

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

■ FINAL REPORT ■

PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HEAD START

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■ **Major Findings from the Head Start Parent Involvement Project** ■

**HOW DOES HEAD START PARENT INVOLVEMENT
IMPROVE THE LIVES OF FAMILIES?**

Through An Improved Parent-child Relationship:

Less parental strictness.

Less parenting aggravation.

Through An Enhanced Home Learning Environment:

Greater number of school readiness skills parent tries to teach her Head Start child.

Higher parental expectations for the Head Start child's long-term school success.

Parental provision of more educationally relevant play materials in the home.

Through Children's Greater Social Competence:

Parent's perception of her Head Start child as more cooperative at home.

Parent's report of her Head Start child as getting along better with family and peers one year after Head Start.

Parent's report of older sibling's greater overall social competence one year after Head Start.

Through Greater Parent Involvement in Elementary School:

Greater likelihood of parents helping and offering help in their child's kindergarten classroom.

Through Increased Parental Self-sufficiency:

Less likelihood of being pregnant during the year following Head Start.

Greater likelihood of paid employment.

WHO GETS INVOLVED IN HEAD START?

Parents Who:

Reported needing education, job training, or paid employment at the beginning of the Head Start year.

Were not pregnant during the Head Start year.

Were not engaged in self-sufficiency promoting activities (education, job training, employment) during the Head Start year.

Reported less frequent parenting hassles.

Reported less intense parenting hassles.

Had greater expectations for their Head Start child long-term school success.

Had a younger Head Start child.

Had a Head Start child with fewer birth difficulties.

Had a Head Start child with greater health problems.

Reported the older sibling to have better school performance.

WHO UTILIZES HEAD START SOCIAL SERVICES?

Demographic Factors:

Parents Who:

Were older.

Were less educated.

Reported more self-sufficiency needs.

Parent-Child Relationship and Home-Learning Environment:

Parents Who:

Were stricter.

Spoke more frequently with their child about school.

Helped their child learn more school readiness skills.

Head Start Child and Older Siblings:

Parents Who:

Had an older Head Start child.

Had a Head Start child with more health problems.

Had an "older" older sibling.

Reported the older sibling as having poorer school performance.

Reported the older sibling to have better peer and family relations.

■ POLICY AND PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS ■

Reexamine the needs and skills of parents and how Head Start can address these through the types of involvement activities offered.

Tailor programs to meet parents' specific goals, guided by a model of which aspects of parent involvement have which outcomes.

Redefine Head Start parent involvement to include activities initiated by the Head Start center to be carried out by the parent at home (e.g., reading to the Head Start child, volunteering on a Head Start fund-raising activity).

Reduce the case loads of social services staff to maximize their ability to build strong partnerships with parents and address parents' individual needs so that they can attain their goals.

Add services to decrease barriers to fuller participation in Head Start (e.g., wrap-around child care, full-day program for Head Start child).

Examine the feasibility of instituting state-level coordination between Head Start agencies and welfare-to-work programs so that Head Start agencies can offer on-site job training and educational activities leading to paid employment as part of their parent involvement component.

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INTRODUCTION

Head Start is a comprehensive, federally funded program for low-income families with young children. Since its inception during President Johnson's War on Poverty, Head Start has served as a model for the delivery of comprehensive child development services. Today, Head Start stands as the first two-generation intervention designed to focus on children's development and well-being **within the context of strong family support and involvement**. Head Start seeks to alleviate family poverty and increase the sense of dignity and self-worth of family members (Parker, Piotrkowski, Horn, & Greene, 1995). From its inception, Head Start's legislative mandate called for "maximum feasible participation" of parents in all programmatic efforts and policy decisions. Parental involvement has always been an integral component of the Head Start program model [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 1970].

Traditionally, research on Head Start's effectiveness has focused on its impact on the Head Start child; specifically, on his or her cognitive, language, and motor development, and health, nutrition, and subsequent educational attainment. Policymakers and practitioners alike have used this child-focused research base as their sole source of evidence for assessing the efficacy of the program, despite the fact that Head Start founders -- notably Dr. Edward Zigler -- see parents as the vital force behind long-lasting effects of Head Start on families. Dr. Zigler has consistently called for research that focuses on parents in addition to children (Zigler, 1978; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992; Zigler & Styfco, 1993; Zigler & Valentine, 1979). Furthermore, legislated federal panels and focus groups, as well as the National Head Start Association, have strongly advocated for research that explores parent involvement in Head Start (NHSA, 1990; USDHHS, 1993; NAS, 1996). Nevertheless, there is little research on the benefits of Head Start to parents and on the role of parents as mediators of child and family outcomes. This lack of attention to parents is unfortunate because only by investigating the potential benefits of parent participation for parents themselves and for other family members can the full impact of Head Start be understood (Parker, Piotrkowski & Peay, 1987; Slaughter, Lindsey, Nakagawa, & Kuehne, 1989). In light of President Clinton's pledge in his first State of the Union address of 1997 to expand Head Start by 2002, documenting *all* of the benefits of Head Start to justify the investment of these substantial federal funds becomes more crucial than ever before.

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) Center for the Child, in collaboration with the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, undertook the Head Start Parent Involvement Project in 1990 to explore this virtually untapped area. This five-year initiative consisted of three parts:

A parent survey exploring life events and experiences that might function as barriers to parents' participation in Head Start;

A longitudinal study of parent involvement in Head Start assessing its impact on parents, Head Start children, and their siblings;

An intervention focused on staff development and training to enhance staff's work with Head Start parents.

The first three years of this project were funded through a Head Start/University Partnership Grant from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) and NCJW. Later funding from NCJW and private foundations helped support the project and enabled a follow-up study of Head Start children and their families in elementary school.

The project was designed and implemented through a partnership of NCJW Center for the Child and the Head Start community. The commitment to this joint effort was based in the belief that both practitioners and researchers have expertise and creativity that, when combined, improve the validity and utility of the results. The partnership, named the "Head Start Research Group" (HSRG), was comprised of representative Head Start staff and parents, Center for the Child research staff, and consultants from the research and the practitioner communities. The HSRG worked together throughout the project to refine the designs, constructs, and methods of the studies; to develop and/or select measures; and to implement all phases of the project.

The Participating Head Start Agencies

Two Head Start delegate agencies in New York City participated in the project. Agency One was established in 1981 with Head Start expansion money; Agency Two was one of the original Head Starts, established in 1966. Both agencies use a standard center-based model with half-day and full-day classrooms. While Agency One's two centers are within walking distance in the same community, Agency Two has one center that buses families from three widely dispersed geographic areas to a middle-class neighborhood. Agency One serves Latino families of Dominican origin (99.6%), while Agency Two's families are predominantly African American. Virtually all of the families from both agencies have incomes below the poverty line and receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits.

Based on community needs assessments, police reports, and other sources of demographic data,¹ the following information about catchment areas of two participating agencies at time of study was available.

The catchment area of Agency One is a recently immigrated Latino (mostly Dominican) community in which half the residents speak little or no English. Forty-four percent of the Dominican homes are headed by women. The high school drop out rate in the community for Dominicans is 66%. The neighborhood surrounding Agency One is reported to be among the most dangerous in the city. Related to the high homicide rate is the pervasive and violent underground drug economy. Nevertheless, the community lacks adequate police protection, with only one precinct serving the area.

Agency Two's catchment area is large and diverse in terms of ethnicity and SES, with African-American, Asian, Euro American, Middle-Eastern, Native-American, and Latino ethnic groups represented. The majority culture is English speaking (89%), Euro-American (90%), native born (88%), and with wages or salary as the source of income (81%). Educational attainment in this middle-class community is relatively high, with almost three-fourths of adults (72%) completing their schooling. The crime rate appears to be moderate, compared to statistics for the city as a whole. Within this emerging picture of a nearly homogeneous, White, middle-class borough, pockets of poverty coexist.

Families and staff at these two Head Start agencies participated in all three parts of the Head Start Parent Involvement Project.

PART I: A PARENT SURVEY: LIFE EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES AS POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Faith Lamb Parker, Chaya S. Piotrkowski, Lenore Peay, Beryl Clark, Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Susan Kessler-Sklar, & Amy J. L. Baker.

ABSTRACT

Sixty-eight mothers differing in level of Head Start involvement as judged by staff were surveyed about the occurrence of 33 life events and experiences during the Head Start year and their perceptions of these events as barriers to fuller involvement. Twenty-two of the life events were reported by at least 10% of the mothers. Eight of the life events were associated with reduced involvement, whereas two were associated with increased involvement. Mothers' expressed a need for additional job-training activities as part of their Head Start experience.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

A survey was developed to generate information about the types of life events experienced by Head Start mothers and the extent to which they perceived these life events as barriers to their involvement in Head Start. The number and types of life events experienced were also related to Head Start staff's ratings of the mothers' level of involvement compared to other mothers in the program.

The *Barriers to Head Start Parent Participation Survey* was conducted through personal interviews in June 1991. The survey explored indepth four domains of life events and experiences that represent potential barriers to mothers' participation in Head Start activities and experiences: 1) institutional -- quality and types of activities offered, appearance of physical space, perceptions of staff friendliness; 2) personal -- race and ethnicity, job training and education, health, and psychological well-being; 3) family and friends -- household size, ages of children, and supports and drains in and outside of the household; and 4) community -- neighborhood safety, accessibility of transportation, and availability of child care.

The HSRG's decision to conduct the survey was based on interest in and concern about why some parents were less involved in parental experiences and activities at these agencies. Survey items were selected by members of the HSRG based on a review of the literature and their experience with Head Start families. A summary section of the survey listed 33 life event items; mothers indicated whether they had experienced each of the 33 events and if so whether or not they perceived that event as a barrier to their involvement. The mothers also answered two open-ended questions about different ways that parents could be involved in Head Start and their ideas about how to improve the parent involvement component.

Each Head Start mother at the two agencies was classified by staff as a low, moderate, or high participator. Research staff randomly selected 72 mothers, 24 from each of the three involvement categories (low, moderate, high). Sixty-eight of the 72 (94%) invited mothers participated in the survey.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What Life Events Are Experienced by Head Start Mothers?

A mixture of personal, family, and community life events was reported by the mothers. The most frequent of these was "often feeling sad, down, depressed" during the Head Start year (47%). Furthermore, about one-quarter (27%) reported that they "lacked energy or had little interest in things." Having a major health problem also ranked among the personal factors mentioned by the mothers (21%). Parental factors ranking high on the list included having a baby or toddler at home (40%), having children with a disability or behavioral problem (29%), and not having dependable, convenient child care (21%). Factors related to maintaining a home also were prevalent in these women's lives. Mothers reported lacking heat, hot water, or electricity (34%), experiencing flood, fire, or other disaster (21%), and having no telephone (19%) during the Head Start year. That nearly half of the mothers experienced depressed feelings and one-fifth to one-quarter reported having a major health problem, a child with a disability or behavior problem, no dependable child care, or a combination of these speaks to the immense burden of living in poverty.

Several life events related to self-sufficiency (i.e., job training, education, employment) were ranked among the top 15: working, going to school, or volunteering outside Head Start (44%), having a schedule that conflicted with Head Start activities (37%), and having inflexible hours at work or school (26%). Interestingly, the only barrier mentioned that related to the Head Start agency or program itself was not being satisfied with the physical space allocated for parent involvement activities (19%).

Are These Life Events and Experiences Related to Level of Involvement?

Mothers varied greatly in the total number of events experienced, with the average number between five and six. Of primary interest to this study was the extent to which these events functioned as barriers to mothers' involvement. We addressed this question in two ways. First, we asked whether number of events was related to level of involvement. Results revealed that mothers reporting more life events and experiences were rated by staff as significantly less involved in Head Start.

We also examined whether each event alone was associated with level of involvement. These analyses focused on the 22 events that were reported by at least 10% of the mothers. Eight of these 22 life events were associated with less participation, including feeling sad, down, or depressed, having a conflicting schedule, working or going to school during the day, having a baby or toddler at home, having a child with health problems, moving during the Head Start year, and experiencing a flood, fire, or other disaster. Two demographic variables were found to be associated with less staff-judged involvement: 1) having more adults in the home and 2) being married, suggesting that activities, chores, and possibly the attitudes of others in the home may be important factors influencing mothers' level of participation in Head Start. Two life events were associated with greater involvement: feeling shy and being without heat, hot water, or electricity. The direction of these two relationships suggested that mothers may utilize Head Start as a supportive institution and as a temporary "home away from home" when necessary.

Do Mothers Perceive These Life Events as Barriers to Their Participation in Head Start?

Of the 22 life events experienced by at least 10% of the mothers, 20 were perceived as barriers to involvement by at least one mother. There was considerable variability in the percentage of mothers perceiving each of the 22 life events and experiences as barriers to their participation. The most frequently perceived barrier, *among those who indicated that the event applied to them*, was having a schedule that conflicted with Head Start activities (84%). Interestingly, although almost half of the mothers reported often feeling sad, down and even depressed, only one-third believed that those feelings hindered their participation. Thus, mothers do not perceive their depressive feelings as interfering with their ability to be involved in Head Start. A somewhat different picture emerged, however, from staff reports. Head Start staff perceived the mothers who characterized themselves as depressed as less involved. Such differences in perception of level of involvement between staff and parents should be of interest to Head Start administrators, because staff and parents must work together to address parents' needs and goals. Developing shared goals and perceptions is an important ingredient in addressing barriers to the development of an effective parent involvement program (see Part III).

How Can Parents be Involved in Head Start?

Mothers' ideas for how they could be involved in Head Start were consistent with the Head Start program performance standards (USDHHS, 1996): 1) direct involvement in decision making in program planning and operations; 2) participation in classroom and other program activities as paid employees, volunteers, or observers; 3) activities for parents that they have helped to develop; and 4) working with their children in cooperation with Head Start staff. Some mothers also mentioned activities related to other parents or staff, such as "socializing" or "meeting new parents" and having supportive relations with staff. These experiences, although not explicit in the standards, reflect the spirit that permeates Head Start for some parents and may in fact be critical to its long-term success.

How Can the Parent Involvement Component be Improved?

The suggestion most frequently made by mothers for improving Head Start parent involvement was to have more self-sufficiency related activities such as ESL, GED, and other skill-building training experiences. Anecdotal evidence (e.g., Replogle, 1995) also supports these findings. Head Start and TANF program developers and policy makers should take these data into account as they consider how Head Start parent involvement might be effectively integrated into present welfare-to-work efforts. Many current programs requiring TANF-supported parents to participate in job training and education (Family Support Act of 1988) create conflicts for parents and for staff, who are trying to recruit and engage parents required by law to be involved elsewhere. Recent thinking on this issue (Herr, Halpern & Majeske, 1995; Parker et al., 1995) has urged policymakers at both federal and state levels to coordinate with each other and to integrate Head Start's parent component with the welfare reform agenda to reduce duplication of services and to help parents build skills that could lead to economic self-sufficiency. Coordinating welfare-to-work programs with new or expanded Head Start programming in this area would enhance the value of Head Start to its communities, a goal of the program that was central to its original mandate.

SUMMARY

The results of this survey provide insight into the daily lives of Head Start mothers and suggest several avenues for enhancing staff-parent relationships and for integrating Head Start with the current welfare reform legislation. The Head Start mothers who completed this survey revealed that they experienced a variety of stressors and major life events during the Head Start year. Interestingly, mothers did not always perceive these life events to be barriers to their involvement. They did report that having a work schedule that conflicted with the Head Start schedule was a barrier to fuller participation. Mothers who reported a greater number of total life events were rated by staff as less involved compared to other mothers. The mothers also shared their ideas for improving the parent involvement component of Head Start, focusing specifically on opportunities for enhancing their self-sufficiency through ESL, GED, and other skill-building and training experiences.

PART II: THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY: THE IMPACT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT ON PARENTS AND CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Forty-three possible predictors and 27 possible outcomes of multiple types of parent involvement in Head Start were examined in a longitudinal study of 254 mothers at two northeastern urban agencies. Major findings regarding the predictors of involvement revealed that mothers who were working or going to school, or who were pregnant participated less. Important parent, child, and sibling outcomes were associated with different types of involvement. Policy implications of these findings are discussed, and recommendations made for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The present study of parent involvement was initiated because of a clear need to rigorously understand parents' participation in Head Start. It builds on previous work (Oyemade, Washington & Gullo, 1989; Parker et al., 1987; Slaughter, Lindsey, Nakagawa, & Kuehne, 1989) and extends it by: 1) using pretest measures of outcomes to control for initial differences; 2) using multiple objective measures of parent involvement; 3) assessing the impact on a wide array of outcomes; 4) employing a longitudinal design that follows the Head Start family one year after the end of the program; and 5) assessing the impact of parent involvement on an older sibling.

This project also moves the field forward by attempting to further understand what characteristics and circumstances of parents and children predict parent involvement. This study examines the effect of a wide range of predictor variables, including demographic, personal, and contextual characteristics of the parent, the Head Start child, and older siblings, on multiple types of involvement.

Parent involvement in Head Start is the major independent variable in this study. We hypothesized that more involvement would be related to better outcomes for parents and children. Building on the variety of ways parent involvement has been conceptualized (Parker et al., 1987; Slaughter et al., 1989; Valentine & Stark, 1979), two ways of conceptualizing involvement were identified for this study. First, parent involvement was conceptualized as the *amount* of parent activities and experiences in the Head Start program. Second, the HSRG identified different *types* of activities parents could participate in, based on the Head Start Performance Standards: 1) volunteering in the classroom, office, and kitchen and on field trips; 2) attending workshops on parenting, child development, and nutrition; 3) participating in policy-making committees and meetings, including such activities as class, agency-level, and personnel practices committee meetings; and 4) utilizing social services, including contacts about personal

problems; the Head Start child and/or another family member, housing, financial, or immigration issues, and community resource referrals.

Social competence is the major outcome domain for Head Start parents, Head Start children, and their older siblings (Zigler and Trickett, 1978), defined as: 1) successfully meeting society's expectations and 2) personal development and self-actualization. This study examines the impact of parent involvement in Head Start on the social competence of parents, Head Start children, and their siblings.

Parent involvement in Head Start might enhance parents' social competence by providing them with support and services to reduce life stress, by enhancing skills that promote the confidence to try new behaviors, and by facilitating parents' feelings of efficacy and control over their own lives. Because the concept of social competence is broad and multifaceted, we focused on those aspects of social competence that seemed likely to be affected by parent involvement in Head Start. Most of the outcomes were assessed at the end of the Head Start year. Those that were assessed at the end of the following year are noted as such. Specific aspects of parental social competence assessed as outcomes in this study include:

Positive parent-child relationship: parental encouragement of the child's independence, lower parental strictness and aggravation, less frequent daily parenting hassles;

Enhanced home learning environment: higher parental expectations for the child's long-term school success, parental report of teaching the child more school readiness skills, and the provision of educational learning materials in the home;

Greater involvement in the Head Start child's education in kindergarten: ratings of overall involvement in kindergarten, a parent's helping or offering to help in the classroom;

Skills and behaviors that promote socioeconomic self-sufficiency: paid employment during the year following Head Start, participation in education or job-training activities, not becoming pregnant during the year following Head Start;

Enhanced subjective well-being: feelings of mastery and control and lack of depressive symptomatology.

Children's social competence might also be enhanced through parents' involvement in Head Start. Specifically, the parent-child relationship might be affected by increased feelings of parenting competence, new understandings of child development, and improved methods of interaction between parent and child. In addition, parent involvement could enhance how parents deal with other social institutions, such as schools. Thus, parents' involvement in all aspects of Head Start might have benefits for the Head Start child as well (in addition to the direct benefits Head Start children receive from their center-based experience). Specific aspects of children's social competence assessed as outcomes in this study include:

Greater school readiness and social competence: school readiness, greater cooperativeness, and less disruptiveness at home;

Greater elementary school adaptation and social competence: teacher ratings of adaptation to the kindergarten classroom, teacher ratings of higher current and anticipated school performance, parent's report of the child's positive relationships with other family members and peers, parent's report of the child's greater ability to work and play alone.

Finally, parent involvement in Head Start might enhance the social competence of the older siblings of the Head Start child. The older siblings might benefit from potential changes in their parents' child-rearing attitudes and feelings of personal well-being as well as from changes in the home learning environment.² Specific older sibling outcomes include:

Greater social adjustment one year after Head Start: parent's report of sibling's overall social competence, sibling's community activities, relationships with family and peers, and school grades.

Therefore, the objectives of the study were: 1) to identify the "predictor" (i.e., demographic, contextual, and personal) variables associated with parents' participation in Head Start, and 2) to examine the relationship between parent participation in Head Start and positive outcomes for the parents themselves, the Head Start children, and siblings.

METHOD

Design and Data Collection Procedures

The design for the longitudinal study is correlational with pretest and posttest data collections (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Two hundred and three Agency One mothers and their families and 103 Agency Two mothers and their families responded to invitations to participate. In the fall of 1991, the mothers completed a series of measures and Head Start staff assessed the children. Data were collected on parent and child outcomes at the end of the Head Start year. One year later a telephone interview was conducted with the mothers. At the same time, data were collected from the children's teachers on their school functioning and on the mothers' involvement in the elementary schools. The attrition rate was average for research with this population.

Subjects

Two-hundred and three mothers and their Head Start children out of a possible 256 at Agency One (79%) and 103 mothers and their Head Start children out of a possible 151 at Agency Two (68%) agreed to participate and were pretested. Ninety-eight percent of the Agency One families were Dominican and 83% were born outside the United States, with Spanish as their dominant language. Agency One mothers' ages ranged from 21 to 62 years, averaging 34 years of age. Forty-two percent of the mothers did not finish high school. One hundred and thirty two of the Head Start children were four year olds with no previous Head Start experience. One school-aged sibling between the ages of 5 and 12 was selected from each Agency One family participating in the study and having a sibling within that age range balancing for age and gender. Eighty-six siblings were included. Of the 203 Agency One families, 172 have complete data sets and therefore constitute the analyzed sample.

One-hundred and fifteen Agency One families with older children entering kindergarten in September 1992 comprised the follow-up sample. Forty-four siblings were included in this follow-up.

The 103 pretested families at Agency Two were English speaking (90%) and primarily American-born and educated. Their diverse ethnic backgrounds included African American (60%), Hispanic (18%), and Euro American (18%). Mothers ranged in age from 18 to 54 (average age was 31 years). Sixty-four percent had completed high school. Fifty-seven of the Head Start children were four year olds with no previous Head Start experience. Eighty-two of the families have complete data sets and therefore constitute the analyzed sample.

Measures and Variables

The measures used to assess the major constructs of the study fall into three major categories: measures of predictor variables, measures of parent involvement, and measures of outcome variables. Table 1 summarizes the measures used and the sources of the data. The parent involvement variables are detailed below.

Four variables measuring parent involvement in Head Start were used. The first was a continuous variable of *overall involvement*³ representing the number of hours the parent was at the center during the Head Start year. This variable did not include the number of hours parents utilized social services because utilization of social services was qualitatively different from the other parent involvement activities.⁴

Two parent involvement "activity type" variables were created based on preliminary examinations of the parent involvement data: *volunteering* and *attending workshops/policy meetings*.⁵ These variables represented not just *amount* of involvement but *type* of activity as well. A fourth variable represented the number of hours parents spent *utilizing social services*.

Because the parent involvement component at each site was defined and implemented differently in response to the cultural backgrounds of the families, all data were analyzed separately by agency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Who Gets Involved in Head Start?

The associations among 43 demographic, maternal, family, and contextual factors and the four types of parent involvement were assessed. The predictors of volunteering, workshops/policy meetings, and overall involvement are presented first, followed by the predictors of utilization of social services. In addition to statistically significant associations, trends are included because they represent meaningful effect sizes (Cohen, 1977). Mothers who became more involved at Agency One include:

- *mothers who reported needing education, job training, or paid employment at the beginning of the Head Start year (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings);*
- *mothers who were not pregnant during the Head Start year (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings);*
- *mothers who were not engaged in self-sufficiency-promoting activities (education, job training, employment) during the Head Start year (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings);*
- *mothers who reported less frequent parenting hassles (overall involvement, volunteering);*
- *mothers who reported less intense parenting hassles (overall involvement, volunteering);*
- *mothers with a younger Head Start child (overall involvement);*
- *mothers whose Head Start child had experienced fewer birth difficulties (volunteering);*
- *mothers whose Head Start child experienced greater health problems (volunteering);*
- *mothers who reported that the older sibling had greater school competence (overall involvement, workshops/policy meetings); and*
- *mothers who reported greater expectations for their Head Start child's long-term school performance (workshops/policy meetings).*

At Agency Two, the following findings replicated those at Agency One:

- *mothers who were not pregnant during the Head Start year (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings);*
- *mothers who reported that the older sibling had greater school competence (overall involvement, volunteering).*

Who Utilizes Social Services?

At Agency One, results pertaining to utilization of social services included:

- *older mothers;*
- *less educated mothers;*
- *mothers who reported more self-sufficiency needs;*
- *mothers who helped their child learn more school readiness skills;*
- *mothers of Head Start children with more health problems;*
- *mothers of older Head Start children;*
- *stricter mothers;*
- *mothers who spoke more frequently with their child about school;*
- *mothers having an "older" older sibling;*
- *mothers who reported that the older sibling had poorer school performance; and*
- *mothers who reported that the older sibling had better peer and family relations.*

Based on previous research and theory, a large range of predictors were selected for inclusion in this study, many of which were related to involvement. Most noteworthy is the finding that engagement in self-sufficiency-promoting activities -- working, going to school, or job training -- was associated with less involvement in Head Start. This relationship was found as well in our *Barriers to Head Start Parent Participation Survey* (see Part I).

The total amount of variability accounted for by the predictors of involvement was modest, suggesting that the next step in understanding which factors predict parent involvement in Head Start requires the development and testing of an expanded theoretical model specifying the most important influences on parents' participation and further exploring the nature of parent involvement itself. Factors that were not analyzed in the present study but that might be included in future work are the quality of the parents' Head Start experience, the characteristics and quality of the Head Start program, the educational needs of the Head Start child, and the skills and preferences of the parents.

How Does Parent Involvement Improve the Lives of Families?

The Head Start Parent Involvement component was designed to have multiple benefits for both Head Start children and their families. To this end, parent involvement in Head Start has had two key goals: to promote parents' personal development and self-sufficiency and to promote their involvement in their children's development and school readiness. Major findings pertaining to these outcomes of parent involvement for both agencies are reported and discussed below. In addition to statistically significant associations, trends are included because they represent meaningful effect sizes (Cohen, 1977).

Parent-Child Relationship and the Home Learning Environment

- *Mothers who participated more (volunteering) were less aggravated with their children.*
- *Mothers who participated more (overall involvement, workshops/policy meetings) were less strict.*
- *Mothers who participated more (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings) tried to teach their Head Start child a greater number of school readiness skills.*
- *Mothers who participated more (volunteering) had higher parental expectations for the Head Start child's long-term school success.*
- *Mothers who participated more (volunteering) provided more educationally relevant play materials in the home.*

Greater involvement by the mothers in Head Start was associated with direct benefits for the mothers, in terms of an improved parent-child relationship. More involved parents reported more positive feelings towards their Head Start child including less aggravation and less strictness. Mothers' involvement in Head Start was also associated with their enhanced ability to provide an enriched home learning environment for their Head Start child. Mothers who participated more were more able to provide their children with the educational resources they needed to succeed in school. This included teaching their child more school readiness skills and providing more educationally relevant play materials in the home. Mothers who participated more also had higher expectations for their child's long-term success in school.

Findings pertaining to an improved parent-child relationship and home learning environment were more consistent in Agency One than in Agency Two. The smaller number of positive findings for Agency Two may result from lower levels of parent involvement overall, programmatic differences, a smaller sample size, pretest differences in the amount of stress the mothers experienced (Agency Two mothers reported more stressors and higher levels of perceived stress), and the different ethnic composition of its families. Like Head Start agencies across the country, these two agencies differed in several ways. Thus, further research is needed to understand how these factors influence the outcomes of involvement for parents and children.

Parent Involvement in Elementary School

- *Mothers who participated more (workshops/policy meetings) were more likely to help and/or offer help in their child's kindergarten classroom.*

The present study explored the impact of Head Start parent involvement on parents' involvement in public school. More attendance at workshops and policy meetings during the Head Start year was associated with mothers' helping more frequently and/or more frequently offering to help in the classroom. Overall involvement and volunteering were not related to involvement in public school, suggesting that other variables are important for understanding parents' patterns of elementary school involvement (such as parents' work obligations, parents' needs and interests, the needs of the child, the receptiveness of the school to parents' participation, and the nature of the opportunities for involvement offered by the school). Family-friendly employment policies also may play a role. Currently, parents are often limited by their employers' family leave policies. Pending federal legislation that allows parents to leave work to attend parent-teacher conferences, special class presentations, and school-wide assemblies may pave the way for more parent-school interaction.

Parental Self-Sufficiency

- *Mothers who participated more were less likely to become pregnant during the year following Head Start.*
- *Mothers who participated more were more likely to have paid employment during the year following Head Start.*

Mothers who participated more in Head Start were less likely to become pregnant and more likely to have paid employment in the year following Head Start. Thus, mothers who were more involved appeared to have more inner and external resources one year after the end of Head Start -- even after controlling for important demographic characteristics -- than mothers who participated less. The financial benefits of paid employment and the absence of the stress associated with pregnancy may benefit both children and parents, resulting in multiple payoffs for the entire family.

Parent Well-Being

Contrary to previous research (e.g., Parker et al., 1987), in the present study mothers' involvement in Head Start was not associated with increased maternal psychological well-being, particularly in a decrease in depressive symptoms or a heightened sense of personal control and mastery. Three factors may in part account for this: differences in the conceptualization and measurement of parent involvement,⁶ lower levels of participation than in 1987, and changes in the larger society negatively affecting the life circumstances of parents in the 1990s.

This third explanation is of particular importance to policymakers and is consistent with results of post hoc tests that examined the combined influences of involvement and engagement in self-sufficiency-promoting activities. Results indicated that mothers who were highly involved in Head Start and also engaged in self-sufficiency-promoting activities were more depressed than other highly involved mothers, suggesting that mothers may be overloaded and burned out when the need or wish to be involved in Head Start and to achieve self-sufficiency are simultaneous. There also was tentative post hoc evidence that children's school readiness may be adversely affected by the combination of high involvement and engagement in self-sufficiency activities. Thus, both Head Start program developers and legislators must consider how to integrate time and training requirements for low-income parents with young children, to reduce their stress and maximize their emotional well-being, while still achieving the desired goals for the family. Future research should include developing a model of the processes by which involvement and engagement in self-sufficiency promoting activities affect parents and children.

Head Start Child's Social Competence

- *Mothers who participated more (overall involvement, volunteering, workshops/policy meetings) perceived their Head Start child to be more cooperative.*
- *Mothers who participated more (overall involvement, workshops/policy meetings) reported their child to get along better with family and friends one year after Head Start.*

Greater cooperativeness at home was reported by mothers who volunteered more, attended more workshops and policy meetings, or participated more overall. In addition, one year after Head Start, mothers reported that their Head Start child got along better with family and friends. Thus, in addition to the already established direct benefits of Head Start for children (McKey et al., 1985; USDHHS, 1996), this study suggests potential indirect benefits for children of their mothers' involvement in Head Start, e.g., better interpersonal relationships. The findings are encouraging for several reasons. First, these data suggest that the benefits of Head Start extend to settings other than the Head Start center. Second, they suggest that the benefits of Head Start extend to child outcomes other than cognitive performance. Third, benefits of parents' involvement were found one year after the end of the program, suggesting that the effects of parent involvement extend beyond the end of the program.

We also found tentative evidence that the Head Start child's school readiness was affected by the combination of involvement and engagement in self-sufficiency-promoting activities. Children of highly involved mothers who also worked, went to school, or were in job training tended to have lower school readiness than children of highly involved mothers who were not engaged in self-sufficiency-promoting activities. Together with our findings on maternal depression, these findings suggest that total amount of parental activity may affect parents, and through the parents, their children.

Sibling's Social Competence

- *Mothers who participated more (volunteering) reported that the Head Start child's older sibling became more socially competent.*

The present study was the first to gather data exploring the impact of parent involvement on the Head Start child's older sibling. Even with a small sample, the results suggest that at least one type of parent involvement -- volunteering -- has a positive impact on the sibling's overall social competence. This study may have underestimated the full impact of involvement on siblings because the sample size was small and a full range of outcomes was not assessed.

Different Types of Involvement

The present study also explored the differential impacts of the two types of parent involvement -- volunteering and attending workshops/policy meetings -- each of which contained different content, required different parental behaviors and interactions with others; and had different goals. Examination of the pattern of correlations revealed tentative evidence of differences in the impact of volunteering and workshops/policy meetings. Volunteering in the classroom was associated with greater help offered to the child in learning school readiness skills, whereas involvement in workshops/policy meetings was more often associated with more positive relationships of the Head Start child with the mother, other family members, and peers. The former finding suggests that volunteering provides parents with information about their child's skills and capabilities as well as with instructional techniques and knowledge of the types of skills that preschool children should be mastering. The impact of workshops/policy meetings on parenting attitudes is consistent with the parenting focus of many of the workshops.

Results also revealed that overall involvement appeared to account for more of the statistically significant relationships with outcomes than did either of the two activity types. This may be because there was more range and variability in overall involvement, resulting in greater power to detect statistically significant relationships. The nature of Head Start record keeping, which necessitated combining somewhat different activities,⁷ might have masked the unique effects of different types of involvement.

The next step in understanding the benefits of specific parent involvement activities requires the development of a theoretical model relating specific activities to specific outcomes. Testing such a model would require that Head Start staff and researchers work together to develop a record-keeping system that would more fully detail individual parent involvement activities. The results of such efforts could provide information to policymakers and educators about how to maximize the effectiveness of the parent component of the Head Start experience.

How Does Parental Utilization of Social Services Improve the Lives of Families?

Greater utilization of social services was associated with one outcome: mothers reporting that the Head Start child works and plays alone better than other children at one-year follow-up. The benefits of social services may be underestimated in the present study for several reasons:

- mothers' level of utilization of social services was generally low, possibly due to high case loads and staff overload;
- mothers who used social services more had more life problems that might not have been susceptible to short-term change;

- the present study did not take into account the content of parents' social services contacts or the nature of the relationship between the family service worker and the parent, dimensions that may be related to outcomes.

The quality of this relationship may be an important mediator of the benefits of social services contacts and should, therefore, be considered in future research on the impact of Head Start social services.

Although a major goal of the social services component is to aid in identifying opportunities for increasing self-sufficiency, our data did not reveal an association between utilization of social services and parents' self-sufficiency activities during the year following Head Start. (Overall involvement and volunteering, however, did show relationships with aspects of self-sufficiency.) Again, the families who utilized social services more may have had more life problems requiring a greater time period or more intervention for improvement to be documented. Future research could examine the impact of social services on promoting behaviors that are steps on the ladder toward self-sufficiency (such as following through on opportunities, keeping appointments for interviews, being on time when volunteering in the classroom) and that might be more susceptible to change (Herr et al., 1995; Parker et al., 1995). An evaluation of the full potential of the social services component would require an examination of the issues addressed in social services contacts, the quality of parent-staff relationships, and the ratio of social service staff to parent case load.

Summary

The present study provides evidence of some of the ways in which the parent involvement component of Head Start has achieved its goals. Positive effects of involvement were found with respect to the parent-child relationship, the home learning environment, parents' involvement in their children's kindergarten experience, and parental self-sufficiency. Positive effects of involvement on parental well-being were not found in this study. Aspects of the Head Start child's and sibling's social competence were found to be related to parent involvement. Results showing a differential impact of different types of involvement on outcomes provide new avenues for thinking about the relationship between specific parent involvement activities and specific outcomes.

FULFILLING THE MISSION OF HEAD START AS A TWO-GENERATION PROGRAM

How Can the Effectiveness of Head Start Parent Involvement be Enhanced?

Three related challenges for Head Start can be better addressed with information gained from the present study:

- How to customize services to meet the individual needs of families.
- How to make it easier for parents to participate in and benefit from involvement in Head Start.
- How to reconcile the new welfare-to-work demands on parents' time with Head Start's present requirements for parents' participation.

Embedded in these challenges are five important questions regarding the conceptualization and measurement of parent involvement that suggest avenues by which future research and policy can help shape an even more effective parent involvement program. These questions are especially timely in light of the current challenge of defining an effective Head Start parent involvement component for the 21st century within the context of current economic and political realities such as welfare reform (Parker et al., 1995).

How should parent involvement be measured?

The present study measured parent involvement as the number of hours of participation. This metric, while revealing some positive associations with outcomes, may be underestimating the full impact of Head Start. An important next step would entail examining the quality of the parent involvement process, including staff-parent relationships, the parents' experience of their involvement, and the skills and preferences that parents bring to their experience.⁸

Should measures of involvement include at-home behaviors?

Activities not currently taken into account in measuring parent involvement in Head Start are those initiated by Head Start staff to be carried out at home (such as phoning other parents to schedule a meeting, or engaging in a teacher-initiated learning activity with the Head Start child at home). This type of participation could not be assessed in the present study because records of parents' participation in these types of activities are not routinely kept by these (and most) Head Start agencies. An important next step would be to measure and assess the impact of at-home parent involvement on parents and children.

Is there a minimum threshold of involvement?

In the present study, overall involvement at Agency One was substantially lower than in the previous study at the same agency (Parker et al., 1987). The high-involved mothers in this study were at a comparable level of involvement to those mothers who were low involved in the earlier study. In the earlier study, the medium- and high-involved mothers benefitted but not the low-involved mothers. As levels of involvement appear to vary across time and context, an important next step in parent involvement research could entail identifying the minimum amount of participation in Head Start -- in conjunction with participation in other activities -- that leads to positive outcomes for parents.

Future research should also continue to systematically identify the barriers to fuller involvement in order to increase the likelihood that parents can be involved in Head Start.

One possible cause of lower involvement is the present harsher economic climate in which a greater percentage of mothers (33% in the current sample versus 18% in the 1987 sample) are engaged in self-sufficiency-promoting activities (working, attending school, job training) outside the Head Start center. Our data showed that engagement in self-sufficiency-promoting activities is associated with a decrease in Head Start participation. Thus, these activities compete with traditional Head Start activities for parents' limited time and resources. Lower participation may also be due to insufficient funds to include all parents in workshops and unrealistically high parent involvement/social services staff case loads.

How does involvement in Head Start combine with parents' self-sufficiency-promoting activities to affect outcomes?

Although a causal relationship cannot be established from our data, the present study found an association between working, going to school, or being in job training and reduced participation in Head Start. Our post hoc analyses suggested that the processes leading to positive outcomes may be different for Head Start parents who are also working, going to school, or in job training. Parents engaged in these activities in addition to their high Head Start involvement may become overloaded and stressed, resulting in negative outcomes for parents and children. This issue addresses the related challenge of how to reconcile participation in Head Start with the new welfare-to-work laws, which place further demands on parents' time, and how to make it easier for busy parents to participate in Head Start.

What is the relationship of Head Start to welfare-to-work programs that promote self-sufficiency?

Head Start parents will be increasing their engagement in self-sufficiency-promoting activities outside Head Start through mandatory participation in the new welfare-to-work programs. Both Head Start and welfare-to-work programs share the goal of helping parents engage in job training or education leading to paid employment. Parker et al., (1995) suggest that helping parents become self-sufficient is a component of the Head Start program that has not attained maximum effectiveness because of insufficient funds and staff training. Herr and Halpern (1991) propose that creating a partnership between Head Start and welfare-to-work programs would provide *both* with additional resources that would help each fulfill its objective. Since Head Start is perceived by parents as a friendly, supportive environment that provides sound early childhood education and out-of-home care, parents might be amenable to participating in self-sufficiency activities on site. In fact, parents who participated in our Barriers Survey (see Part I) expressed a desire for these activities at their Head Start center. By receiving such services on-site, parents' travel time and expenses may be reduced, leaving them with more time to learn the skills needed to attain self-sufficiency. The partnership might also be cost effective by reducing some duplication of services. An additional benefit could be the inclusion of these activities as in-kind services for the Head Start program.

In summary, helping parents receive maximum benefit from Head Start and attain self-sufficiency in part depends on understanding how all of the activities parents are involved

in, both in and out of Head Start, together affect parents and families. Research can shed light on this process by identifying and providing a deeper understanding of all of the major forces impinging on the family.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research would add substantively to the ability to document and understand the ways in which parent involvement in Head Start has a positive impact on the lives of Head Start parents and their families. Such information is vital as Head Start moves into the 21st century:

- Identify groups of parents who differ on background characteristics or on their combination of parent involvement experiences (e.g., high in workshops/policy meetings but low in volunteering) who may have different outcomes.
- Examine possible interaction effects between involvement and variables other than self-sufficiency. For example, involvement may have a greater positive impact on parental aggravation for less strict parents than for stricter parents.
- Examine the content and quality of parents' social services contacts and relate these to improved outcomes.
- Identify additional predictors of involvement related to the characteristics of Head Start programs, neighborhoods and communities.
- Continue to develop a process model in which specific involvement activities are linked to specific types of outcomes.
- Examine the effects of involvement on additional outcomes that would best capture the benefits of the Head Start experience (e.g., child health outcomes).
- Examine outcome data from a cultural perspective to better understand culturally based beliefs, perceptions, and responses with regard to the major outcome constructs.

Programmatic and Policy Recommendations

The following is a summary of the policy and programmatic recommendations:

- Reexamine the needs and skills of parents and how Head Start can address these through the types of involvement activities offered.
- Tailor programs to meet parents' specific goals, guided by a model of which aspects of parent involvement have which outcomes.

- Redefine Head Start parent involvement to include activities initiated by the Head Start center to be carried out by the parent at home (e.g., reading to the Head Start child, volunteering on a Head Start fund-raising activity).
- Reduce the case loads of social services staff to maximize their ability to build strong partnerships with parents and address parents' individual needs so that they can attain their goals.
- Add services to decrease barriers to fuller participation in Head Start (e.g., wrap-around child care, full-day program for Head Start child).
- Examine the feasibility of instituting state-level coordination between Head Start agencies and welfare-to-work programs so that Head Start agencies can offer on-site job training and educational activities leading to paid employment as part of their parent involvement component.

PART III: THE INTERVENTION: STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE STAFF'S WORK WITH PARENTS: A PROCESS OF SELF-AWARENESS, LEARNING, AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

A social services/parent involvement staff workshop and ongoing peer group were developed to train staff to work with hard-to-engage Head Start mothers. Qualitative evaluations suggested that staff gained insight into their own and mothers' attitudes, feelings, and values. Staff also reported that they developed increased empathy for mothers and increased ability to interact productively with them to reduce barriers to participation and to customize activities based on mothers' needs, strengths, and resources.

INTRODUCTION

There is a longstanding tradition in Head Start of hiring Head Start parents for staff positions. Thus, former Head Start parents function as social services/parent involvement staff. These staff members reside in the community served by the Head Start program, have paraprofessional status, and, consequently, receive low wages. Therefore, Head Start staff frequently experience life circumstances similar to those of the Head Start parents they serve and are often vulnerable to many of the same stressors. In order to work more effectively with parents, staff need support in developing and maximizing their personal and professional skills, including their emotional strength, ingenuity, and creativity. If staff lack an in-depth understanding of their own circumstances, including their conscious and unconscious values and attitudes, they will have fewer personal and professional resources with which to work effectively with parents.

Unfortunately, there are a limited number of training opportunities for social services/parent involvement staff that focus on staff support and development.⁹ Therefore, the Parent Involvement Project's HSRG developed and implemented a staff-focused intervention to help meet this need.

DEVELOPING THE INTERVENTION

In order to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for addressing staff issues, the HSRG took several steps: 1) reviewing research on issues relevant to barriers to parents' participation in their children's school experience (the effects of depressive symptoms and demoralization on parents and children, relationship-building with a focus on partnerships when working with parents, and cultural traditions and values that may affect parent

involvement in Head Start and public school settings); 2) surveying Head Start mothers (see Part I) to assess potential barriers to their participation in Head Start; and 3) conducting focus groups with social services staff about working with parents, considering their personal feelings, professional needs, and possible solutions for enhancing parents' participation in the program.

At the end of this process, the HSRG reached consensus that the major thrust of the intervention would be on staff attitudes toward and feelings about their work with parents and on social services/parent involvement staff's ongoing relationship with parents. To that end, two staff development and training strategies were developed: 1) a two-day workshop for all Head Start staff; and 2) an ongoing peer group for social services/parent involvement staff. The strategies were developed to help staff better understand how to work more effectively with parents, especially those whom they perceived to be particularly hard to engage¹⁰ in the Head Start experience. They were designed to provide staff with: 1) a deeper understanding of their and parents' strengths, needs, attitudes, values, and goals; 2) key psychosocial concepts related to child and family development; 3) more appropriate opportunities for enhancing parents' participation; 4) peer support; 5) problem-solving strategies; and 6) oral and written skill-building opportunities. The overarching aim was to empower both staff and parents.

The two-day workshop consisted of a series of nine interactive exercises that explored staff perceptions of and attitudes toward Head Start parents, especially those whom they felt were hard to engage, uncovered hidden prejudices; addressed staffs' and parents' stressors and supports and how they related to parent involvement; and linked parent involvement to empowerment. The workshop was conducted separately at each agency. All staff (N=82) participated, including consultants and maintenance personnel.

The peer group for social services/parent involvement staff was developed to provide staff with an opportunity to meet regularly with peers to further develop their understanding and skills in their work with a subset of hard-to-engage parents. The Peer Group included a facilitator who was knowledgeable in family issues, child development, and group process, and who also had experience in Head Start.

The primary purposes of the peer group were to: 1) provide staff with a supportive professional and emotional environment; 2) help them build trusting partnerships with parents to address their needs and goals and enhance their participation; 3) address barriers to service delivery and parent involvement; and 4) focus on skill building and professional empowerment. The peer group functioned as a means for staff to work with a case load of hard-to-engage parents and to develop individual and group strategies with parents to enhance their participation in Head Start. Throughout the sessions, the concepts and lessons learned from the workshop were integrated into the discussions and plans developed by staff.

SELECTED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Two-Day Workshop

Staff responses during the workshop exercises were tallied and qualitatively assessed. It was found that as they moved through the exercises, there was a developmental progression in their understanding of themselves, the Head Start parents, and their role in working with parents. This progression was noted in their understanding of: 1) the complexities of parent involvement; 2) key psychosocial concepts such as the "life load;" 3) how to apply these concepts to their work with Head Start parents; and 4) the link between parent involvement and empowerment.

For example, in an early exercise staff revealed a negative attitude toward parents who were less involved, perceiving them to be apathetic about their children's growth and development. In later exercises, however, staff indicated a more complex understanding of the factors in parents' lives that competed or interfered with their involvement. Discussions included an acknowledgement that Head Start itself may function as an additional burden for parents, especially if they are pressured to become involved without staff taking into account their needs and goals, such as a desire for job training or further education. This particular exercise focused on the importance of working with parents to determine the most appropriate resources and activities for them.

The developmental progression of staffs' understanding of themselves, Head Start parents, and their role in working with parents was also reflected in their evaluation of the effectiveness of the workshop. First, staff expressed almost unanimous agreement that the workshop had been beneficial to them and that they felt energized by the experience. Specifically, they appreciated the concreteness of the experiential exercises, which enabled them to apply what they learned to their ongoing work with parents. Second, they felt that after participating in the workshop they had a common language and understanding that could be used to discuss various issues pertaining to their work with parents. Third, they mentioned that they had a better understanding of their role vis-à-vis parents and would be better able to work cooperatively with other Head Start staff. Lastly, social services/parent involvement staff expressed eagerness to grapple with issues faced by parents that they had previously avoided, specifically some of the issues and barriers of the hard-to-engage parents. They felt more equipped to do their job. Nonetheless, supervisory staff noted that some staff were still skeptical about how they were going to apply what they learned to their targeted hard-to-engage parents. At the same time, the supervisors noted that staff's general level of willingness seemed improved.

The Peer Group

An analysis of the forms filled out by peer group staff on their targeted families as well as the notes taken during each peer group provided both process and outcome information about the effectiveness of the peer group for staff and parents. In these evaluations, several organizational and community barriers to service delivery were revealed. Organizational barriers included insufficient time to complete required paperwork, need for more effective training, too high a caseload, staff turnover, low salaries, and poor working conditions (i.e., violent neighborhoods). Community barriers included a lack of effective community resources. Staff felt that community resources had diminished and that waiting lists for those that remained were so long that referrals became meaningless. Furthermore, when referrals were possible, the bureaucratic red tape of many community agencies, as well as language and cultural barriers, a lack of trust on the parents' part, and/or the geographic distance of the service from the parents' home, made it difficult for parents to stick with the process long enough to receive the appropriate services. Staff felt that these barriers impaired their sense of efficacy in successfully doing their job.

Some of the hard-to-engage mothers who were selected as the focus of staff's work in the peer group shared similar life events and experiences that appeared to be interfering with their involvement, such as working, going to school, having a toddler in the home, low self-esteem, or problematic family relationships. In these instances, staff brainstormed with mothers outside of the peer group and worked with other staff in the peer group to develop approaches that could be implemented with small groups of mothers to address their needs and goals for enhanced involvement. While the approaches were originally developed specifically for these mothers, many of them are appropriate for all Head Start families.¹¹

In addition to group approaches, staff also worked closely with individual mothers to address their needs and goals by building on existing strengths and resources. In developing trusting relationships with parents, staff put into practice the concepts learned in the workshop, in particular the concepts of life events and experiences, barriers, relationship building, and empowerment. As they experienced firsthand the issues discussed in the workshop, they became more empathic to and less judgmental of the families, and therefore more effective in their work with them. In fact, staff felt strongly that the peer group substantially improved their effectiveness in working with the families targeted as hard to engage. For example, by the end of the Head Start year, of the 48 mothers targeted for case management, 42 were considered by staff to be "more engaged" in the parent involvement process. Those who were not perceived as improving were facing extreme life situations that the peer group felt were beyond Head Start's scope.

Through the peer group process, staff acquired a deeper understanding of Head Start parents and learned to successfully and effectively develop individualized and group-level plans to engage mothers. Through intensive discussions generated by their experiences in the workshop, staff were able to continue their exploration of their own beliefs, attitudes, and values about Head Start parents and developed more empathetic, respectful approaches toward building parent-staff partnerships. They gained confidence in themselves and their ability to foster change in parents' lives. Moreover, they learned how

to tailor their approaches to the specific life situation of each parent. They were particularly surprised and touched that seemingly inconsequential gestures turned out to be the delicate and creative overtures that were exactly what hard-to-engage mothers needed in order to establish confidence and trust in the Head Start staff and begin the steps toward involvement and empowerment. In their ongoing work in the peer group, the staff also learned how important their work is for parents.

SUMMARY

The workshops and peer group intervention enhanced staff both personally and professionally and helped hard-to-engage mothers move into the Head Start parent involvement process. In doing so, it served to accomplish the overall goals that were set by the Head Start Research Group. Specifically, the outcomes for staff that were met included: 1) an increase in self-awareness, and in understanding of and empathy for Head Start parents; 2) the ability to approach barriers to parental participation in positive ways, taking into account the life experiences, strengths, and needs of parents; 3) closer peer relationships that served supportive and empowering functions; and 4) an increase in written and oral communication skills. Staff perceived benefits to the targeted hard-to-engage mothers as: 1) an increase in their trust and confidence that Head Start was an important resource and support for them; 2) closer relationships with social services/parent involvement staff that fostered their personal and/or professional development; and 3) an enhancement of their parental participation in Head Start.

NOTES

1. The information for the community profile comes from the following sources: 1) NYC Department of Health, 1988; 1990 US Census; NYC Housing and Vacancy Survey; 1992 NYPD Annual Statistical Report; NYPD Annual Statistical Reports, 1989-1990; cited in Garfield & Abramson, 1994. 2) Ft. George Community Enrichment Center, inc., Head Start Community Needs Assessment, prepared by Floyd D. Page, 1/31/94.
2. Older siblings of Head Start children between the ages of 5 and 12 were chosen for this study because it was thought that this group might be affected, as a result of parents' participation, by potential changes in their parents' child-rearing attitudes and feelings of personal well-being as well as potential changes in the family's home learning environment. The 12-year-old cutoff age was selected because of the probability of peer-dominated effects in the teenage years.
3. For post hoc analyses, a categorical *overall involvement* variable was also created to test for nonlinear relationships between involvement and the outcomes. The variable was constructed by dividing the full pretest sample of parents at each agency into three groups -- lowest third, middle third, and highest third -- based on total number of hours spent in parent activities and experiences.
4. Utilization of social services was conceptualized to be qualitatively different from the other three involvement variables. Because parents who utilized social services more tended to have more problems than the average Head Start parent, we hypothesized that the pattern of relationships between this type of involvement and outcomes might be different than that of other types of involvement and outcomes. Data analyses supported these notions. Utilization of social services was not correlated with the other three types of involvement, nor related to the same outcomes.
5. Preliminary analyses of our data indicated that attendance at workshops and participation in policy-making activities needed to be combined because the variability within each of these categories was not sufficient to warrant separate analysis. An additional reason for combining them was that they are theoretically linked as "group-oriented" parent experiences, while volunteering represents an "individual-oriented" parent experience (Herr & Halpern, 1991).
6. In the 1987 study, volunteering, attendance at workshops and policy meetings, and social services contacts all were correlated, and were included in one measure of involvement. In the present study, social service contacts are not correlated with the other types of involvement and are not included in the measure of overall involvement.
7. For example, volunteering included classroom, office, and kitchen activities as well as assistance on trips -- activities that probably offer parents different skill benefits and experiences.
8. We are currently conducting analyses that may shed light on one of the more complex dimensions of parent involvement by examining the skill benefit derived from different types of participation and the level of initiative required to participate in different parent involvement activities.
9. See ACYF Final Report, Part III, Appendix C, for a summary of current professional development and training opportunities for staff in parent involvement.

10. The term *hard to engage* was chosen by members of the HSRG to describe those parents who seemed to be participating the least in parent activities and experiences offered by the Head Start program. The HSRG preferred that term over *low participating* which to them had a more negative connotation. In addition, they liked the term *hard to engage* because to them it implied a wider range of possible reasons (both positive and negative) behind parents' lack of participation. For example, a parent might be hard to engage because she was in school full-time or in a job-training program, or she might be hard to engage because she felt demoralized and alienated from others or was abusing alcohol. The reasons could also be connected to cultural issues of parents who were new to this country. Therefore, the term *hard to engage* was chosen for parents who did not seem to be engaged in the Head Start experience for themselves (although they might be bringing their children every day) and did not seem to be taking advantage of the parent-related opportunities that were being offered by the Head Start program.
11. See Part III of the final report to ACYF of the Head Start Parent Involvement Project (Parker, et al., 1996).

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Table 1
PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN HEAD START PROJECT
• MEASURES •

| VARIABLES | ABOUT | COMPLETED BY | HOW VARIABLE USED IN STUDY | MEASURE |
|---|------------------|----------------|----------------------------|---|
| No. of yrs. mother in U.S. | Parent | Parent | Predictor | About You and Your Family (AI) <i>(NCJW Center for the Child, 1992)</i> |
| Acculturation factors | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Highest grade mother completed | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Neighborhood safeties | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Pregnancy | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Mother's engagement in self-sufficiency promoting activities during Head Start year | Parent | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Family Profile (INTKEFA) <i>(NCJW Center for the Child, 1992)</i> |
| No. of years child has been in Head Start | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | |
| Mother's age | Parent | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| No. of years parent in Head Start | Parent | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| Mother's need for greater economic self-sufficiency | Parent | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| Mother's ethnicity | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child's age | Head Start Child | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| Child's gender | Head Start Child | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| No. of other children in the home | Family | Research Staff | Predictor | |
| Mother's social support | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Mother's no. of life changing events or experiences in prior year | Parent | Parent | Predictor | Norbeck Life Events Scale (NLES) <i>(Norbeck, 1984)</i> |
| Mother's depression | Parent | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Center for EP - Studies in depression (CES-D); <i>(Radloff, 1977)</i> |
| Mother's personal control | Parent | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Pearlin & Schooler - Mastery Scale (MAST); <i>(Pearlin & Schooler, 1978)</i> |

Table 1: Measures, p.1

| VARIABLES | ABOUT | COMPLETED BY | HOW VARIABLE USED IN STUDY | MEASURE |
|---|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Mother's self-esteem | Parent | Parent | Predictor | Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SE) (<i>Rosenberg, 1987</i>) |
| Frequency of parenting hassles | Parent | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Parenting Daily Hassles (PDH) (<i>Crnic & Greenberg, 1990</i>) |
| Intensity of parenting hassles | Parent | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child's help with household tasks | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | Neis Part B (NEIS); (<i>ABT Corporation</i>) |
| No. of play materials in home | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| No. of school-readiness skills parent has helped child learn | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Parent & child's frequency talking about school | Parenting | Parent | Predictor | |
| Parent's expectation for child's school performance | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Parental attitudes towards child's autonomous behavior | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Parental Attitudes Re: Child-Rearing Questionnaire (PACR) (<i>Easterbrook & Goldberg, 1984</i>) |
| Parental attitudes towards the expression of affection | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Parental attitudes towards discipline and self control | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Parental feelings of being annoyed or upset by their child's behavior | Parenting | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Child's birth difficulties | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child's age | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | ESI Parent Questionnaire (ESI.PQ) (<i>Teachers College Press, 1983</i>) |
| Child's gender | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child not achieving developmental milestones | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child's health-related problems since birth | Head Start Child | Parent | Predictor | |
| Child's school readiness | Head Start Child | Teacher | Outcome | |
| Child's cooperativeness at home | Head Start Child | Parent | Outcome | Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (ASBIP); (<i>Hogan, Scott, Bauer</i>) |
| Child's disruptiveness at home | Head Start Child | Parent | Outcome | |
| Overall social competence | Sibling | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (<i>Achenbach, 1978</i>) |
| Community involvement | Sibling | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Family & peer relations | Sibling | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Academic performance | Sibling | Parent | Predictor & Outcome | |
| Grade level | Sibling | Parent | Outcome | |

| VARIABLES | ABOUT | COMPLETED BY | HOW VARIABLE USED IN STUDY | MEASURE |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------------------------|--|
| Older sibling's age | Sibling | Parent | Predictor | Sibling Version of ESI Parent Questionnaire (SQ) (Meisels, Wiske & Tivnan, 1984) |
| Older sibling's gender | Sibling | Parent | Predictor | |
| Older sibling's birth problems | Sibling | Parent | Predictor | |
| Older sibling's health-related problems | Sibling | Parent | Predictor | |
| Mother's employment during year following Head Start | Parent | Parent | Outcome | Telephone Interview Protocol (TIP) (Parker, Kessler-Sklar, Peay, Clark, Piotrkowski & Baker, 1993) |
| Mother's pregnancy during year following Head Start | Parent | Parent | Outcome | |
| Mother's education and job training during year following Head Start | Parent | Parent | Outcome | |
| Child's ability to work and play alone | Head Start Child | Parent | Outcome | |
| Child's ability to get along with others | Head Start Child | Parent | Outcome | |
| Parents' overall involvement in child's kindergarten experience | Parent | Teacher | Outcome | Parent Involvement in School - Teacher Ratings (Baker, 1993) |
| Parents' helping in the classroom | Parent | Teacher | Outcome | |
| Child's motivation and interest in learning | Head Start Child | Teacher | Outcome | Child Classroom Adaptation Inventory (Halpern, Baker & Piotrkowski, 1993) |
| Child's present and anticipated future performance ratings | Head Start Child | Teacher | Outcome | |
| Frequency and type of parent involvement | Parent | Research staff | Parent's Involvement | Parent Involvement Information Protocol (PIIP) (NCJW Center for the Child, 1992) |

Table 1: Measures, p.3

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