

Academic gains, improved teacher relationships found among high risk kids in Head Start

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A new study by Oregon State University researchers finds that Head Start can make a positive impact in the lives of some of its highest risk children, both academically and behaviorally.

Published in the current issue of the [Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology](#), the study sheds light on how Head Start has helped [children](#) living in non-parental care, or living with someone who is not a parent or step-parent by biology or adoption.

"These children tend to have unstable home lives, sometimes transitioning between different relatives, living with their [grandma](#) one month, and later with an aunt or other family member," said lead author Shannon Lipscomb, an assistant professor of human development and family sciences at OSU-Cascades.

"These are kids who face heightened [risk factors](#) even beyond those of other children living in poverty. They are more similar to what we find in kids in [child welfare](#). They have a lot of challenges in their lives, and the stresses of that can cause behavioral and development issues."

The researchers obtained data from the Head Start Impact Study, a nationally [representative sample](#) of Head Start programs and families commissioned by the federal government. Head Start provides comprehensive early child development services to low-income children

and their families. That original study, published in 2010, looked at the general population of children attending Head Start programs, but did not examine impacts for children living in non-parental care.

"Children in non-parental care showed more problems with academics, behavior, and a wide variety of risk factors at the beginning of the study," Lipscomb said. "In addition, Head Start is designed as a wrap-around program, which links child, teacher, and parent. So we wanted to know if this model even works for kids who don't have a traditional family, and may have different caregivers at any given time."

The researchers found that Head Start appears to be as beneficial for this group of children as it is for the general population of children living in poverty who attend the program. Analyzing the data on 253 children in non-parental care, they found the program had short-term positive impacts on school readiness, particularly in regards to early academic skills, positive teacher-child relationships, and a reduction in behavior problems.

"Our findings show Head Start is at least as effective for this very high risk group as prior studies have shown that it is for other children," Lipscomb said. "The impact we saw was modest, not huge, but statistically significant. We think the positive impact on child-teacher relationships is especially important."

Lipscomb said this was a new finding; prior analysis of Head Start's impacts on children who live with their parents haven't found this effect.

Lipscomb is an expert on early childhood development, with an emphasis on preschool and early child care experiences, and how those early social experiences help kids prepare for success in life. Her work focuses on children from at-risk backgrounds.

"Children in non-parental care tend to struggle with socio-emotional development, likely due to the risk factors they experience such as transitioning between homes, special needs, and behavioral problems," she said. "Perhaps as a result of [Head Start](#)'s whole-child focus and standards for teacher qualifications, their teachers may be more effective than caregivers in other types of programs in establishing positive relationships with children who have high needs."

More information: hdl.handle.net/1957/36405

Provided by Oregon State University

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