Start children are 93% less likely to be removed from their homes and placed in foster care than those with no early education services.

Non-parental care

Head Start enhances school readiness for children living in non-parental care and improves social-emotional outcomes for those in foster care.

Supportive services

Head Start increases families' receipt of supportive services and home visiting, decreases spanking, and improves parent involvement for children living in non-parental care.

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Head Start Explainer: Impact on Child Welfare

Why is child welfare an important focus in Head Start?

Children who live in poverty are twice as likely as their affluent peers to have been exposed to three or more distressing and traumatic life events. These events, called Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs, can impact a person for a lifetime. U.S. children with two or more ACEs are significantly more likely to have developmental, behavioral, or social delays and to exhibit behavioral problems or aggression. They also have lower rates of school engagement and higher rates of chronic disease. Adults who had four or more ACEs as children are 4- to 12-times more likely to suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression.

It is estimated that, in the United States, more than 270,000 children under the age of 5 experience abuse or neglect each year and another 160,000 children under 5 are in foster care. Early childhood traumatic experiences, such as abuse and neglect, can cause short- and long-term cognitive and emotional delays. Young foster children face a variety of risks that negatively affect their development in everything from math and reading to social-emotional skills.

A 2017 study found that almost all children in Early Head Start had experienced at least one adverse experience, and more than 4% had experienced 4-5 ACEs before the age of 3.

What does Head Start do to support children involved or at risk of being involved in the child welfare system?

Head Start's multi-generational approach focuses on providing opportunities and addressing the needs of both children and their parents. Head Start provides families with a variety of services that help enhance family stability and reduce children's exposure to ACEs, such as access to mental health services, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence services, and affordable housing. As a core part of Head Start's family engagement model, parenting education impacts parents' use of physical discipline and level of engagement in educational activities with children, as well as promotes healthy parent-child relationships and home environments, which ultimately reduces children's involvement with child protective services.

For citations, please visit go.nhsa.org/Explainers

Children in foster care and children experiencing homelessness are eligible to participate in Head Start, regardless of their family's income level. In 2017-2018, Head Start served more than 34,000 children in foster care and more than 20,000 children referred from child welfare agencies.



Head Start improves children's social and emotional outcomes, including improved approaches to learning and reduced hyperactivity, particularly for children who have been exposed to violence or neighborhood crime.



Mothers in Early Head Start provide more supportive parenting behaviors for their children, despite experiencing elevated depressive symptoms.



Families participating in Early Head Start have better parenting and family outcomes, including lower levels of parenting stress, more supportive home environments, and less family conflict, which in turn, lead to reductions in child maltreatment and a 10-22% lower likelihood of child welfare system involvement.

What is Head Start?

Head Start (HS) is a comprehensive early education program for children from at-risk backgrounds from birth to age 5. From early math and reading skills to confidence and resilience, Head Start helps children build the abilities they need to be successful in school and life. Head Start recognizes the role of parents as their child's first and lifelong educators and engages parents as equal partners.