



RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE BRIEF

Promising Evidence that Early Head Start Can Prevent Child Maltreatment

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EARLY HEAD START RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PROJECT

This brief addresses two main questions in a sample of Early Head Start eligible children: 1) the number and type of maltreatment episodes and 2) the impact of Early Head Start on child and family involvement in the child welfare system. These findings are especially important given the lack of scalable and effective preventive interventions. In addition, they are also timely given the recent interest in fostering collaborations between early care and education programs and child welfare agencies, agencies responsible for overseeing child protection from maltreatment (OHS & ACYF, 2010; ACYF & OHS, 2011; ACYF & OCC, 2011). The current study represents a first look at the impact of Early Head Start on child maltreatment. We are continuing to collect data and will have more information in the upcoming years.

Early Head Start is a two-generation early education program for low-income families with infants and toddlers. The primary goal of the program is to support child development, while also supporting parent and family well-being. Early Head Start programs are required to follow the Head Start Program Performance Standards (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/hspps>), which outline the comprehensive and quality services that must be provided by all programs. However, programs can adapt to the characteristics of the local community. For instance, Early Head Start programs can provide services through home-based services (providing weekly 90-minute home visits along with occasional group socialization activities), child care services (full-day full-year child care, either center based or family child care, along with at least two home visits a year) or a combination of the two.

Early Head Start has shown positive impacts on child development, parenting, and family well-being (Love, Chazan-Cohen, Raikes & Brooks-Gunn, 2013) and is considered an evidence-based home visiting program (Avellar, Paulsell, Sama-Miller, & Del Grosso, 2014; Harden, Chazan-Cohen, Raikes, & Vogel, 2012). This brief summarizes our findings on two important outcomes:

- the frequency with which Early Head Start eligible children experience an encounter with child welfare; and
- the impact the program may have in preventing child maltreatment.

Summary of Findings

This study used data from a subset of programs that were involved in an evaluation of Early Head Start. It found that about one in six children eligible for Early Head Start in this sample had either a substantiated report of child maltreatment or an out-of-home placement due to child maltreatment (a “child-welfare encounter”) by the time they were 13 years of age. However, children in Early Head Start had significantly fewer child welfare encounters between the ages of five and nine years than did children in the control group. Early Head Start children were also less likely to have multiple encounters and had a longer time before subsequent encounters. Additionally, compared to children in the control group, children in Early Head Start were less likely to have a substantiated report of physical or sexual abuse, but more likely to have a substantiated report of neglect. There was some evidence (a non-significant statistical trend) that Early Head Start children had fewer total child welfare encounters. These findings suggest that Early Head Start may be effective in reducing child maltreatment among low-income children, in particular, physical and sexual abuse. These findings have been published in the peer reviewed literature:

Green, B. L., Ayoub, C., Dym-Bartlett, J., VonEnde, A., Furrer, C., Chazan-Cohen, R. Vallotton, C., & Klevens, J. (2014). The effect of Early Head Start on child welfare system involvement: A first look at longitudinal child maltreatment outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 42, 127-35.



This study included a sample of children who participated in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP), a rigorous evaluation conducted in 17 Early Head Start Programs (Administration for Children and Families, 2002). The programs involved in EHSREP were among the first funded Early Head Start programs. Some programs were long-standing community agencies with collaborations that spanned across the community while other programs were new and just establishing community partnerships. They also varied in terms of depth and characteristics of the partnerships between Early Head Start and child welfare agencies.

The current study includes a subset of 1247 children and their families who were in 7 of the 17 Early Head Start programs in EHSREP (n=628 Early Head Start participants and n=619 control group participants; control group participants could access any services in the community other than EHS). See “*More information on the Early Head Start - Child Welfare Project*” section at the end for details of the study.



The following information was extracted from administrative records:

1. Number and date of substantiated reports of child maltreatment.
2. Number and date of out-of-home placements.
3. Number of child welfare encounters: either substantiated report or out-of-home placement.
4. Type of maltreatment of each substantiated report. A primary type for each report was either (1) physical abuse; (2) sexual abuse (physical and sexual abuse reports were combined for the analyses because of the small number of sexual abuse reports); (3) neglect; or (4) emotional abuse.

What we learned:

What percent of children eligible for Early Head Start experience child maltreatment?

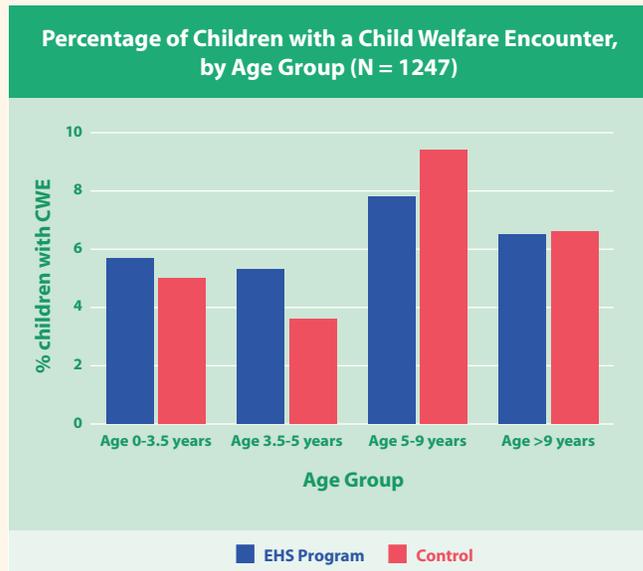
Overall, 15.8% (n = 197 children) had at least one substantiated report of child maltreatment, 6.7% (n = 84 children) had an out-of-home placement by the time they were 13 years old, and **18% of children (n=224 children) had at least one child welfare encounter by the time they were 13.** Among children with a child welfare encounter, half had two or more encounters. Children were more likely to have a substantiated report of neglect (11% of all children) than either physical abuse (4%) or sexual abuse (3%).

It is important to note that rates of child maltreatment varied greatly across communities. The percentage of children who had at least one encounter with child welfare over the 13-year follow up period varied from 15% to 34% across the seven programs. This variation is likely due to differences in local child welfare policies as well as true differences in rates of maltreatment and population risk factors.

In sum, by age 13, about 1 in 6 children eligible for Early Head Start had a child welfare encounter that resulted in a substantiated report of child maltreatment or an out-of-home placement. Keeping in mind that approximately 70-80% of all child maltreatment investigations are unsubstantiated (Casanueva, Smith, Dolan, & Ringeisen, 2011; NSCAW I brief 6; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014), it is likely that a much higher percent of Early Head Start eligible children and families underwent investigations than reflected by the available information.

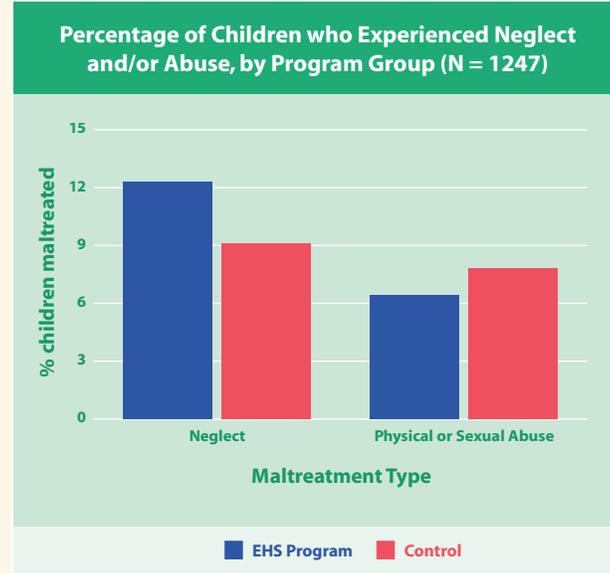
Were families who had been in Early Head Start less likely to be involved in the child welfare system than those children and families who did not receive Early Head Start?

Overall, for the entire birth to age 13 age-span, there was a trend, although not statistically significant, that Early Head Start children had fewer total number of encounters with the child welfare system. However, we suspected that Early Head Start children would be more likely to be reported to child welfare in the early years, especially ages birth to three, due to their involvement with the program and the watchful eyes of program staff, and less likely to be reported to child welfare in the elementary school years because of the positive impacts of Early Head Start on parenting practices. To investigate this further, we looked at the percentage of children with encounters with child welfare by different age periods (see graph below). There were no differences in the percent of children with a child welfare encounter when children were 0-3 years, 3-5 years, or 9-13 years old. However, **significantly fewer children in Early Head Start had a child welfare encounter between the ages of five and nine years than did children in the control group** (7.8% of the Early Head Start children and 9.4% of the control group).



Compared to children in the control group, **children in Early Head Start were less likely to have a substantiated report of physical or sexual abuse, but more likely to have a substantiated report of neglect.** Across the entire birth to age 13 age-span, 12% percent of the Early Head Start children had substantiated reports of neglect compared to 9% in the control

group. Conversely, 8% of the control group had a substantiated report of physical abuse or sexual abuse compared to 6% of the Early Head Start children. These are statistically significant differences.



While overall rates of substantiated reports of child maltreatment were not higher for Early Head Start children when they were 0-3 years old, the data suggested some evidence of surveillance bias, specifically for neglect. Other studies suggest that enrollment in formal programs may increase the visibility of very young children experiencing neglect who might otherwise have gone unnoticed (Avellar, Paulsell, Sama-Miller, & Del Grosso, 2014; Olds, Henderson, Kitzman, & Cole, 1995). The current study provides some support for this notion. Among children aged 0-3 years, the Early Head Start children (3%) were more likely to have neglect reports than the control children (2.1%). Early Head Start children were more likely to be enrolled in formal care and education preschool programs when they were aged 3-5 years than the control group children (Love, Chazan-Cohen, Raikes & Brooks-Gunn, 2013), which may explain why Early Head Start children (3.3%) continued to have higher rates of neglect reports during the preschool years than the control group (1.9%). After age five, the percent of neglect in the Early Head Start (5.1%) and control (4.5%) groups was more similar. Because of small numbers, we were unable to conduct statistical tests or look at differences for abuse by age group.

Furthermore, while **Early Head Start did not have an effect on the time to the first child welfare encounter, it did increase the time to second encounters and reduced the likelihood of multiple encounters.** Early Head Start children did not differ from control children with respect to the timing of the

first encounter: the average time from birth to the first welfare encounter was 64.5 months for Early Head Start children and 65.3 months for control children. However, the two groups did differ significantly in the timing of the second encounter: average time from the first encounter to the second welfare encounter was 19.6 months for Early Head Start children and 14.6 months for control children. In fact, the chance of children in Early Head Start having a second child welfare encounter at any given age was 63% lower than for children in the control group. Early Head Start children were also significantly less likely to have multiple encounters than control children. Forty-nine percent (49%) of Early Head Start children had more than one encounter compared to 57% in the control group. Children in the control group were 1.4 times more likely to have multiple encounters than Early Head Start children.

There are several possible explanations for these findings. First, signs of maltreatment, especially neglect, in the Early Head Start group may have been more likely observed by program staff than in families with very young children who are not involved in formal services. The early impacts of Early Head Start on increasing positive parenting and decreasing corporal punishment (Administration for Children and Families, 2002) may have also lead to a reduction in maltreatment, especially abuse, in the later years.

What risk factors were associated with involvement in the child welfare system?

We looked at many family factors that might increase risk for child maltreatment among Early Head Start and control children together. While few factors predicted maltreatment individually, when taken together we consistently found that **families with higher numbers of risk factors when children were very young were more likely to have contact with the child welfare system.**



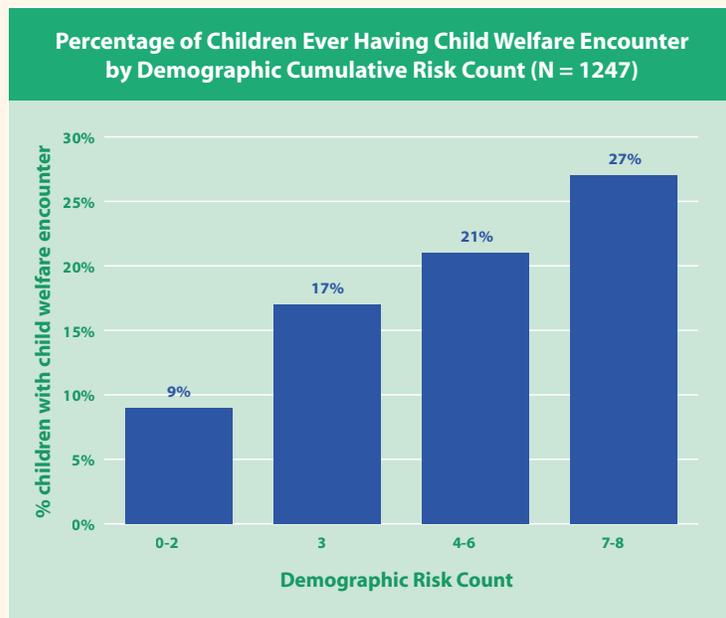
We looked at the following demographic factors: single parenthood, receiving government assistance, extreme poverty (<33% of poverty), minority status, household move in the past year, mother not having a high school degree, mother being unemployed, family ever being homeless, teen mom, and more than three children in the household. The only factors that contributed to increased risk for a child welfare encounter individually were children in families who, at the time of enrollment were receiving public assistance/welfare, had been homeless, or had mothers with less than a high school education. However, the best predictor of risk for maltreatment was the total number of these individual factors that a family experienced. This is very similar to other studies (e.g., Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998) that have found cumulative family risk, rather than individual risk factors, to be most predictive of poor outcomes for children.

Conclusion

These results indicate a potential for early care and education programs to support families at risk for involvement in the child welfare system. The findings from this study are very encouraging and support the need to study and understand how to build effective collaborations between the early care and education programs and child welfare systems.

Implications for Practice and Policy:

- **Early Head Start programs have the potential to influence child and family involvement in the child welfare system.** Given the financial costs (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012) and serious health and societal consequences (CDC, 2014) of child maltreatment, the impacts of Early Head Start on reducing child abuse, repeated maltreatment episodes, and overall child maltreatment in the elementary school years have important economic and social implications. As an early education and child development program, the focus of the program is not the prevention of child maltreatment. However,



- these findings indicate the important role that Early Head Start and similar two generation programs can play in preventing maltreatment. Programs can do even more to strengthen their services for the most at risk families, those families who enroll with the highest numbers of risk factors for child maltreatment. Focusing on parenting practices, perhaps emphasizing positive guidance and non-corporal punishment approaches, may be especially important given the impacts we found for reducing child physical abuse. It is important to keep in mind that the benefits of the program can be long-lasting and may not appear until years after the end of the program.
- **More work is needed to understand and support collaborations between child welfare agencies and early childhood programs.** Given the promising evidence that Early Head Start can help prevent maltreatment, Early Head Start and other early childhood programs are likely to be an important component of services for families in the child welfare system. This underscores the need for close collaborations between early childhood education programs and child welfare agencies. More research is needed on how to promote and sustain these partnerships. Child welfare agencies can partner with their local early care and education programs, Early Head Start and other home visiting and child care programs, in working with parents to strengthen parenting skills and promote positive outcomes for children.

More information on the Early Head Start - Child Welfare Project:

When Congress first funded the Early Head Start program in 1994, it was under the condition that a rigorous evaluation of this brand new program be conducted immediately. As a result, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP), a randomized controlled trial in 17 communities across the country, began recruiting in 1996. These 17 communities represented a diverse array of programs, including rural and urban settings, diverse ethnic and minority populations, and program models of service delivery. The 3001 children and families participating in EHSREP were randomly assigned to receive Early Head Start or to be in the control group, who did not receive Early Head Start, although they could access any other services in the community.

When children were age three, at the end of the program, the study found that those children who had been in Early Head Start were doing better than their peers who had not gotten Early Head Start in all domains of child outcomes studied, including health, cognition, language, and social-emotional outcomes. There were also positive impacts of the program on many parent and family outcomes. At age five, two years after the end of the program, overall impacts remained for children's social-emotional outcomes and some parent outcomes. By fifth grade, eight years after the end of the program, the only overall impacts that remained were for children's social-emotional well-being. However, patterns of impacts varied by groups of children and families; long-term impacts were notable for African American families and those families who had been enrolled in home-based Early Head Start programs (ACF, 2002; Love, Chazan-Cohen, Raikes, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Vogel et al, 2011).

EHSREP was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Columbia University Center for Children and Families, and the Early Head Start Research Consortium of researchers in 15 universities under the direction of the Child Outcomes Research and Evaluation Division, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The EHSREP looked at many aspects of family well-being, but did not originally measure child maltreatment or child and family involvement in the child welfare system. In 2010, the Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funded the Early Head Start-Child Welfare project. This project looked at the feasibility of locating records for EHSREP children from child welfare agencies and explored the impact of Early Head Start on child maltreatment. The investigation was conducted by a subset of Early Head Start Research consortium members led by Portland State University and the Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Boston Children's Hospital. Seven of the original 17 sites were part of this investigation (N=1,247 children; 628 Early Head Start participants and 619 control group participants).

Note: This project was funded by contract #200-2010-35155, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



Additional resources:

ACF has released three information memorandums about collaborations between early care and education programs and child welfare agencies.

Office of Head Start & Administration for Children, Youth and Families (2010). *Head Start and Child Welfare Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in the Child Welfare System* [Information Memorandum]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Administration for Children, Youth and Families & Office of Head Start (2011). *Child Welfare and Head Start Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs* [Information Memorandum]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Office of Head Start & Administration for Children, Youth and Families & Office of Child Care (2011). *Child Welfare and Child Care Partnerships: Partnering with Families Involved in Child Care Subsidy Programs*. [Information Memorandum]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

In 2002, ACF funded 24 Early Childhood/Child Welfare Service Partnerships grants to identify promising practices and challenges in making collaborations between Early Head Start programs and child welfare agencies. For more information see:

https://www.pal-tech.com/intranet/OCAN/3784_Rodrigues,_S.-Handout4.pdf

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/ec-cw-tipsheet.pdf>

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Administration for Children and Families. (2002). *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of Early Head Start. Final technical report*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Avellar, S., Paulsell, D., Sama-Miller, E., & Del Grosso, P. (2014). *Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness Review*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Brown, J., Cohen, P., Johnson, J.G., & Salzinger, S. (1998). A longitudinal analysis of risk factors for child maltreatment: Findings of a 17-year prospective study of officially recorded and self-reported child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22, 1065-1078.

Casanueva, C., Smith, K., Dolan, M., & Ringeisen, H. (2011). *NSCAW II Baseline Report: Maltreatment*. OPRE Report #2011-27c, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

CDC. (2014). *Child maltreatment: Consequences*. Retrieved September 4, 2014 from: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/consequences.html>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2014). *Child maltreatment 2012: Summary of key findings*. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Fang, X., Brown, D.S., Florence, C.S., & Mercy, J.A. (2012). The economic burden of child maltreatment in the United States and implications for prevention. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36, 156-165.

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Harden, B.J., Chazan-Cohen, R., Raikes, H.H., & Vogel, C (2012). Early Head Start Home Visitation: Role of Implementation in Bolstering Program Benefits. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(4), 438-455.

Love, J. M., Chazan-Cohen, R., Raikes, H. H., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2013). What makes a difference: Early Head Start Evaluation findings in a developmental context. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 78(1).

Olds, D. L., Henderson, C. R., Kitzman, H., & Cole, R. (1995). Effects of prenatal and infancy nurse home visitation on surveillance of child maltreatment. *Pediatrics*, 95, 365-372.

Vogel, C. A., Xue, Y., Moiduddin, E.M., Kisker, E.E. & Carlson, B.L. (2011). *Early Head Start children in grade 5: Long-term follow-up of the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study sample*. OPRE Report # 2011-8, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.