



**June 2013:
The Benefits of Parent Engagement**

Background

Parenting is key to children's long-term outcomes - an article in TIME magazine last fall even proclaimed [Why Parenting Is More Important Than Schools](#). Since the [very earliest days](#) of Head Start, parent engagement has been a key value. Generations of parents have volunteered in classrooms, participated on policy councils, and been their children's first and best teachers. Yet for all the measurement and evaluation of Head Start there is relatively limited research on how Head Start and Early Head Start change parents' involvement over time and how the programs affect aspects of family functioning beyond child development like employment, housing and health. This spring, the NHSA Dialog ran a special issue on [Parent Involvement and Engagement in Head Start](#) and addressed some facets of these questions, but there is much more to be learned. As you explore research partnerships and questions in your own communities, we urge you to think about how to document Head Start's important work using the whole family, two-generation model.

Resources

[Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change](#)

This short video from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child explores how deepening adults' knowledge and developing parents' capabilities can help improve the capacity of a community to support children's learning and development.

[Harvard Family Research Project](#)

The Harvard Family Research Project contains research summaries of studies related to Early Childhood Education and family engagement as well as a host of other topics. While most of this work is not Head Start specific, if you're looking for research in a particular area, you may want to skim their offerings.

Research

[Head Start and Parent Involvement](#)

by Christopher Henrich and Dana Gadaire in [Infants & Young Children](#)

This article clearly articulates Head Start's two-generation approach through deep parent

involvement and engagement since the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and its emphasis on "maximum feasible participation" of parents. Henrich and Gadaire lay out the six components of Epstein's framework for parent involvement that is used widely in parent engagement literature and how Head Start and Early Head Start programs support different components. The authors also address barriers to parent engagement and make recommendations about improving engagement, notably including all related adults in a child's life, incorporating career-support for parents, encouraging "active" engagement, and considering families' unique characteristics as Head Start has always done.

Positive Relationships Between Parent School Involvement and Public School Inner-City Preschoolers' Development and Academic Performance

by Rebecca Marcon in School Psychology Review

Marcon explored the involvement of parents whose children attended either Head Start or pre-K administered by the Washington DC public schools, examining how the number of parent involvement activities and the quality of parent involvement activities were associated with their children's outcomes. Most parents were found to be "somewhat" involved - there was no significant difference in involvement based on income or number of parents in a home - but Head Start parents were significantly more involved than pre-K parents.

Increased parent school involvement and more active involvement (e.g. volunteering) were associated with children's stronger developmental outcomes, and academic performance. Increased parent involvement was particularly related to positive gains in boys, who tended to score lower than girls on all developmental measures. Notably, teachers who used more developmentally appropriate practices had higher parent engagement in their classrooms. These findings support Head Start's work to date and underscore the relationship between the whole-child and whole-family components of Head Start.

The Longitudinal Process of Early Parent Involvement on Student Achievement: A Path Analysis

by Momoko Hayakawa, Michelle Englund, Mallory Warner-Richter & Arthur Reynolds in NHSA Dialog

Extensive previous research has documented the value of parental involvement for students' outcomes, but this analysis of data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study of the Child-Parent Center program examined the mechanism for parental involvement in early child leading to effects throughout childhood and into early middle school. After examining many potential paths

for parental involvement effects, the authors found that early parental involvement begins a cycle whereby parent engagement predicts children's early achievement, which increases children's motivation, which then perpetuated parents' involvement and children's later achievement. These findings underscore the importance of engaging parents of young children as a form of early intervention for life-long academic success.

Enhanced Early Head Start with Employment Services: 42-Month Impacts from the Kansas and Missouri Sites of the Enhanced Services for the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation Project

by JoAnn Hsueh & Mary Farrell, submitted to OPRE

While limited research exists on how Head Start and Early Head Start affect not children but parents, this OPRE-funded study attempted to document how enhanced services for Early Head Start parents improved their employment and family stability over time. The two programs in the study provided additional "self-sufficiency" supports to parents, and then parents were tracked for three and a half years. The report documents numerous barriers to full implementation of the program modification, including staff comfort working with parents in this area and parents' desire to find work while children were young. Families in the control group also received significant services that may have limited document effects.

The study had no major findings for parents overall beyond improved child care, however for parents who enrolled while pregnant or while their child was an infant, there were significant economic impacts. Mothers who enrolled while pregnant or while their children were infants were 13% more likely to be employed three years later and earned a total of \$7,700 more than control group mothers over the course of the study; they were also significantly more likely to have held jobs continuously. These results offer further avenues for development of self-sufficiency interventions and underscore once again the critical importance of early intervention.

Discussion Questions

1. Macon writes, "*The didactic, academically directed approach that is prevalent in many public school pre-kindergartens may not promote any important role for parents beyond that of agents to bring about a child's cooperation with the school. For low-income parents, a developmentally inappropriate approach (i.e. academically directed) could accentuate the perceived imbalance in power and make home-school partnerships even more difficult.*"

Is this a tendency you've witnessed in pre-K programs you or your partners operate? What efforts have you made to engage parents or to ensure that practices are developmentally appropriate?

2. What teacher strategies are most effective in your program for engaging parents? For staff members who began as parents, what do you remember drawing you in first?

3. What research questions about parent engagement or parent impacts would you most like to see studied? Do you know any research universities nearby who might work with you?

Do you know of other recent research that may be of interest to the Head Start field? Do you have other questions, comments or concerns? E-mail Emmalie Dropkin (edropkin@nhsa.org).