Research Within Reach: Effects of Preschool Home Visiting on School Readiness
Were the benefits of a home visiting program sustained through 3rd grade?

Introduction

Past research suggests that early home visiting programs can promote sensitive and responsive parenting and show promise for short term developmental benefits for children. However, little research has been done to better understand the long-term benefits of home visiting programs. A recent study examines the sustained effectiveness of a preschool home visiting program called Research-Based and Developmentally Informed-Parent home visiting program (REDI-P) that was implemented in 24 Pennsylvania Head Start programs. Researchers from Pennsylvania State University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison conducted a randomized clinical trial assessing and comparing outcomes between participants in a home visiting program and a control group who received a math home learning program in the mail. The study not only assessed outcomes related to child academic performance, social-emotional adjustment, and home problems, but also assessed the child's need for additional educational and mental health services in later years. The results of this study suggest that the REDI-P program produced sustained benefits four years after the intervention and significantly reduced the child's need for additional school services.

The Basics:

Many home visiting programs focus on parent-child learning activities and home teaching strategies that promote positive parenting skills to create nurturing and predictable home environments that support child development. The development of REDI-P was informed by these home visiting practices but with a more expansive and integrated focus, targeting language-literacy and social-emotional development. Parents were provided with a detailed curriculum and developmentally sequenced set of learning materials along with coaching and support in how to use them effectively. Families in the intervention group received ten home visits during pre-school and six booster visits in kindergarten. The control group did not receive any home visits and instead received math home learning materials in the mail.

The Results:

The researchers found that:

- REDI-P promoted improvements in children's sight word reading fluency and academic performance in third grade.
- REDI-P promoted sustained improvements in social-emotional development with significantly higher scores on task orientation and social understanding.
- REDI-P reduced parent-reported problems at home as well as their corresponding levels of parenting stress.
- REDI-P reduced children's need for educational and mental health services at school.
The Implications:

This study helps broaden our understanding of early childhood home visiting programs and suggests that programs may produce sustained effects on child well-being across academic and social-emotional developments at home and in school. This study also suggests that evidence-based home visiting programs focused on multiple domains of school readiness may reduce the need for remedial academic, mental health, and behavioral support services in later years. One of the reasons why the researchers believe that REDI-P was beneficial in later years is because of the resources provided to parents. The materials included strategically selected and carefully designed home learning activities that were easy, playful, and enjoyable for both parents and children. However, additional research should investigate the difference in specific intervention activities to better understand what home visiting components contribute to positive and long term child development.

The Limitations:

- Some of the measures for assessing child and home outcomes are self-reported by teachers and parents which could contribute to skewed results due to potential reporting bias.
- 41.2% of invited parents declined to participate in the study, leading to a potential skewed group of particularly motivated parents who participated.
- The study was conducted with Head Start programs in Pennsylvania, meaning the findings may not be replicable in other states or other early learning contexts.

The Methodology:

The Sample:

- Families were recruited from 24 Head Start centers in 3 Pennsylvania counties. A total of 200 low-income families with four-year-old children participated. The sample included 110 white, 52 black, and 38 latino children; 56% of the children were male.

The Measures

- **Academic performance**: Sight word frequency subtest of the Test of Word Reading Efficiency; Academic Competence Evaluation Scales, a teacher-reported assessment of reading and math.
- **Social-emotional adjustment**: Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language, conducted by research assistants; Adapted Leiter-R Assessor Report, to measure task orientation.
- **Home problems**: Parent report on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Parenting Daily Hassles Scale, and a subset of the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form.
- **Service needs**: Teacher report of individual child needs for specific services.
- **Demographics**: Gender, race/ethnicity, parent education and employment, county urbanicity.

The Analysis:

- Hierarchical linear models were used to assess the effect of REDI-P on third-grade outcomes, which were then confirmed by testing the results using a mediation model.

Do you have any questions, comments, or new ideas? Email vjones@nhsa.org