

Head Start Impact Study Findings in Context

About the Study

In the 1998 Reauthorization of Head Start, federal lawmakers mandated the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to fund a national study to determine the effectiveness of Head Start Program. The Head Start Impact Study researchers used a nationally representative sample of 84 randomly selected grantee/ delegate agencies and 383 randomly selected Head Start centers. The study consisted of nearly 5,000 new entering, eligible 3- and 4- year-old children who were randomly assigned to either (1) a Head Start group with access to Head Start services or (2) a control group that did not have access to Head Start. Parents of control group children could still enroll their children in other early childhood programs or non-Head Start early childhood services. Data collection started in fall 2002 and continued through 2006 following children through the spring of their first grade year.

Key Findings of the Study Show that Head Start Works:

The Head Start Impact Study authors found that, “Providing access to Head Start has a positive impact on children’s preschool experiences. There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every measure of children’s preschool experiences measured in this study.”ⁱ Furthermore, this study demonstrated that Head Start programs are of good quality and found favorable cognitive, socio-emotional, and health impacts for children who attended Head Start and positive impacts on parenting practices.ⁱⁱ These impacts were found despite the fact that this study’s Head Start data only represented 6 to 9 months of the Head Start experience.

- **Program Quality.** On average, Head Start children attended classrooms of good quality, and these classrooms were of higher quality than classrooms in other center-based programs.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Cognitive Impacts.** Children attending Head Start showed greater cognitive impacts than the control group children. In comparison to the control group, three-year-old children who had attended Head Start demonstrated modest gains in language, literacy, pre-writing, and math skills. Four-year-old children attending Head Start demonstrated modest gains in language and literacy skills.^{iv}
- **Socio-Emotional Impacts.** Children attending Head Start demonstrated some favorable impacts in the social-emotional domain in comparison to the children in the control group. Three year-old children with special needs showed improvements in the social-emotional domain by the end of first grade. Meanwhile, children who attended Head Start as three-year-olds showed less hyperactive and problem behavior by the end of Head Start, favorable social skills and positive approaches to learning at the end of the age 4 year, less hyperactive behavior and increased social skills and positive approaches to learning by the end of their kindergarten year, and parents of the Head Start group children reported evidence of a closer relationship with their child and reported a more positive overall relationship with their child than parents of the control group children did. Children who attended Head Start as 4-year-olds were found to exhibit less withdrawn behavior by the end of first grade than those in the control group.^v
- **Health Impacts:** Children attending Head Start had favorable impacts on their health. Three-year-old children attending Head Start were more likely to receive access to dental care by the end of their Head Start year and again at the end of their age 4 year. In comparison to the control group children, these children were more likely to have access to health insurance at the end of their kindergarten year, an overall excellent/ good health status by their end of their Head Start year, and care for an injury in the last month by the end of the age 4 year. Meanwhile, four-year-old Head Start children were 15 percent more likely to receive dental care, more likely to have health insurance coverage by the end of kindergarten and first grade, and more likely to possess an overall excellent/ good health status by their end of their kindergarten year.^{vi}
- **Parenting Practices:** Three-year-old Head Start children were less likely to be spanked in the last week at the end of their Head Start year and kindergarten, less likely to have parents using an authoritarian parenting style with them by the end of the age 4 year and first grade, more likely to have parents read to them during their Head Start year, and more likely to have parents involving them in cultural enrichment activities by the end of their Head Start year.^{vii}

Important Scientific Considerations

There are several important scientific considerations to take into account when reading this study’s findings:

- **Control Group Contamination.** Children randomly assigned to the study’s control group did not all stay at home and had a variety of early education experiences. About 60 percent of the control group children participated in child care or early education programs during the first year of the study, with 13.8 percent of the 4-year-olds in the control group and 17.8 percent of the 3-year-olds in the control group making their way into other Head Start programs during this year. Because 60 percent of the control group children were in child care or early education programs, it would be inappropriate from a scientific perspective to expect that the magnitude of the impacts found in this study

would be equivalent to those in model early childhood programs, such as the Perry Preschool Study. In the Perry Preschool study, all or almost the entire control group did not receive early childhood services outside of the home.^{viii}

- **Myth of Fade-Out.** This study found relatively few favorable impacts when children who had attended Head Start finished first grade. However, this study is only one of numerous studies evaluating Head Start over the past forty years of Head Start's history. The study shows that Head Start demonstrated favorable short-term cognitive, socio-emotional, and health impacts on children and improved parenting practices. This study was not designed to and does not capture the intermediate and long-term benefits of Head Start, but numerous rigorous studies have done so. Those studies found that Head Start decreased criminal activity,^{ix} child mortality rates,^x the need for special education,^{xi} and the need for children to repeat grades later on in school^{xii}, and increased child achievement test scores,^{xiii} high school graduation rates,^{xiv} and immunization rates.^{xv} Moreover, a very recent econometric study found that Head Start had significant favorable impacts on long-term outcomes of adults 19 years or older who attended Head Start.^{xvi}
- **Pre-Head Start Reauthorization Data.** This study examines children who attended Head Start programs five years prior to Head Start's reauthorization in the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*. This study's findings do not reflect quality improvements in Head Start that were authorized by federal lawmakers in 2007.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2010, January). Head Start Impact Study Final Report, xvi.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, xvi-xvii.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2005, June). Head Start Impact Study First Year Findings, 3-13.

^{iv} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2010, January). Head Start Impact Study Final Report, xxiii-xxvii.

^v Ibid., xxvii-xxix.

^{vi} Ibid., xxx-xxxii.

^{vii} Ibid., xxxii-xxxiv.

^{viii} Ibid., xv.

^{ix} Garces, E., Thomas, D. and Currie, J. (2002, September). Longer-Term Effects of Head Start. *American Economic Review*, 92 (4): 999-1012.

^x Ludwig, J. and Phillips, D. (2007). Does Head Start improve children's life chances? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (1): 159-208.

^{xi} Barnett, W. (2002, September 13). The Battle Over Head Start: What the Research Shows. Presentation at a Science and Public Policy Briefing Sponsored by the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences; p. 999; Garces, E., Thomas, D. and Currie, J., (2002, September). Longer-Term Effects of Head Start. *American Economic Review*, 92 (4): 999-1012.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ludwig, J. and Miller, D. (2007). Does Head Start improve children's life chances? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (1): 159-208.

^{xv} Currie, J. and Thomas, D. (1995, June). Does Head Start Make a Difference? *The American Economic Review*, 85 (3): 360.

^{xvi} Deming, D. (2009, July). Early Childhood Intervention and Life-Cycle Skill Development: Evidence from Head Start. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1 (3): 111-134.