



Strengthening Whole Family Comprehensive Supports in Early Childhood

Implications for Head Start and Early Head Start

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INTRODUCTION

America's young children and families are facing historic challenges and possibilities. Families are confronting long-standing barriers to opportunity like poverty, systemic racism, and under-resourced neighborhoods, and also challenges related to a global pandemic, gun violence, and climate change including increasingly dangerous natural disasters and resulting displacements. In the face of these complex challenges atop those of daily life, families and communities are resilient, resourceful, and motivated to provide their children with a promising future. They are ready to tap into this era of unprecedented possibility, scientific discovery, and innovation that can buffer the impacts of adverse experiences. Research points to supporting the strengths and needs of children via "early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive" "whole child-whole family" programs, such as those delivered by Head Start and Early Head Start.¹ These programs should be expanded and updated to incorporate up-to-date scientific and practice insights to better address the 21st century needs of America's children and families.

Why Whole Child-Whole Family Approaches

The early years of life are a time of unparalleled growth that is deeply influenced by children's environments and experiences. For healthy development and learning, all children need safe, affirming, and positive early experiences within their families and outside of their homes. These experiences include safe, stable, nurturing environments within the home where the wellbeing of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers are supported.² A caregiver's mental health and levels of stress influence children's behaviors, language development, and brain development, thus the focus needs to be on whole child and whole family support.³ Experiences in the community are also important to ensure that children have opportunities to learn, play, and grow in spaces that are free from violence and harmful chemicals, and in environments that are culturally-affirming, promote positive relationships and access to resources that can reduce stress on both caregivers and children.⁴

Toxic stress, defined by the Harvard Center on the Developing Child as “prolonged activation of the stress response system,” can be experienced when a child goes through frequent and significant adversity, such as deprivation, neglect, abuse, or exposure to violence without adequate adult support.⁵ Families experiencing poverty, and families that face systemic barriers that limit access to protective resources are especially at risk. “Because racism places Black and other [racially and ethnically minoritized] children at higher risk for experiencing stressors such as psychological distress, racism may upregulate their stress response systems, thus leading to dysregulation.”⁶

Prolonged exposure to adversity can potentially cause physical changes to the structure of children’s brains, disrupting the development of strong brain architecture and heightening their propensity to be in “fight or flight mode” with long term implications for health and learning. Early childhood adversity is associated with a range of negative life outcomes, such as poor health, higher rates of high school dropout, and unemployment later in life.⁷

Fortunately, children thrive when their families thrive, and there are proven strategies for mitigating the effects of the adverse experiences of children and families while building on their strengths. Research demonstrates that: caring relationships, access to basic resources, access to opportunities, and safe and predictable early environments can buffer children and their families against the adverse consequences of toxic stress and boost healthy development and learning.

One effective way to promote healthy child development and learning is by integrating early childhood education and comprehensive family supports. Building upon relationships established within early education and care programs, children and families enrolled can be connected to social, emotional, health and academic supports—such as diapers, food, books, parenting support, special education, and health services—as well as developmental opportunities for children like play-groups, music, art; family visits to libraries and museums; and connections to opportunities for parental and caregiver leadership and support such as education, job training, employment, transportation, housing, financial supports, community groups, mental health and health services.⁸

Whether accessed by families directly or with assistance, regular connections to robust supports and opportunities, often referred to as “comprehensive services,” are vital to fostering family and child well being and healthy child development. Drawing on the interdisciplinary sciences of learning and child development, the case for an integration between early education and care approaches and comprehensive services becomes clear.

Comprehensive services as a part of early childhood programs are essential for improving outcomes for children and families because they:

- promote access to resources, opportunities, and positive relationships,
- reduce stressors within the child’s environment and strengthen families,
- support development across all domains,
- narrow inequities tied to race and class.⁹

Promote access to resources, opportunities, and positive relationships: Families with young children are in a time of transition and openness to new experiences and relationships.¹⁰ Connections to early childhood educators, staff, other parents, and community members can play an integral role in supporting families as they gain knowledge and access to the resources they need to parent their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.¹¹ Early education and care programs like Head Start and Early Head Start create a network of trusted adults who, like the parent, are invested in a child’s healthy development and learning.¹² When combined with an intentional emphasis on connecting children and families to comprehensive supports and opportunities from the surrounding community, early education programs become conduits to resources and

relationships that can open doors of possibility and buffer against life's challenges.¹³ These "protective" relationships can alter the trajectories of young children and their families.¹⁴

Reduce stress in the child's environment: A "whole child, whole family" approach recognizes that the family context profoundly influences child development and learning, and emphasizes the importance of support for both the child *and their family*. Comprehensive services can reduce family stressors and promote well being by providing access to material resources, like food or housing, social resources such as parenting support, connections to other parents or community organizations, and skill-building resources for caregivers like job training opportunities or financial literacy. Tailored supports can build caregiver confidence, knowledge, resources, and relationships which can reduce stress and promote well being for a family and their child.¹⁵

Support development across domains: Early experiences lay the foundation for subsequent development. The early years are an especially sensitive developmental period, with more than one million neural connections formed every second during the first few years of life.¹⁶ As children learn and grow, development occurs simultaneously across all domains: cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and psychological.¹⁷ These domains continuously co-act with and build on one another. For example, the ability to use language to communicate is deeply intertwined with developing cognitive skills, socializing with peers, and expressing emotions in constructive ways. However, this also means that obstacles to development in one domain can threaten development in other domains.

Effective approaches to coordinating comprehensive services target support for strengths and needs for each child and family across all domains, optimizing a child's chances for healthy development. For example, this can include access to nutritious food, medical care, speech/language support, seasonal clothing, books, a neighborhood play group, and education and training opportunities for a parent.

Narrow inequities tied to race, place, and class: Coping with racial stereotypes, discrimination, and systemic barriers can be a source of chronic stress in the child and their parents and caregivers. These barriers can also limit opportunities for economic mobility. The impacts of tangible and intangible barriers can manifest as chronic physical and mental health conditions.¹⁸ Additionally, Black, Hispanic, immigrant, and other families disproportionately experience adversities like poverty.¹⁹ Poverty poses a threat to healthy child development because it increases deprivation, uncertainties, and stresses, while limiting developmental opportunities and resources for children and families.²⁰ Comprehensive services, tailored to the unique needs of each child and family, can act as a buffer against these experiences by reducing barriers to resources and opportunities and by limiting the disadvantages experienced by children in underserved communities.





EVIDENCE OF IMPACTS

Research on Early Head Start and Head Start combined with emergent understanding of the role of comprehensive services and robust evidence from integrated student support interventions in elementary schools build both theoretical and evidence-based cases for the importance of updating approaches to implementing comprehensive services in early childhood settings. Together, these studies suggest that updating approaches to the integration of comprehensive services—consistent with evidence-based best practices—can have a positive impact on child development and learning outcomes in both the short- and long-terms. These studies also demonstrate positive impacts on parents and caregivers.

Head Start

Although Head Start programs have always included access to comprehensive services, impact studies of Head Start programs have not historically sought to isolate and understand the impacts attributable to comprehensive services alone, as compared to the combination of educational and comprehensive supports. However, new studies are exploring the role of Head Start family support staff, who are instrumental to providing comprehensive services. These studies are finding that the role is essential to child and parent outcomes through both supporting family self sufficiency and positive parenting behaviors. One study found that strong relationships between Head Start family support staff and families resulted in children having better vocabularies, in part because families engaged in more educational activities in the home.²¹ A second study found that the receipt of income support was associated with reduced depression for parents and improved approaches to learning in children.²²

Early Head Start

Because it serves families with the youngest children, research on Early Head Start has focused on assessing parenting and the parent-child relationship. A rigorous experimental study of Early Head Start has shown not only the impacts of the program for both children, parenting and family well-being, but also sheds light on the pathways to impacts for children,

including the impacts on parenting and family wellbeing as well as the receipt of comprehensive services.

IMPROVED CAREGIVER ENGAGEMENT AND REDUCED STRESS:

- Caregivers who participate in Early Head Start are found to be more emotionally supportive, engaged during play, and more likely to read to their child daily.²³
- Caregivers are less likely to engage in negative parenting strategies, such as spanking, and report being less stressed having less family conflict.²⁴
- Caregivers participating in Early Head Start show increased participation in education and job readiness activities and are more likely to be employed.²⁵

IMPROVED CHILD COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT:

- Children participating in Early Head Start programs demonstrate improved language and vocabulary acquisition.²⁶
- Children enrolled in Early Head Start show accelerated cognitive development and academic achievement, reducing the percentages of children scoring in the at-risk range on developmental functioning, and bringing them closer to the national mean than prior to enrollment.²⁷

IMPROVED CHILD SOCIAL SKILLS:

- Children enrolled in Early Head Start demonstrate, when compared to similar children not enrolled in Early Head Start, improved social interaction skills and less hyperactive or aggressive behavior.²⁸
- Children participating in Early Head Start engage their parents more, are more likely to observe objects during play, and have fewer negative interactions with their parents.²⁹

MORE ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORTS:

- At age 2, Early Head Start families report receiving many more services than similar families not enrolled in Early Head Start such as parenting support, increased hours of child care, Early Intervention services, health and mental services, education, and job training.³⁰
- Specific services received lead to benefits for children and families.³¹ For example, a parent's access to education and job training services so that they can obtain a better job is linked to positive parenting behaviors and positive impacts on child social-emotional and cognitive development. Early intervention services are associated with positive cognitive and language outcomes for children. And access to additional hours of child care are positively associated with children's cognitive development and parents' support of their child's learning and development.³²

EARLY IMPACTS ON PARENTS HAVE LONG TERM BENEFITS

Analysis of the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project shows that the early impacts of the program on parenting and family wellbeing have long term benefits. For example:

Early Head Start children were less likely to experience maltreatment in the first 15 years of their lives due to early impacts on positive parenting behaviors and increased family wellbeing—reduced family conflict and parenting distress.³³

Early Head Start impacts on reducing parenting stress and spanking while children were aged 2 and 3 resulted in more positive social-emotional outcomes for children in 5th grade, 7 years after the end of the program.³⁴

Early Head Start impacts on increasing learning opportunities in the home environment, increasing supportive parenting and decreasing detached parenting when children were 2 and 3 led to increased academic skills for children in 5th grade.³⁵

Integrated Student Support

The potential contributions of comprehensive supports and opportunities to child development and learning is further illuminated by evidence from approaches to integrated student support in elementary schools, where children are typically ages 5-11.

Integrated Student Support is a school-based approach to ensuring that each child receives the resources, relationships, and opportunities that best address his or her strengths and needs. When integrated into the day-to-day functioning of the school, it intentionally and systematically addresses the out-of-school factors that can impede children's readiness to learn in school.³⁶ Evidence-based approaches to integrated student support demonstrate a range of positive results for students, including:

- **More access to comprehensive supports:** In schools with and without approaches to integrated student support, students had more access to comprehensive services in schools that intentionally coordinated both school and community resources for children and families.³⁷ A study of City Connects, an integrated student support model, found that on average, City Connects students accessed an additional \$5,400 worth of services in support of student well-being during elementary school, as compared to students in schools with a traditional approach to student support.³⁸
- **Less likely to be chronically absent or repeat a grade:** Students attending a school with an integrated system of support demonstrated lower rates of being held back in grade as well as reduced chronic absenteeism when compared to similar students who never enrolled in a school with an integrated approach to student support.³⁹
- **Improved effort, attendance, and engagement:** Children participating in educational settings with systems of integrated comprehensive support, as compared to children in educational settings without, demonstrated improved academic motivation and achievement, more positive attitudes about school, and more consistent school attendance.⁴⁰
- **Stronger performance in class:** Students experiencing high quality integrated student support, who had significantly lower report card scores in math and reading, catch up to or outperform comparison students by the end of grade 5.⁴¹ Integrated student support models also had statistically significant impacts on the proportion of students who passed all their core courses, and on the overall reduction of course failure.⁴²
- **Outperform comparison peers on statewide tests:** In a large-scale study, students who were randomly assigned to schools with integrated student support scored significantly higher than their peers randomly assigned to comparison schools on fifth-grade statewide ELA and mathematics tests.⁴³ Additionally, students who received evidence-based integrated student support in elementary school (grades K-5) demonstrated on the 8th grade statewide tests that they closed about two-thirds of achievement gaps in Math, and half of the achievement gap in English Language Arts compared to their peers who did not receive integrated student support in elementary school.⁴⁴
- **Less likely to drop out of high school:** Students who received evidence-based integrated student support in elementary school were approximately half as likely to drop out of high school than peers who did not receive comprehensive support.⁴⁵
- **Increased postsecondary enrollment and completion:** Students who experienced integrated student support in elementary school are more likely to enroll in, and graduate from, postsecondary programs.⁴⁶

BEST PRACTICES

The developmental sciences and the research on effectiveness provide insight into how approaches to comprehensive services can best disrupt negative developmental pathways and strengthen positive developmental trajectories through relationships, supports, and opportunities. Head Start and Early Head Start can strengthen their current approaches by more consistently using best practices to produce an approach that is:⁴⁷

- **Customized:** All children have strengths and needs and follow a unique developmental trajectory shaped by genetics, experiences, and family and community contexts. Therefore, interventions must be customized to best support each individual child and their family.⁴⁸
- **Comprehensive:** Children develop across multiple domains and exhibit strengths that can be cultivated and needs that can be addressed. Interventions must therefore account for all domains and the levels of risk experienced within each domain. For young children, multigenerational supports which address comprehensive aspects of parenting and family wellbeing can play an important role in strengthening a child's developmental context.
- **Co-created:** Children depend foremost on the care and engagement of their parents and caregivers. Co-creating a customized and comprehensive plan with parents and caregivers respects families as knowledgeable about their children and empowers families with knowledge and decision making that can activate engaged parenting.⁴⁹
- **Coordinated:** All environments in which children learn, play, and live influence their development. Therefore, interventions must coordinate across a child's early childhood program, family, and community in order to access adequate supports and align efforts.
- **Continuous:** Development occurs over time and subsequent development depends on earlier experiences. Therefore, interventions must be continuous in that they encourage consistent follow-up and adapt to the child and family's changing strengths and needs.



IMPLICATIONS FOR HEAD START AND EARLY HEAD START

Head Start and Early Head Start have many strengths on which to build. From inception, both programs have recognized the importance of comprehensive services, and taken steps to connect young children and their families to program- and community-based supports. Although the quality and consistency of access to comprehensive services varies across programs and communities, some Early Head Start and Head Start programs do implement many of the core best practices and have demonstrated results for children across the United States.⁵⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst widespread social isolation and shut downs of businesses, schools, and community organizations, Head Start and Early Head Start programs leveraged existing community partnerships to ensure that resources, supplies, and virtual or 'drive up' support for families and children were provided.⁵¹ In some places, teachers, bus drivers, agency upper management, and Family Support teams played essential roles in connecting participating low-income families to the assistance they needed.⁵²

The opportunity presented by reauthorization of the Head Start Act is to make improvements that enhance the efficacy of Head Start and Early Head Start interventions, and to develop resilient systems capable of supporting families with young children through a period of increasing complexity and upheaval. Among the changes that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Congress can consider are:

- **Building on Best Practices:** Best practices point toward establishing a clear operational infrastructure to support in-program interventions as well as coordination of community-based services, enrichments, and relationships for children and families. The operational infrastructure includes development of a comprehensive support plan for each child, and capacity to ensure delivery of individualized plans by coordinating both in-program and community-based



services and opportunities. Best practices include engaging parents as advocates with important insights about their children, and supporting parent knowledge-building and capacity to connect to resources. Implementation consistent with best practices builds upon and strengthens the two-generational model of Early Head Start and Head Start by creating a more intentional, systematic, and comprehensive approach.

- **Updating Language:** Update the Head Start Act to better reflect recent research and best practices for effective coordination of comprehensive services. This includes: articulating the role of toxic stress and the mitigating effects of comprehensive supports and enrichments; directing the Administration of Children and Families to clarify staff roles and responsibilities at the local level; and to provide research-based guidance, professional development, technical assistance, and technology to support effective implementation of comprehensive services consistent with best practices. This recommendation builds on proposed changes to the Head Start Performance Standards which would reduce the caseloads of family service professionals and improve conditions for teachers in order to enable higher quality engagement between programs, children, and families.
- **Increasing Funding:** Strengthening the whole child, whole family model with cutting edge practices for integrating comprehensive services will require modest increases in funding in order to generate positive outcomes. A set aside to invest in aligned professional development, supporting technology, and community partnerships responsive to the needs and interests of participating children and families would enable more effective and efficient implementation. To provide accountability and understand implementation and efficacy within the Early Head Start and Head Start contexts, funding for research and evaluation should also be provided.
- **Enhancing Support for Professionals Working with Families:** The Head Start and Early Head Start professionals working with families are part of an extensive interdisciplinary network interacting with families of young children. This includes professionals such as home visitors, pediatricians, social workers, infant mental health specialists, child welfare workers, and virtually any family support professionals ranging from early intervention, early care and education, and multiple fields of psychology. Head Start and Early Head Start professionals could benefit from increased support rooted in the Relationship Based Competencies, which are based on research and recommended practice across the diverse fields that work alongside families from pregnancy through the early childhood years.⁵³ By increasing support for professionals, staff wellness is promoted and protected, which is essential to relationship building between adults connected to the families of young children, and promotes family well-being.⁵⁴





CONCLUSION

The potential of coordinated comprehensive services to positively impact the developmental contexts of children makes it particularly important that early childhood programs, like Head Start and Early Head Start, engage in research-backed best practices in support of families and young children. Best practices build on what Head Start and Early Head Start are already doing by creating a systematic and methodological approach to ensuring that every child and family receives needed supports and aligned opportunities. This systemic approach allows for adaptability as children's needs and families' circumstances change, and resiliency and connection in the context of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the important role of Early Head Start and Head Start programs in providing protective resources and relationships to children and families during a crisis. Strengthening these programs by focusing on improved coordination and integration of comprehensive supports and opportunities will allow Early Head Start and Head Start programs to promote healthy child development, learning, and thriving in an era of change and challenge.

ENDNOTES

- 1 **Head Start and Early Head Start** are federal programs that provide funding for children ages 0-5 from low-income families to receive quality early education and care services. Early Head Start and Head Start promote school readiness through comprehensive education, health, and social services and can be delivered through home-based, center-based, or family child care services. Early Head Start accepts eligible infants and toddlers and pregnant women and prioritizes providing developmentally-appropriate services for infants and toddlers, while affirming the primary caregivers' role as their child's first teacher. Within the Early Head Start realm, **home visits** and family-based programs are most commonly chosen, with center-based care on the rise. Head Start, on the other hand, provides services to eligible 3 and 4 year old children to help them reach kindergarten readiness, and these programs are almost exclusively center-based programs within the local community.
***Eligible participants** include families who meet the federal low-income guidelines (those who are at or below the federal poverty line or who participate in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program public assistance services). Other eligible participants include children who are in the foster care system or are experiencing homelessness.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank reviewers Mary Walsh, Eric Dearing, Helen Raikes, Iheoma Iruka, Deborah Stark, Dana Thomson, and Linda Smith for their feedback and improvements. We also thank graduate assistants at Boston College whose research, writing, and attention to detail made this brief possible including Sophia Tirabassi, Meghan Fitzgerald, Kristen Cefalu, Caelyn Nordman, and Annmarie Lee; and David Coleman and Tanya Lazar for their assistance with design and publication. Finally, we thank the children, families, and the people who support families with young children for their perseverance and possibility.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Wasser Gish, J., Chazan-Cohen, R., & Warren, T. (2024). Strengthening Whole Family Comprehensive Supports in Early Childhood: Implications for Head Start and Early Head Start.



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