

Child Care and Community Services: Characteristics of Service Use and Effects on Parenting and the Home Environment

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Project Description

Many early childhood education and care programs work to provide children with high-quality care and to improve parent-child interactions. Large-scale evaluations of early child care and education programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, show a positive effect on parenting and the home environment; however, little is known about the mechanisms through which the child care environment influences the home. This study focuses on the services offered to parents as a result of their child participating in early childhood education or child care programs to determine if the services offered are a pathway through which child care positively affects the home environment and parenting practices. Also, little is known about who utilizes the services offered and what specific types of services parents use. The results of this study can help inform child care centers which services are most used and whether they should invest more in providing or offering specific services to parents. The results of the study will provide practitioners and policymakers with empirical evidence on who best to target for services given their likelihood of using them.

Research Questions

- What characteristics of parents predict usage of supports and services offered through the child care center and the community?
- What types of services and supports do parents use?
- Do the services and supports provided or referred by the child care or preschool providers positively affect the home environment and parenting practices?

Sample. Three national data sets will be used to answer the research questions: Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSRE), and National Institute of Child and Human Development Study of Early

Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD). Each contains rich data on child care, community services, and parenting practices.

- **HSIS:** The HSIS began data collection in 2002 and followed the children and their families through the child's first grade in elementary school. The study uses data from the first year of Head Start services (Fall 2002 – Spring 2003). The sample size for the proposed study consists of 4,442 children and their families.
- **EHSRE:** Children and families were followed from focal child birth (or age at random assignment—no older than 12 months of age) to when the child was in fifth grade. Parents and children in both the treatment and control groups were followed and asked questions regarding their usage of community services and supports at 6, 15, and 26 months after random assignment. The proposed study focuses on only children who were in center-based care or received a mixture of home and center-based care. A final sample of 1,609 will be used in the study.
- **NICHD SECCYD:** The current study uses data from phase I (ages 0-3), and II (ages 4 ½ to first grade year in elementary school) of data collection. The study includes children who were in center-based child care at 54-months for at least 10 hours a week. The study sample includes 606 children and their parents.

Method. This project involves the analyses of secondary data. No new data will be collected. Several methods will be used to analyze the data.

- To address the first two research questions, logistic and multinomial logit regression will be used to predict who uses services and what types of services they use. The first question examines service use overall, with no distinction being made on the type of service used. The second question separates the services utilized into two categories—direct and indirect services (Layzer

& St. Pierre, 1996). Direct services are aimed at changing parenting practices (e.g., parenting classes, parent support groups), whereas indirect services are aimed at changing the home environment, which is hypothesized to positively alter parenting (e.g., nutrition assistance, counseling, income supports). The predictor variables of interest for the first two questions are parental characteristics, such as income level, education, and other factors known to be associated with service take-up.

- The second type of methodology that will be used in the study, instrumental variables (IV), is a rigorous methodological approach that allows causal impacts to be estimated, and will be used to answer the third research question. This methodology will be used to estimate the effect of take-up of services on parenting and the home environment. IV in this study involves taking advantage of the variation caused by experimental status, so only the HSIS and EHSRE data sets will be used to answer the third research question. Parenting is the outcome of interest for the third research question and will be measured by the amount of cognitive stimulation and emotional support parents report/or are observed providing to their child.

Progress Update

The project is in the beginning stages; currently the focus is on cleaning and organizing the data in order to conduct descriptive analyses across the three data sets. Along with descriptive analyses, several indices are being created to capture a set of family risk factors (e.g., teen parent, parent has less than a high school degree) that will be used to understand who uses services. Also indices are being created to represent parenting and the home environment across the data sets. Substantive analyses are planned to begin in the late fall/early winter.

Implications for Policy/Practice

The results of the study will further the field's understanding of the parental characteristics related to service take-up and whether the services offered or

referred by providers have a positive effect on parenting or the home environment. Through understanding how parenting and the home environment are influenced, policymakers and researchers will be better equipped to design early child care and education programs that improve the environments and relationships vital for children's academic and social development. Understanding the effect of the services used as a result of participation in Head Start or Early Head Start on the home environment and parenting has implications for child care and preschool programs in terms of how they allocate resources to providing parental education classes or refer parents to services in the community. If services and supports are found to positively affect the home environment, it is likely that more child care and early education programs may be interested in providing services and supports to families.

Implications for Research

Past research on early childhood programs has found effects on parenting and home environment, but few studies have investigated why the home environment is changing when children participate in the programs. This study begins to investigate a potential pathway through which early childhood care and education centers positively affect parents. Future research should continue to investigate other pathways. Also, this study seeks to understand who uses services and supports, which future researchers can use to examine how best to increase service uptake or determine why certain groups of parents are not utilizing services or supports.

For more information:

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