Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

The federal government’s historical commitment to sponsor and encourage research and evaluations in the HS and EHS programs has generated a large corpus of research on HS and EHS. This research reveals that HS and EHS programs provide educational, economic, health, and law enforcement benefits.

Educational Benefits
Substantial research finds that HS and EHS programs provide educational benefits. National Family and Child Experiences Survey data shows that HS graduates, by the spring of their kindergarten year, were essentially at national norms in early reading and early writing and were close to meeting national norms in early math and vocabulary knowledge. By the spring of their kindergarten year, HS graduates’ reading assessment scores reached national norms, and their general knowledge assessment scores were close to national norms.

The HS Impact Study reveals small to moderate statistically significant positive impacts for 3- and 4-year-old children enrolled in HS on pre-reading, pre-writing, vocabulary, and parent reports of children’s literacy skills. This study found that a higher proportion of HS parents read to their children more frequently than those parents of children who were not enrolled in HS. Reliable studies have found that HS children experience increased achievement test scores and that HS children experience favorable long-term effects on grade retention, special education, and graduation rates.

Likewise, findings from the EHS Impact Study show that EHS children on average had a higher cognitive development score than their control group. EHS children at age 3 had larger vocabularies than the control group children had. EHS children demonstrated a higher level of social-emotional development than their control group.

Economic Benefits
Research shows that HS is a wise investment for society. The preliminary results of a randomly selected longitudinal study of more than 600 HS graduates in San Bernardino County, California, showed that society receives nearly $9 in benefits for every $1 invested in these HS children. These benefits include increased earnings, employment, and family stability, and decreased welfare dependency, crime costs, grade repetition, and special education. A recent analysis of Head Start impact data suggests that Head Start as it operated during 1960s through the 1980s yielded a benefit-cost ratio that may be at least as large as the $7 to $1 figure often cited for model early childhood programs such as Perry Preschool which served children during the 1960s.

Properly trained HS parents can decrease Medicaid costs by $198 per family.

Health Benefits
Studies demonstrate that HS and EHS improve the health of the children and families they serve. Recent research reports that the mortality rates for 5- to 9-year-old children who had attended Head Start are 33 to 50 percent lower than the rates for comparable children who were not enrolled in Head Start. In fact, Head Start reduced the rates to the national average of mortality rates for all 5- to 9-year-old children. The HS Impact Study demonstrated that a much higher proportion of HS children received dental care than those children who did not receive HS services. A higher proportion of parents with 3-year-old children in HS reported that their child was either in excellent or very good health as compared with those parents who did not have children enrolled in HS. The HS Impact Study showed that HS reduces the frequency and severity of problem behavior as reported by their parents. HS provides health and dental services to children and families who might otherwise not have them. Parents who participate in HS are found to have greater quality of life satisfaction; increased confidence in coping skills; and decreased feelings of anxiety, depression, and sickness.

Research suggests that HS reduces childhood obesity. HS children are at least eight percentage points more likely to have had their immunizations than those children who did not attend preschool. Similarly, EHS children had a higher immunization rate than children in a control group.

Law Enforcement Benefits
Along with improving the health of its children and families, HS benefits its children and society-at-large by reducing crime and its costs to crime victims. HS children are significantly less likely to have been charged with a crime than their siblings who did not participate in HS.

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The National Head Start Association, an independent membership organization, advocates on behalf of the entire Head Start community and provides training and resources to Head Start programs nationwide.

2 Ibid.


4 Ibid., xvi.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., xiii.


