



National Head Start Association 2015-2016 Head Start Research Agenda

Introduction

Ever since its conception in 1965 by a group of renowned scholars, researchers, physicians, and experts, Head Start has been rooted in the best available research and knowledge of child development, family engagement, and community change. In 2015, fields ranging from neuroscience to economics to implementation science have brought new lessons about how Head Start programs in communities across the country can best identify and address children's needs and support them and their families in achieving success in school and in life. NHSA's Head Start Research Agenda highlights priority areas for research to further inform our understanding of child development, the daily work of teachers and home visitors, and national Head Start policy.

NHSA gathered input for this agenda from listening sessions at conferences across the country and a voluntary national survey that reached over 450 respondents, including approximately 375 Head Start parents, alumni, staff, and program leaders; 30 Collaboration Offices; 15 state, regional, and national Head Start Associations; and 50 members of the research community.

The agenda below recommends priority research areas that should be of interest to the broad Head Start community. Finding the answers to these questions and putting those lessons into practice will be the work of all stakeholders.

About NHSA and the Center for Policy, Data, and Research

The National Head Start Association is committed to the belief that every child, regardless of circumstances at birth, has the ability to succeed in life. The opportunities offered by Head Start lead to healthier, empowered children and families, and stronger, more vibrant communities. NHSA is the voice for more than 1 million children, 200,000 staff and 1,600 Head Start grantees in the United States. The NHSA Vision is to lead – to be the untiring voice that will not be quiet until every vulnerable child is served with the Head Start model of support for the whole child, the family and the community – and to advocate – to work diligently for policy changes that ensure all vulnerable children and families have what they need to succeed.

A strong and sustainable future for Head Start will mean the success of generations of children who might otherwise struggle throughout their lives. Their future success rests on the knowledge, commitment and collaboration of families, programs, researchers, and policymakers. To that end, the mission of the Center for Policy, Data, and Research is to curate knowledge about Head Start to support Head Start programs as leaders and to share their wisdom and experience widely; to generate new analyses and reflections on program and policy priorities; and to strengthen dialogue and collaboration between Head Start practitioners and researchers.

Context

Head Start has been a laboratory for early childhood research for nearly fifty years, and the overwhelming bulk of that research has deepened our understanding of the program's positive



effects on everything from school readinessⁱ to family stabilityⁱⁱ to college attendance and adult success.ⁱⁱⁱ A supplementary body of research has divined lessons about what models and doses of services have the greatest effects, including hours,^{iv} curricula, and particular interventions.^v Yet there remain unanswered questions about how to maintain children's gains from Head Start through their school years as well as opportunities to use research to inform continuous improvement in programs. As pre-kindergarten opportunities expand across the country and child care partnership models diversify, there are also new avenues for research to explore early childhood development, program models, and targeted interventions. Head Start practitioners, researchers, and leaders were consistent in their identification of the following areas as research priorities for the coming years.

Principles for Research on Head Start

1. Research on Head Start should be framed by the goal of improving the early environment and developmental opportunities of children in poverty.
2. Research on Head Start that examines any element of the program must consider the whole child and whole family approach that is at the heart of Head Start, rooted in the federal-to-local funding that enables communities to design programs based on local resources and needs.
3. Head Start programs and practitioners should be integrally involved in the framing of research questions, the design of studies, and the adaptation of lessons from research for daily practice.
4. Research should consider that families and communities vary in their resources and their needs and therefore require individualized interventions and respond differently to particular services.
5. Head Start programs serve diverse children and families including American Indian and Alaska Native communities, migrant and seasonal workers, immigrants, refugees, and more; efforts to understand these programs should be as inclusive as possible of the breadth of communities and families served across the United States.

Priority Research Areas

The Research Agenda survey asked stakeholders to identify their top research priorities from a list of options in three ways: priorities for understanding child development and early childhood education; priorities for informing the daily work of practitioners; and priorities for Head Start policy nationally. While the ranking of the priorities fluctuated for different questions and different stakeholder groups, the following ten research areas emerged repeatedly as being of great importance. Throughout these priorities, the term "Head Start" is used to include Head Start, Early Head Start, American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start and Early Head Start, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs.

Academic Outcomes of Early Childhood Education

Across stakeholders, research into academic outcomes of early childhood education was consistently a top priority. The Head Start Impact Study found that Head Start children who graduated the program in 2002 and 2003 were more ready for school than their peers, but did not document significant impacts by the end of third grade. Yet numerous local and state data



systems have found lasting impacts. Research in this area stands to inform everything from the design of Head Start services to future funding for the program. Major research questions include:

- How do different features of Head Start as it is currently implemented (dosage, curriculum, program model, etc.) affect school readiness outcomes?
- What school and community experiences after Head Start affect children’s maintenance or loss of their gains during the program?
- What demographic factors or child and family risk factors are related to children’s academic gains, and which populations benefit the most?
- How does the Head Start focus on the whole child – including health, mental health, and “soft skills” – contribute to long-term academic impacts?
- How does the Head Start focus on the whole family – including parenting skills, parental education and employment, and mental health – support additional benefits over time?

Longitudinal Impacts

Beyond the academic gains from Head Start, effects have been found on adult health, reduced criminal behaviors, employment, and family stability. Understanding the breadth of these long-term impacts and the mechanisms that support them is key to ensuring reforms to Head Start don’t jeopardize the program’s effects. Major research questions include:

- What is the full spectrum of adult impacts of Head Start, and which program models support them most strongly?
- What elements of Head Start’s whole child and whole family approach support sustained achievement and success over the life span?
- How does Head Start participation affect intergenerational poverty for whole families?
- How do school and community factors in children’s lives after Head Start contribute to long-term impacts?

Economics of Early Childhood Investment

The clear return on investment from early childhood education can make a strong case for deepening national commitments to Head Start. In the short and long-term, savings from reduced special education and grade retention, increased high school graduation rates, and decreased demand for subsidies and supports amount to far more than the cost of the program. As Social Impact Bonds gain interest, it is important to understand the returns from Head Start. Major research questions include:

- What are the short-term savings to school systems from reduced special education services and fewer children repeating grades?
- What are the short-term savings to communities from families being more stable and increasing their education and employment levels?
- What are the returns on investment of specific program models, such as Early Head Start home visiting?
- What is the long-term return on investment from the broad spectrum of Head Start impacts?



- How do effects on child health and behaviors including obesity, smoking, emergency room use, and more contribute to return on investment?

Achieving and Sustaining Quality

For both daily practice and policy purposes, achieving and sustaining quality emerged as one of the top priorities for Head Start research. Defining and providing high quality services allows programs both to deliver on their commitment to individual children and families and to demonstrate to their communities why the Head Start model they provide best meets local needs and is the best intervention for the most vulnerable families. In addition, numerous respondents prioritized understanding of Head Start models, dosage, and implementation, all of which are features in understanding quality. Major research questions include:

- What teacher and staff characteristics support the greatest gains for children across the spectrum of development?
- What curricula, learning experiences, and environments support the greatest gains for children across the spectrum of development?
- What dosage (hours per day, days per year, years of participation) supports the greatest gains for children, and how does this vary for different groups of children?
- What models of service delivery (home visiting, center-based, child care partnership) support the greatest gains for children, and how does this vary for different groups of children?
- What leadership, systems, or structural features (e.g. funding design) are most important to programs' ability to achieve and sustain quality?
- How can monitoring systems and accountability to standards best encourage excellence?

Family and Community Engagement

For fifty years, family and community engagement has been at the heart of Head Start, and more than any other educational system in the country Head Start programs have succeeded in truly committing to relationships with parents, supporting them as their children's first teachers and empowering them to change their own lives and their communities. These family outcomes may well be a mechanism for many of the long-term impacts of the program. Major research questions include:

- What is the effect of Head Start's work to support parents' understanding of building nurturing relationships with their children and parents' access to mental health services when needed on their ability to support their children over time?
- What are the most successful two-generational models of integrating adult education and employment supports with Head Start services to support whole families?
- What role does including parents in program governance play in changing the course of family and community trajectories?
- How do various changes in parents' competencies, self-sufficiency, and stability contribute to their children's long-term outcomes?
- How can lessons from behavioral economics help increase positive behaviors among families?



- How can family and community engagement efforts be designed to best support various American Indian/Alaska Native (Region XI), migrant and seasonal (Region XII), immigrant, and refugee populations?

Effects of Poverty

As many Head Start practitioners shared in responding to the Research Agenda survey, the experiences of poverty have changed in many of their communities over the course of the past fifty years. Families they work with may have unmet mental health or health needs, drug or alcohol issues, or other risk factors that can undermine their children's trajectories.

Understanding how best to respond to these concerns allows local programs to best serve families and also supports national policies to ensure that services reach the families who need them most. Major research questions include:

- Which constellation of family needs should define the most "at-risk"?
- Which experiences of poverty most influence a child's development, and how?
- What protective factors against the experiences of poverty can Head Start provide to all children or to children identified as most at-risk?
- How do family resources and income relate to variable impacts of Head Start?

Social-Emotional Development

The highest research priority for Head Start staff in terms of informing the understanding of child development was social-emotional development; this area was also of significant importance to researchers. Many of the experiences associated with poverty that face Early Head Start and Head Start children influence their social-emotional development and are expressed in the classroom as children struggle to communicate and relate to teachers and peers. Major research questions include:

- What are the key components of social-emotional development that teachers and home visitors should target to support children's development?
- What are the most effective curricula or intervention strategies to support healthy social-emotional development?
- What are the best practices for professional development to help all adults, including Head Start staff and parents, develop the skills to support healthy development?

Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience

In recent years, neuroscience has contributed new tools to efforts to understand child development and the effect of interventions. Moving forward, there are additional questions that can be posed in these areas. Major research questions include:

- What brain structures and systems are influenced by early childhood education, and what do different interventions contribute to different components of development?
- How can programs implement the lessons from neuroscience studies in daily practice?
- What are the most critical developmental components for programs to support to influence long-term healthy development?

Assessment and Data Practices



Two research areas - “Assessment Tools and Practices” and “Data Collection, Use, and Analysis” – emerged as somewhat overlapping priorities, though notably these were priorities for a much greater proportion of practitioners than researchers. Data and outcomes have become much more commonly and purposefully used in recent years, but there is a clear desire for research that identifies best practices for programs’ collection and use of data. Major research questions include:

- What are the most important key outcomes for all Head Start programs to track?
- What data practices and systems are essential to quality programs?
- Which assessment tools are the best measures of children’s learning and development in different areas, and under what circumstances do the tools measure most effectively?
- Which assessment tools or strategies are culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate for the diverse populations served by Head Start programs?

Early Childhood Workforce

With all that is known about the power of early childhood experiences to change children’s life chances, the early childhood workforce is due far more respect and compensation than is the reality for most people working with young children. Practitioners shared many of their urgent research questions around workforce issues. Major questions include:

- What degrees, competencies, or training best prepare someone to work with young children in particular and support their development through nurturing relationships?
- How can we suitably and sustainably compensate the Head Start workforce?
- What are the best professional development practices for adult learners, including relationship-based mentoring practices for supporting staff?
- What are the best strategies for supporting the social-emotional well-being of staff to enable their effective work with children?
- How do the gender, demographics, and life experiences of staff, including culture and language, contribute to their effects on children and families?

Implementation of the Research Agenda

The many stakeholders who participated in the creation of this Head Start Research Agenda also have important roles to play in finding the answers to these many questions and putting them into practice toward continuous improvement of services to children and families.

- *Federal Government* – The Office for Planning, Research, and Evaluation funds numerous studies every year to better understand and implement Head Start, and these research priorities should be considered as new funding becomes available.
- *Head Start Programs* – Programs can seek out research partners to address their most pressing questions or begin their own formative or action research.
- *Researchers and Research Organizations* – Researchers should consider partnering with Head Start programs to address these questions.
- *Head Start Associations and Collaboration Offices* – Various leadership groups, including NHS A, have an important role to play in gathering and disseminating the



research that already exists and new research as it becomes available to support programs in their work.

The future of Head Start children and families relies on the collaboration of all stakeholders to support them in achieving a trajectory toward stability and success. Research can identify the best practices and tools for that work and help ensure the success of the program in communities across the country.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2010). Head Start impact study: Final report. Washington, DC.

ⁱⁱ Love, J. M., Kisker, E. E., Ross, C. M., Schochet, P. Z., Brooks-Gunn, J., Paulsell, D., . . . Brady-Smith, C. (2002). Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of early Head Start. Volumes I-III: Final technical report and appendixes and local contributions to understanding the programs and their impacts. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deming, D. (2009). Early Childhood Intervention and Life-Cycle Skill Development: Evidence from Head Start. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, **1:3**, 111-134.

^{iv} National Bureau of Economic Research. (2014, October). Inputs in the Production of Early Childhood Human Capital: Evidence from Head Start (Working Paper No. 20639). Cambridge, MA: C. Walters.

^v Neville, H.J., Stevens, C., Pakulak, E., Bell, T.A., Fanning, J., Klein, S., & Isbell, E. (2013). Family-based training program improves brain function, cognition, and behavior in lower socioeconomic status preschoolers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, **110(29)**: 12138-12143.