

HEAD START RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Overview

Established in 1965, Head Start was designed to promote the school readiness of children, ages three to five, from families with low income by supporting the development of the whole child through high-quality, comprehensive services. In 1994, the Early Head Start program was established to provide these same comprehensive services to families with low income who have infants and toddlers, as well as pregnant women. Today, the ACF [Office of Head Start](#) oversees approximately 1,600 Head Start and Early Head Start grantees run by local public and private non-profit and for-profit agencies throughout all 50 States, the District of Columbia, six territories, and in tribal and migrant and seasonal farm-working communities.

Nearly one million children, birth to age five, are currently enrolled in Head Start and Early Head Start. Children and their families receive services through a variety of models, including center-based, family child care, and home-based (home visiting). Programs tailor their service models to the needs of the local community and to be ethnically, culturally, and linguistically responsive to the families they serve. Children's growth and development is supported through individualized early learning experiences, health and nutritional services, and supports for family well-being.

Head Start is authorized by the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. In fiscal year 2019, just over \$10 billion were appropriated for Head Start and Early Head Start. ACF administers these funds through grants to local agencies and provides oversight, policy direction, guidance, technical assistance, and other supports for Head Start and Early Head Start grantees. ACF supports a number of research and evaluation activities as well as learning from a broad array of other activities such as performance management, technical assistance, stakeholder engagement, grantee monitoring, and continuous quality improvement.

Past Research and Evaluation

The science of early childhood development demonstrates the importance of children's earliest experiences for long-term development and learning and highlights the potential for early care and education (ECE) programs to help close the school readiness gap observed between

ACF's Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) performance measures related to Head Start:

Reduce the proportion of Head Start preschool grantees receiving a score in the low range on any of the three domains on the basis of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS: Pre-K) - *Performance Measure 3A* ([p. 124](#))

Increase the percentage of Early Head Start children who become up-to-date during the program year on a schedule of age-appropriate preventive and primary health care, according to their state's EPSDT schedule - *Performance Measure 3B & 3.6LT* ([p. 124](#))

Increase the percentage of Head Start preschool teachers with an AA, BA, or Advanced degree in early childhood education or a related field - *Performance Measure 3C* ([p. 124](#))

Increase the percentage of Head Start preschool teachers that have a BA degree or higher in early childhood education or a related field - *Performance Measure 3D* ([p. 124](#))

Decrease under-enrollment in Head Start and Early Head Start programs, thereby increasing the number of children served per dollar - *Performance Measure 3E* ([p. 124](#))

Percentage of parents of children in Head Start preschool who report reading to child three times per week - *Performance Measure 3.7LT* ([p. 125](#))



children from families with low income and their more affluent peers. There is a large and growing body of evidence indicating high-quality ECE programs can produce meaningful improvements in children’s language, literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development. Research further shows, however, that the quality of ECE programs varies considerably. As such, ECE research has given extensive attention to identifying the components of ECE programs that best improve children’s well-being and to effective mechanisms for enhancing quality.²⁰ For over 50 years, Head Start research has contributed to this still growing research base and provided valuable information not only for guiding program improvements in Head Start itself, but also for the larger field of ECE.

The [Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey \(FACES\) studies](#), which have collected descriptive data on Head Start programs and families since 1997, made (and continue to make) significant contributions to our understanding of Head Start program performance and how quality has improved over time; the changing population of families served by Head Start; families’ engagement in children’s learning and the importance of parents’ well-being to children’s growth; the development and well-being of children from families with low-income; and how features of program quality and familial characteristics/processes predict child outcomes. Through rigorous evaluations, Head Start examined the impact of its programs as a whole and how those impacts vary for different populations, communities, or program characteristics. Lessons from past descriptive and impact studies have guided a robust portfolio of research targeting strategies for improving program quality and child and family outcomes. Through partnerships between researchers and local programs, Head Start has developed and evaluated innovations in Head Start practice related to infant mental health, parenting, dual language learning, curricular enhancements, caregiver-child interactions, dual-generation approaches, and other topics.

Research and Evaluation Stakeholders

In setting Head Start research and evaluation priorities, ACF takes into account legislative requirements and Congressional interests; the interest and needs of ACF, HHS, and Administration leadership; program office staff and leadership; ACF partners; the populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders. ACF routinely interacts with these stakeholders through a variety of engagement activities. These activities inform our ongoing research and evaluation planning processes.

Who

- State, territory, tribal, local, and non-profit Head Start administrators and staff
- Head Start training and technical assistance providers
- Head Start curriculum and model developers
- Children and families served by Head Start
- Federal partners in HHS and other agencies, such as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Institute of Education Sciences at the Department of Education (ED/IES)
- Researchers and policy experts

²⁰ Burchinal, M., et al. (2016). Quality thresholds, features, and dosage in early care and education: Secondary data analyses of child outcomes [Special issue]. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 81(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12248>; Camilli, G., et al. (2010). Meta-analysis of the effects of early education interventions on cognitive and social development. *The Teachers College Record*, 112, 579-620; Phillips, D.A., et al. (2017) *Puzzling it out: The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects*. Washington, DC: Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/puzzling-it-out-the-current-state-of-scientific-knowledge-on-pre-kindergarten-effects/>



- National organizations, such as the National Head Start Association (NHSA) and the Society for the Research on Child Development (SRCD)
- Partners in the broad array of community-based service systems that support children and families

How

- Conferences and meetings, such as the National Research Conference on Early Childhood (NRCEC), the Child Care and Early Education Policy Research Consortium (CCEEPRC) Annual Meeting and Steering Committee, and the Network of Infant and Toddler Researchers (NiTR) Annual Meeting
- Engagement with Head Start training and technical assistance networks
- Surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other activities conducted as part of research and evaluation studies
- Structured mechanisms for broad stakeholder engagement, such as the Secretary’s Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation

Examples of Broad Questions

1. Who are the children and families served by Head Start and Early Head Start? How are they faring?
2. What services are provided by Head Start and Early Head Start programs? What is the quality of those services and how do they support improved outcomes for children and families?
3. How effective are Head Start and Early Head Start programs? How does their effectiveness vary by features of the program, services, children/families, or communities served?²¹
4. How can Head Start and Early Head Start services be improved? Can innovative or promising practices be implemented in Head Start and Early Head Start settings and are they effective in improving quality and/or outcomes?

Examples of Recent and Ongoing Research and Evaluation Activities

	Broad Question			
	#1	#2	#3	#4
American Indian/Alaskan Native FACES (AIAN FACES)	X	X		
Culture of Continuous Learning (CCL)				X
Early Head Start FACES (Baby FACES)	X	X		
Head Start and Early Head Start University Partnership Grants				X
Head Start Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion (CARES)				X
Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)	X	X		
Infants and Toddlers Teacher and Caregiver Competencies (ITTCC)				X
Study of Coaching Practices in ECE Settings (SCOPE)				X
Study of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP)		X		
Study of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS)	X	X		
Variations in the Implementation of Quality Interventions (VIQI)				X
We Grow Together				X

²¹ See section on [Future Directions for Research and Evaluation](#) in Head Start.



- **[American Indian/Alaskan Native FACES \(AIAN FACES\)](#)**: is a series of studies providing descriptive, nationally representative information on the characteristics, experiences, and development of Tribal Head Start preschool-aged children, their families, and the programs and staff who serve them in Region XI. (#1) (#2)
- **[Culture of Continuous Learning \(CCL\)](#)**: used the Breakthrough Series Collaborative model to test the feasibility of implementation of this model to create a culture of continuous learning in child care and Head Start programs. (#4)
- **[Early Head Start FACES \(Baby FACES\)](#)**: is a series of studies providing descriptive, nationally representative information on the characteristics, experiences, and development of Early Head Start infants, toddlers, pregnant women, their families, and the programs and staff who serve them in Regions I-X. (#1) (#2)
- **Head Start and Early Head Start University Partnership Grants²²**: is a series of grants programs in which university researchers partner with local Head Start or Early Head Start programs to test innovative strategies for improving service quality and/or child/family outcomes. Past grants programs have examined promising parenting interventions, dual-generation approaches, integrated interventions in center-based Early Head Start, and approaches for working with dual language learners. (#4)
- **[Head Start Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion \(CARES\)](#)**: was a large-scale, group-randomized implementation and impact evaluation of three social-emotional program enhancements within Head Start classrooms. (#4)
- **[Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey \(FACES\)](#)**: is a series of studies providing descriptive, nationally representative information on the characteristics, experiences, and development of Head Start preschool-aged children, their families, and the programs and staff who serve them in Regions I-X. (#1) (#2)
- **[Infants and Toddlers Teacher and Caregiver Competencies \(ITTCC\)](#)**: is exploring approaches to the implementation and assessment of competencies, working to build a conceptual foundation for measurement, research, and evaluation, in order to support ACF's efforts to improve the quality of care for infants and toddlers in community-based child care and Early Head Start. (#4)
- **[Study of Coaching Practices in ECE Settings \(SCOPE\)](#)**: is studying how coaching practices are implemented in ECE classrooms serving children supported by Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies or Head Start grants; how core features of coaching vary by key contextual factors; and which core coaching features are ripe for more rigorous evaluation. (#4)

²² For more details on the most recent Head Start University Partnership Grants, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/head-start-university-partnership-grants-dual-generation-approaches> and for Early Head Start University Partnership Grants, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/early-head-start-university-partnerships-building-the-evidence-base-for-infant/toddler-center-based-programs-2015-2020>. Details on all past Head Start and Early Head Start University Partnership Grants are searchable at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/topic/project-index>.



- [Study of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships \(EHS-CCP\)](#): is a national descriptive study of the characteristics of ACF's 2015 EHS-CCP grantees; their efforts to improve the availability and quality of center-based and family child care services for infants, toddlers, and their families; and the sustainability of partnerships over time. (#2)
- [Study of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start \(MSHS\)](#): was a descriptive, nationally representative study on the characteristics, experiences, and development of the children (birth through age five) and their migrant and seasonal farm-working families, and the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs and staff who serve them. (#1) (#2)
- [Variations in the Implementation of Quality Interventions \(VIQI\)](#): is an experimental study of how changes in ECE classroom quality relate to changes in preschool-aged children's school readiness outcomes. (#4)
- [We Grow Together](#): is a study to develop and test a professional development model aimed at improving teachers' responsiveness and support for infant/toddler development, based on the Quality of Caregiver-Child Interactions for Infants and Toddlers (Q-CCIIT) measure. (#4)

Future Directions for Research and Evaluation

The broad questions listed above will continue to drive much of ACF's research and evaluation activity in this area. Future activities will also be informed by emerging findings from ongoing research and evaluation activities, other learning activities, and continued engagement with Head Start stakeholders. ACF has previously completed studies on the effectiveness of Head Start and Early Head Start programs (Broad Question #3) but is not currently supporting research on this topic. ACF plans to continue this line of inquiry by exploring and testing the effectiveness of strategies informed by behavioral science in the context of Head Start and/or Early Head Start programs in upcoming research and evaluation efforts.

Examples of activities planned for the next few years include:

- Gathering data on the sustainability of EHS-child care partnerships over time and examining factors that predict sustained partnerships
- Exploring the implementation of strategies to support improved access to high quality infant-toddler care in EHS-Child Care partnerships
- Conducting secondary analyses to examine the quality of EHS-child care partnership classrooms
- Testing the effects of changes in quality of ECE classroom practices on preschool children's outcomes
- Examining the processes through which Head Start programs respond to families' needs and provide family support services
- Gathering data on Head Start's provision of services for children with disabilities and the role of the Head Start Disabilities Coordinator
- Developing measurement strategies for understanding how effective leaders can improve quality experiences for children in early care and education settings
- Designing a study to examine recruitment, selection, enrollment, and retention of eligible families in Head Start programs



- Conducting a series of case studies to examine how the conversion of enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start supports community needs
- Conducting secondary analyses to assess the drivers of workforce turnover in early care and education
- Examining the challenges faced by Head Start/Early Head Start programs and the families they serve during the COVID-19 pandemic, how programs have responded to those challenges, and the extent to which programs are able to support families and meet their needs related to COVID-19

