

# Parents benefit from Head Start program, pattern especially strong in African-Americans

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Head Start programs may help low-income parents improve their educational status, according to a new study by Northwestern University researchers.

The study is one of the first to examine whether a child's participation in the federal program benefits mothers and fathers – in particular parents' educational attainment and employment.

"Studies on [early childhood education](#) programs have historically focused on child outcomes," said study lead author Terri Sabol, an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Social policy at Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy and expert in research, practice and policy in early childhood education. "We asked whether there could be beneficial effects for the parents."

Head Start is the oldest and largest federally funded preschool program in the U.S. From its inception, the program was designed to support both [children](#) and parents facing economic hardship. It currently serves more than one million children below the poverty line, just under half of all eligible children, and it receives almost \$8 billion in annual funding.

In 1998, Congress mandated an evaluation of Head Start, called the Head Start Impact Study, a [randomized trial](#) of over 4,000 three- and four-year-old children newly entering the Head Start program. Findings

from that study indicate that Head Start had less of an impact on children's academic and social development than expected. Although participating in Head Start led to short-term improvements for children, these began fading by kindergarten, continuing through the third grade.

"In our study, we asked whether there could be separate story for parents," said Sabol, an expert in early childhood policy. "Head Start may provide the ideal place to promote parents' education via a network of parents and staff, in addition to information and referrals to postsecondary educational opportunities." Head Start also may help parents manage their work-school-family balance by providing an affordable, safe place to send their children while they go to work or school.

The researchers used the gold standard data from the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), a randomized trial, to examine the effect of Head Start on parent outcomes rather than on child outcomes.

The study found that parents of 3-year-olds in Head Start had steeper increases in educational attainment, but not their employment by the time their children turned 6 years old, compared to the parents in the control group, whose children were not assigned to Head Start. The pattern was especially strong for parents who were African American and for parents who had at least some college experience but no degree.

"Parents who had some college but no degree were particularly likely to increase their own education due to their children's participation in Head Start. This suggests that Head Start is particularly helping families who have the motivation to improve their education but need extra support," said Sabol.

The researchers did not find effects among parents whose children entered at age 4. This may be due to the fact that the 3-year-olds had the

opportunity to stay in the program for two years, rather than one. It's also possible that the parents who enrolled 3-year-olds were different from those who enrolled them at age 4. The children who started at age 3 had parents with higher levels of education at baseline.

The study, "The Influence of Low-Income Children's Participation in Head Start on Their Parents' Education and Employment" was published in the current issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

Sabol coauthored the study with P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, the Frances Willard Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern. Chase-Lansdale, the Associate Provost for Faculty at Northwestern, is one of the nation's leading researchers on two-generation educational interventions for young parents and children. Her research is currently studying programs that provide human capital services to parents and child simultaneously to improve parent and child well-being

"Parents with young children enrolled in Head Start are very motivated to expand their children's life chances. This study illustrates great potential for Head Start programs to be a platform for expanding parents' own educational opportunities," said Chase-Lansdale.

The majority of research on Head Start focuses solely on children's cognitive and social outcomes rather than on the impacts on parents. This study finds that Head Start leads to improved parent [educational attainment](#) by the time children are in kindergarten.

"We hypothesize an interconnection between parents' and children's learning. Parents who see their child doing well might be inspired to improve their own education and employment," she said.

"This is a very positive story for Head Start," said Sabol. "The program

may not only affect children, but [parents](#) as well."

**More information:** *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*,  
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10... 2/pam.21799/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.21799/abstract)

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