



**August 2015:
New Lessons from the Head Start Impact Study**

Background

In 1998, the reauthorization of Head Start required a nationally-representative, random control trial of Head Start, and in 2002 data collection began for the Head Start Impact Study. The study looked at three and four-year-olds applying for Head Start, and compared children who were told they could enroll with those told they couldn't. When the first-round findings were released in 2005, they showed that at the end of the Head Start year there were significant benefits for the Head Start children in every domain measured. Shortly afterward, the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start called for revised performance standards and a range of other changes, including higher degree requirements for teachers and use of research-based curricula.

In 2010 and 2012, when findings were released about how the children in the Impact Study fared in elementary school, they showed that by the end of third grade, after four years in the same public school settings as their peers, the Head Start children as a whole showed few differences on academic measures. There are a number of interpretations of this data - [Jon Stewart](#) once summed up some of our favorites - but the Secretary's [Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation](#) spelled them out most clearly in a 2012 report. Placing the Impact Study findings in context as part of a body of research showing long-term effects of Head Start, the committee recommended that the impacts of Head Start could be increased through a range of strategies, including increasing dosage, raising teacher qualifications and support, and focusing on data use for continuous quality improvement. The recently released Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for the Head Start Program Performance Standards clearly reflects many of these recommendations, and enables the program to promise children and families even stronger outcomes in the future.

In the meantime, deeper and more targeted analyses of Head Start Impact Study data over the last few years have actually taught us a great deal more about how Head Start works best and for whom. The studies below explore many of these new lessons, and recent Research Blasts also capture findings based on Impact Study data about [how the program supports increased parental education](#), the [effects of full-day and home-based models](#), and the interaction between [family engagement and children's learning](#) in Head Start. As the Head Start field moves forward, this research finally offers us insights into how to target services where they're most effective and enhance our focus on the most vulnerable children and families.

Resources

[Notice of Proposed Rulemaking](#)

The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) for the Head Start Program Performance Standards spells out exactly what new standards are proposed, what the major changes are, and what the standards would cost to implement. These standards are out for public comment until September 17th, 2015.

[NHSA Resources](#)

The website for NHSA's Center for Policy, Data, and Research offers an overview of the Head Start Impact Study that can be downloaded to share with your staff, legislators, or anyone else who has questions about the study. You can also find other news articles and content explaining the accurate interpretation of the Impact Study.

[Advisory Committee Report](#)

The Secretary's Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation reported in 2012 about placing the Head Start Impact Study in appropriate context among the other research showing life-long effects of program participation. Many of their recommendations influenced the development of the proposed standards.

Research

[Who Benefits Most from Head Start? Using Latent Class Moderation to Examine Differential Treatment Effects](#)

by Brittany Rhoades Cooper and Stephanie T. Lanza

While the national Impact Study found that Head Start effects fade as children grow older, the authors of this study investigated whether there were stronger effects for groups of children with particular profile of risk factors. Using data from the Head Start Impact Study, Brittany Rhoades Cooper and Stephanie Lanza examined Head Start impacts on subgroups of children based on their parents' relationship status, language, food stamp status, mother's immigrant status, maternal depression, maternal age at the child's birth, education, and employment status.

Cooper and Lanza hypothesize that the biggest Head Start effects are felt by the children of immigrants (particularly those whose home language is not English) and children of single mothers with little education. They further hypothesize that the subgroup with the lowest risk - where parents are married and mothers have at degrees beyond high school - will benefit the least from Head Start. Head Start effects are categorized into "cognitive outcome measures" including vocabulary, literacy, and math skills and "social-emotional competence and behavioral outcomes" based on parent and teacher ratings for social skills, approaches to learning, and problem behaviors.

As predicted, children whose parents are immigrants with little education had positive effects in all areas. There were also positive Head Start effects on the children of single mothers. In the subgroup consisting of children with single mothers, food stamps, and maternal depression, Head Start had lasting effects mostly in parent-rated behavior problems and parent-rated parent-child relationships. The subgroup of children with single mothers with higher education and full-time jobs significantly benefited in behavioral and relationship outcomes as compared to the control children. The lowest-risk subgroup experienced relatively little effects but did have a substantial positive impact on vocabulary skills by the end of preschool. These findings may inform how programs choose to design their priorities for enrolling children.

School readiness in children living in non-parental care: Impacts of Head Start

by Shannon Lipscomb, Megan Pratt, Sara Schmitt, Katherine Pears, and Hyoun Kim

There is very little research on Head Start's impact on children in non-parental care, meaning children whose primary caregiver is someone other than a biological, adoptive, or step-parent. Lipscomb et al. examine the effects of Head Start on the 253 children living in non-parental care in the Head Start Impact Study's three-year-old cohort. These children are identified as particularly important because their primary caregivers and living environments frequently change and their rates of developmental vulnerability are high. Furthermore, these children make up a significant portion of special education classes.

Lipscomb and her team assess children's school readiness by looking at pre-academic skills, teacher-child relationships, and behavior problems. They found that the Head Start children's school readiness increases by the end of the first Head Start year and that these effects continue through the second year, as compared to children in non-parental care who were not assigned to enroll in Head Start. The authors stress that this is particularly important considering children in non-parental care often live in poverty. The quality of teacher-child relationships for children in non-parental care increased after a year of Head Start, an impact not detected in the analysis of the full sample of children in the Head Start Impact Study. Because children in non-parental care are among the most at-risk children, the study's results are in line with Head Start's positive effect on the most at-risk children in general.

Children's Schooling and Parents' Behavior: Evidence from the Head Start Impact Study

by Alexander Gelber and Adam Isen

Drawing from Head Start Impact Study data, Alexander Gelber and Adam Isen show that Head Start increases parent involvement in the short- and long-terms. Compared to parents of children not in Head Start, Head Start parents read to their children more often and at greater length. Compared to fathers of children not in Head Start, Head Start fathers visit their children for more days per month. These two effects persist even after the child is no longer in Head Start, and may help sustain children's development throughout childhood..

Parent involvement is measured through self-reporting and teacher interviews. The authors further find that the Head Start programs that raise cognitive scores the most also raise parent involvement the most. The lasting effects of parent involvement even after the completion of

Head Start combats the idea that all Head Start effects fade after a certain point in the child's development. Increased parent engagement may also help explain why other studies have found effects of Head Start through high school graduation, college attendance, and adult behaviors.

[Quantifying Variation in Head Start Effects on Young Children's Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Skills Using Data from the National Head Start Impact Study](#)

by Howard Bloom and Christina Weiland

Howard Bloom and Christina Weiland examine the impact of Head Start on different subgroups in comparison to the different forms of child care families in the control group could access, including parent care. The most significant finding in the study addresses dual language learners. Bloom and Weiland find that dual language learners and Spanish-speaking children with low pretest scores experience dramatic gains in Head Start compared to similar children who spent their preschool year in other kinds of child care and early education settings. The gains were strongest in receptive vocabulary and early numeracy.

Bloom and Weiland conclude that the gain for dual language learners and Spanish-speaking children was not merely due to an increased exposure to English. In fact, they find that dual language learners and Spanish-speaking children persist in cognitive gains throughout their development, validating the neuroscience literature that places bilingualism as a cognitive advantage.

Discussion Questions

1. After reading the research summaries, are there any particular populations you want to target for enrollment this fall?
2. What other questions would you encourage researchers to explore in the Impact Study data or through new research? Which research partners could you enlist to work on those questions?
3. How would you use this information to respond to questions in your community about the statement that "the Impact Study says Head Start doesn't work"?

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).