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**The Effects of Head Start on Parenting:
A Systematic Literature Review**

An honors thesis presented to the Department of Public Policy,
University at Albany, State University of New York
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Public Policy
and
Graduation from The Honors College

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Research Mentor and Advisor: Ashley Fox, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Head Start (HS) is federally funded early childhood development program that provides services, including daycare and parenting classes for low-income families. However, debates exist over its efficacy in improving child development outcomes throughout the child's life course. This research aimed to review the evidence that Head Start improves parenting skills, which, in turn can foster improved health through a systematic review of recent empirical literature on Head Start and parenting. The study identified nine studies measuring the impact of parental involvement in HS on child outcomes. After reviewing these articles, we conclude that the HS program allows for parents to become more engaged in additional parent child activities such as parent child play, reading bedtime routines, reading daily, and reading frequency finding an overall positive effect of the program.

Key words: *Head Start, Early childhood development, Low-income family, Health outcomes*

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BACKGROUND

The Head Start Program was initiated by Lyndon B Johnson in 1965 as a tool to provide comprehensive early childhood education to low-income children (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). The program provides services that go beyond education and focuses on nutrition, parent involvement, and other family support services. Head start has served 35 million children age birth to five across 1,600 agencies. In 2017 about 9 billion dollars were allotted for the federal program (Office of Head Start, 2020). Programs include, WIC assistance (help applying), nutritional education, transportation, job search help, and childhood education. There has been a huge debate across party lines regarding the effectiveness of the Head Start Program which is fully funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Debates include how much parents follow Head Start guidance as well as conversation about the long -term effects after the family graduates from the program (Detrow & Gringlas, 2020). Based on the conflicting evidence, some legislatures believe the program only helps families for a short amount of time rather others feel Head Start has lasting effects and therefore favor increased funding for the program. Current studies included in this literature review focus on the direct effect of Head Start parenting classes on parenting techniques. These studies review the broader impact on child cognitive development in the program, not the effects on families after prekindergarten.

In addition to the direct impacts of Head Start through participation in the program, another way that Head Start may improve child development in the long run is through improvements in parenting and quality of home life. Head Start provides opportunities for parents to participate, for instance, in father involvement activities, parent policy forums, and parent volunteer activities. Increased opportunities for parent involvement and training courses

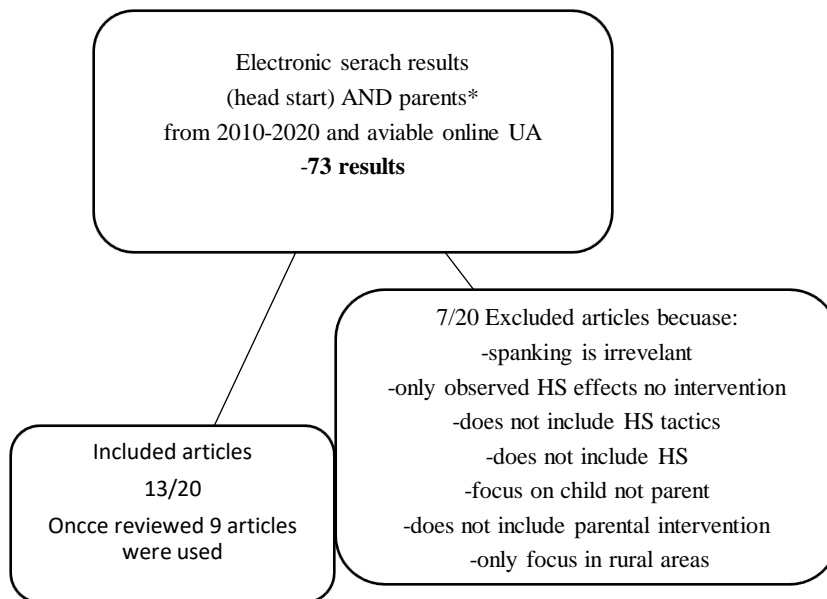
on parenting is an additional part of how the effectiveness of the HS programs may be gauged. One way to gauge the effects of the program is through its impacts on the status of the parent-child relationship. This study examined whether parental involvement and training via Head Start programs improved their relationship with their child by reviewing the evidence from a systematic review of studies examining Head Start's impacts on the parent-child relationship. The review of the evidence finds that there is an overall improvement in parenting styles for children who attend Head Start, though there are limitations in what studies are able to measure. Below I summarize the Methods undertaken to identify and synthesize the papers included in the review before going into the results and discussion.

METHODS

To find empirical research articles on the effects of Head Start on parenting, we systematically searched academic databases and grey literature for research articles. We were primarily interested in research articles that include a direct parenting intervention in the Head Start program. The databases searched included: JSTOR, science direct, springer link, ERIC (institute of education services), APA Psyc Net, NCBI were databases used derived from University at Albany or google scholar. The search terms we used were “‘Head Start’ AND Parent*.” We restricted the search to articles published from 1995 to present. An initial search identified 73 distinct articles. After the research provided 73 articles to review, we excluded 53 articles that were determined not to be relevant to the research question because they were not actually about Head Start. The remaining 20 were evaluated to determine whether they had information about direct Head Start led interventions that may have affected parenting outcomes. Articles were also reviewed in this study if there was a focus on strengthening Head Start parent

competencies. If the article mentioned Head Start parent transition to kindergarten and studied the cognitive, social, emotional and intellectual development in parents it was included. Articles were excluded if they did not focus on parent involvement, had no intervention, focused on the child not the parent, and did not include Head Start tactics. After evaluating each article based on these criteria, 9 research articles and one research book of the final twenty sources that were researched were included in this thesis.

Figure 1 *Search results of articles of Head Start in reference to parent outcomes*



RESULTS

Overall, the 9 articles reviewed demonstrated either a positive impact of Head Start on child outcomes or no effect. Seven demonstrated a positive impact of Head Start on parenting and two were inconclusive. The articles varied however in terms of the type of interventions with parents that were undertaken and how parental involvement was measured. For instance, Chang,

Park, and Kim (2009) examined the effects of attended parenting classes that taught positive parenting techniques and its effects on children's language and cognitive skills. These parenting classes were interventions based with the goal to better child and parent relationships as well as home life (Chang et al., 2009).

In the article "The Impact of Parent Involvement in Head Start on Parents and Children" Parker, Piotrkowski, Kessler-Sklar, Baker, Peay, Clark, and Beryl (1996) examine two Head Start agencies and finds that parents who participated more in Head Start activities demonstrated a greater perception of social competence, greater parental encouragement, less frequently perceived parenting hassles, demonstrated less parental strictness, and a greater number of school-readiness skills (Parker et al., 1996). These parent activities included reading to their child and engaging in parent events at Head Start. The same research journal studied a second agency that showed an improved child relationship and enhanced home learning based on multiple outcomes (Parker et al., 1996).

In another article, Chang et al. (2009) examined the effects of parenting classes on parenting techniques, as well as parent and child cognitive stimulation. Chang et al. used the hierarchical linear modeling and multivariate analysis mode (HLM) and parent child interactive activities from 2,807 low income families in the US (Chang et al., 2009). The outcome when compared to other parents who did not take the parenting class showed an increase in their child's cognitive and language stimulation (Chang et al., 2009). The child's outcomes were measured by Bayley Mental Development Index (MDI) which looks at sensory-perception, knowledge, memory and solving problems (Chang et al., 2009).

Similarly, Kaminski, and Goodman (2002) found in "Enhancing the Parenting skills of Head Start Families during the Transition to Kindergarten" that parents who attended the

parenting group showed gains in caregiver involvement over those who attended an alternative home visiting program (Stormshak et al., 2002). These results were based on the developmental-ecological model which evaluates relationships with others and society. Between the results from the developmental ecological model and home visiting program a child from Head Start was most likely to experience a positive transitional experience to Kindergarten (Stromshak et al., 2020). Stormshak et al. studied data that was collected for two years from parents who were self-selected into various parenting interventions. Children participating in classrooms received 20 sessions focused on social competence, self-regulation, early literacy, and language. These sessions were administered to children by their HS teachers during regular activities (Stormshak et al., 2002).

The final key finding demonstrated that mothers involved in the Head Start program reported a significantly greater decrease in physical and verbal negative discipline techniques. As well as a significantly greater increase in in the use of appropriate limit setting techniques with their children (Webster-Stratton, 1998). Due to the result, it can be concluded by all articles that Head Start has a positive effect on parenting.

A study from the *Children and Youth Services Review* compared interview answers to all HS participants to non-participants. Interviews with the parents were conducted after the child was born, as well as a telephone call after the child turned 1, 3 & 5 (Zhai, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). This article attested to the positive effects of Head Start because this article suggested that parents and children were given better access to materials needed to be successful in school (Zhai et al., 2013).

Webster-Stratton (1998) studied 394 Head Start centers who were randomly assigned to an experimental condition. As for parental affects, mothers who were observed at home to have

fewer critical remarks and commands used less harsh discipline after Head Start interventions (Webster-Stratton, 1998). The article written by Chang et al., discussed how parent outcomes were measured. The three dependent variables were: parental language, cognitive stimulation, parent-child intercreative activities and the Bayley Mental Development Index (MDI) of children. Parental language is key to gauging how children are spoken to which affects their self-esteem and performance in school (Chang et al., 2009). Therefore, a positive change in parental language shows how the Head Start program has the ability to improve parent child relationships.

DISCUSSION

Except for one, all the Head Start programs reviewed were in urban areas. More studies should be conducted in rural areas to get a more holistic view of the effects of the program from all demographics. Due to the fact that all 9 articles had different methods of testing finding a cohesive outcome was difficult. For example, one study could have reviewed the effects of home visits while the other looked at change in parental language towards child. Most articles adjusted for other socioeconomic factors that would affect the outcomes of the Head Start program. With the newly elected President Joe Biden there is likelihood that the Head Start program will continue to be funded, given his initiative to increase childcare availability slots which includes Head Start preschool program (Detrow & Gringlas, 2020).

The main limitation of “Exploring the use of texting to support family-school engagement in early childhood settings: teacher and family perspectives” was that a small cohort was studied including only 20 teachers and 30 family members (Snell, Hindman, & Wasik, 2020). The journal published by Paz Prieto offered the most limitations because it reviewed teachers attitudes towards family involvement not the effects of Head Start directly on parenting

styles (Paz-Albo Prieto, 2018). Biological, social, and community influences on third-grade reading levels of minority Head Start children: A multilevel approach suggested that low reading scores were associated to birth outcomes rather than parental engagement. In this case, there needs to be more research about effects of parenting skills on children's reading scores (Rauh, Parker, Garfinkel, Perry, & Andrews, 2003).

Stormshak et al.'s research journal showed limitations when reaching to parents because strict preference to home visiting approach, cohort was mostly white, and did not examine child outcomes (Stormshak et al., 2002). The main limitation from Snell et al. (2020) was that a small cohort was studied including only 20 teachers and 30 family members (Snell et al., 2020).

Even though each article had its own limitations there were difference in the types of interventions Head Start parents could experience. For example, texting interventions and home visits are two different types of approaches that may not warrant similar effects on parenting. It was also harder to compare studies because different methods were used across each study. Studies also examine parents who were willing to participate in these programs and had the time. Parents who worked multiple jobs may be less available to participate in parent strengthening activities. Limitations of parents age were not mentioned in any study and could influence results based on experiences of teenage or middle age parents.

CONCLUSION

Evidence from the research articles included here demonstrate that the federal Head Start program has positive effects on both children and parents. Head Start uses specific parenting techniques that are projected onto parents. A few techniques as mentioned are texting programs, parenting classes, and home visits. This systematic study suggests that Head Start plays a valuable role in children's lives who are enrolled in the program both directly through early

childhood education and indirectly through parenting techniques that improve the lives of the entire family unit. Therefore, Head Start goes beyond teaching children; rather, it sets up low income families for overall success and should be considered during policy debates about expanding the program. From a public policy perspective, Head Start should be allotted additional funding to expand its cohort and offer more programs across America.

Table 1
Summary of Electronic Articles (9 Total)

Article title	Study design	Findings	Positive/negative effect	Limitations
Parker, Piotrkowski, Kessler-Sklar, Baker, Peay, Clark, & Beryl (1996). <i>Impact of Parent Involvement in Head Start on Parents and Children</i>	Qualitative Study	Agency one: Parents participation in volunteer activities increased overall. --2 nd agency observed no net effect	Positive effects and no net effects	Older research article (1997) Demographic differences, a one group pretest-posttest passive observational design
Chang, Park, & Kim (2009). <i>Parenting Classes, Parenting Behavior, and Child Cognitive Development in Early Head Start: A Longitudinal Model</i>	Longitudinal Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) and multivariate analyses	Parents who attended parenting classes that taught positive parenting techniques stimulated their children's language and cognitive development	Positive, MDI scores were higher of children whose parents attended classes	Reliance on self-reported data and use of self-selection on effects on parenting
Zhai, Waldfogel, & Brooks-Gunn (2013). <i>Estimating the effects of Head Start on parenting and child maltreatment.</i>	Data was used from the fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (FFCWS)	Children and families are more likely to have access to materials	Positive-program benefits children cognition	Need more info from individual and community influences

Stormshak, Kaminski, & Goodman (2002). <i>Enhancing the Parenting Skills of Head Start Families during the Transition to Kindergarten</i>	STAR was used which studies the situation, task, action, and result	Parents who attended the parenting group discussion showed gains in caregiver involvement	N= 146 could not tell effects	Small cohort studied, had difficulty reaching parents they preferred a home visiting approach. Cohort was mostly white and did not examine child outcomes
Webster-Stratton (1998). <i>Preventing conduct problems in Head Start children: Strengthening parenting competencies</i>	Qualitative-recorded by analyzing parenting competencies, parent school involvement, and child social competencies	Mothers discipline styles became more consistent, and a greater decrease in physically and negative discipline techniques	Positive- on parenting styles/techniques	Need more info on long term effects
Snell, Hindman, & Wasik (2020). <i>Exploring the use of texting to support family-school engagement in early childhood settings: teacher and family perspectives</i>	Qualitative	Teachers and families are enthusiastic about using texting and view texting as a tool to further family-school engagement and communication and to enhance child outcomes.	Inclusive: positive attitude toward using the texting program	Small cohort studied only 20 teachers and 30 family members
Paz-Albo Prieto (2018). <i>The influence of simulations on family engagement – prospective early childhood educators’ perceptions</i>	PFCE stimulation	97% of the participants felt that using the PFCE Simulation helped them to reflect of the importance of family involvement	Positive: demonstrates the importance of family involvement	Does not show family results directly

Roggman, Moe, Hart, & Forthun. (1994). <i>Family leisure and social support: Relations with parenting stress and psychological well-being in head start parents.</i>	Self-report inventory using a Likert-type scale	Mothers results: Show more positive parental functioning at the end of the year Fathers results: More leisure time spent with children, increase in less child difficulty	Positive	Self-reported study using “strongly agree scale”
Rauh, Parker, Garfinkel, Perry, & Andrews (2003). <i>Biological, social, and community influences on third-grade reading levels of minority Head Start children: A multilevel approach</i>	Multilevel regression analysis	Low reading scores were associated with male gender, low birth weight, unmarried mother, low maternal education, and inadequate inter pregnancy spacing.	No net effect by head start- more related to how the child is born	Does not research parent effects on test scores

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