



The Impact of Welfare Reform On Infants & Toddlers, Their Families, & Their Communities: The Role of Early Head Start & Head Start

Due to its ability to assist families with young children in overcoming multiple barriers, Early Head Start (EHS) programs have been noted as being a significant family support. EHS assists parents as they endeavor to comply with TANF, support the educational needs of their children, and work towards greater economic stability.

policy brief

The Qualitative Study

An understanding of the impact of new policies cannot be achieved without an assessment of how the policies are interpreted and acted upon by those who have direct contact with the people they are intended to affect. This study is a qualitative inquiry investigating how perspectives of welfare reform implementation may change or evolve from (a) state level policy makers, (b) county or local administrators responsible for implementing the policies, (c) social service workers directly involved with welfare recipients, (d) Head Start/Early Head Start program staff interacting with

both the social service workers and the families they serve, and e) families currently or previously on cash assistance. For each of these groups, investigators have conducted focus groups or key informant interviews. Over 600 interviews were conducted over a two-year period between 1998 – 2000 in rural and urban communities in nine states that are a part of the Early Head Start Research Consortium (AR, CA, CO, IA, KS, MI, MO, NY PA).

For more information about EHS/HS see: <http://www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb>

Early Head Start Services Help Parents Transition from Welfare to Work

Respondents at all levels were asked, “What are some of the barriers to moving from welfare to work?” Families were asked about the kinds of help they had received from EHS or HS programs. Here is a comparison of responses to those questions:

Barriers

- Availability of high quality child care during traditional and nontraditional work hours
 - Transportation
 - Housing
 - Limited education/job training
- “Basically the child care...they don’t feel comfortable with...the care that the kids are getting. (Also) transportation is particularly a problem...(it) is not readily available throughout the county in all areas at all times.”* (Local Administrator, rural community)

Resources

- Child care, provided either directly, or brokered by EHS/HS
 - Transportation assistance
 - Referrals for housing
 - Assistance with obtaining education or job training
- “Now if I have problems...like I have problems with vehicles, [EHS worker] tried to find people somewhere that could help me.”*

Barriers for Families Facing Multiple Challenges

- Domestic violence
- Mental health problems
- Substance abuse
- Children with special needs
- Parents with learning disabilities, often undiagnosed

“The barriers are, of course, domestic violence, mental Health and substance abuse problems. Anywhere you have those problems, if they do get a job they may not be able to keep (it)” (State Administrator)

Services for Families Facing Multiple Challenges

- EHS/HS staff described working with families to establish goals and providing long-term encouragement to families with these needs
- EHS/HS staff described making referrals to community agencies to address these needs

“(EHS) got me connected with (Mental Health Provider) down at the) Regional Mental Health Center)...and that helped quite a bit. I had somebody I could talk to about what was going on.” (Mother, urban community)

Barriers Due to “Lack of Soft Skills”

- Respondents described motivational barriers such as desire to learn, punctuality
- Respondents referred to lack of “soft skills” such as social skills needed to retain jobs
- Respondents referred to lack of off-the-job intensive supports to assure the worker could retain employment

“(Employers) want people who want to work, who will show up on time. There are a whole litany of things that you hear people talking about all the time: can take instruction, can get along with coworkers, know how to dress, that type of routine.” (State Administrator)

Supports Given by EHS or HS

- Families said their EHS workers were a source of constant encouragement and support
 - EHS/HS staff described providing supports such as: budgeting, education, tax computation, credit advocacy
 - EHS staff are concerned about the impact of multiple changes in child care arrangements on the children and consider it important to develop a stable environment for the children.
- “They (EHS) did a lot of emotional support. . . . to talk with me and . . . you know, she comes to visit me. She asks how I’m doing.” (Mother, rural community)*

Policy Recommendations

- Provide incentives for states to invest state funds in Early Head Start, such as a higher match rate, or other incentives for the states to put more funds into EHS.
- Increase federal funding for Early Head Start programs.
- Provide more funds to support full day Head Start programs.
- Fully fund Head Start programs so families can use them year round while they are working.
- Develop a seamless system of transition from Early Head Start to Head Start for families as their children age out of one program and remain eligible for the next program.
- Fund TANF at existing levels plus inflation and continue to allow states flexibility in the use of these funds to support child care and other family supports.

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For a complete list of references or more information about this topic, contact the Center for Family Policy & Research

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