

BRIEF REVIEW OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE RELATED TO EFFECTIVENESS OF PARENT-CHILD PROGRAMS IN IMPROVING CHILD OUTCOMES

Evaluations in the following four program areas are relevant to understanding the potential effectiveness of community-based, professionally supported parent-child programs in improving child outcomes:

- Parent-child centers
- Family literacy programs
- Home-based parent education programs
- Parent-child interaction programs

While the evaluation evidence is not extensive in any of these areas, each has at least one exemplary program or approach that has been evaluated. This memo briefly reviews the results of these evaluations.

PARENT-CHILD CENTERS – The Chicago Child-Parent Centers

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPCs) were intended to provide a school-based preschool through third grade experience to children in high-poverty neighborhoods. Parental participation was required of at least one half-day per week on a volunteer basis.

Program design. Program staff included a head teacher, parent-resources worker, school-community representative, and classroom teachers and aides. A full-time staff member provided outreach for recruitment, home visits, and referrals to community resources and service agencies. Class sizes were small to allow for an individualized approach to child development in the areas of language, cognition and social relationships.

Evaluation results. The experiences of CPC participants were compared to children who did not attend preschool at a number of points in time, with generally favorable results.

- At kindergarten entry, CPC preschool students performed better on cognitive school readiness tests.
- At completion of 8th grade, CPC preschool attenders scored higher on reading and math tests. Fewer had been retained in grade, and CPC students received fewer special education services.

- At a 15 year followup, CPC preschool participants were more likely to have completed high school, were less likely to have been retained in a grade by age 15, were almost half as likely to have been in special education by age 18, and had fewer arrests including arrests for violent crimes. These children were also less likely to have been the victim of reported and substantiated child abuse.
- The earlier and longer children participated in the program, the stronger and more consistent were the results.

These results are similar to those of other long-term, comprehensive programs that offered high quality child development services while engaging the parents in various ways. The focus of these programs has not been on using parent-child interactions and activities to support good parenting and child development.

HOME-BASED PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS – Parents as Teachers

The Parents as Teachers program is intended to support parents in providing their child with developmentally appropriate experiences to foster language and cognitive growth.

Program design. Parents as Teachers staff are certified after completing an extensive training program on the PAT curriculum. PAT workers generally visit parents in their homes, give them information about their child's current stage of development, and model play activities. The goal is to encourage parents to interact more with their children in activities that strengthen their child's development.

Evaluation results. Evaluations of the PAT program have found positive results:

- At age three, PAT participant children, compared to those in a control group, were more advanced in language development, problem-solving and other cognitive tasks, and social development.
- The parents of these PAT children were more knowledgeable about child development and positive child rearing practices.
- At the end of first grade, children who had participated in PAT had higher scores in reading and math on standardized tests than did a comparison group.
- PAT parents were more involved in their child's education, including initiating contact with the teacher.
- PAT students continued to outperform comparison group students in studies of 3rd and 4th graders.
- Families participating in PAT had fewer incidences of child abuse.

- Special studies focusing on Hispanic families found similar results

FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS – Even Start

Family literacy programs bring parents and children together in the classroom to learn and to support each other's academic and non-academic goals. Even Start is a federally funded family literacy program. Even Start serves a very disadvantaged population. Compared with Head Start, Even Start parents are much less likely to have a high school diploma, and Even Start families have substantially lower annual household income.

Program design. Parents receive adult education and may volunteer at their site. Children receive individualized education that is appropriate for their age and developmental level. In addition, parents take part in classes that help them understand their children's literacy development in order to learn ways to support that development at home. There is a regularly scheduled time when parents and children play and learn together through interactive literacy activities.

Evaluation results. The evidence for positive effects of Even Start for either children or their parents is not strong. In comparison to control groups, Even Start children and parents did not show greater gains in literacy. However, those who participated in Even Start activities more intensively for longer periods did better.

Evaluators have argued that the Even Start intervention is not strong enough and does not engage families intensively for long enough periods to be more effective.

PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION PROGRAMS – Early Childhood Family Education

Early Childhood Family Education is a state-funded program in Minnesota that has been in existence since 1973 when it began as a pilot program. The program is administered through local schools and is now offered to families with children from birth to kindergarten entrance in all of Minnesota's 341 school districts and the 4 tribal schools. The program is open to all families and is either free or with a nominal fee that may be waived.

Program design. The core components of ECFE programs are facilitated parent discussion groups, play and learning activities for children, and parent-child activities. Family events, home visiting, child developmental screening, and community resource information may also be offered. Families enroll in 6-week sessions.

Children typically attend with their parents for about two hours weekly for six weeks to a school year or longer. Licensed early childhood teachers design

and implement the children's learning activities, assisted by paraprofessionals and volunteers. Parent-child interaction is usually scheduled at the beginning or end of each class session for 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the age of the child.

For many parents, it is the parent-child interaction time that is the more attractive. Activities are designed by the early childhood teacher and intended to be both enjoyable and stimulating for the child. Many can be replicated at home. This time also provides ECFE staff opportunities to model and provide feedback on parent-child interactions.

Program participation. During the 2003-2004 school year, approximately 288,000 children and parents participated in Early Childhood Family Education, which is about 40 percent of Minnesota's children between birth to kindergarten. About one-tenth of participating families across the state were single parents and just under one-fifth were families of color. In the two major urban areas (St. Paul and Minneapolis) almost half of the participating families were families of color, and almost one-third spoke a home language other than English. Statewide, just under one-quarter of participating families had household incomes of less than \$30,000. In the two major urban areas, over 40 percent had incomes at that level, one third had incomes less than \$20,000 and approximately 20 percent had incomes under \$10,000

Evaluation results. There have been three studies of ECFE participant results, one looking at the general population of participants of all income groups and two focusing on families with incomes less than \$30,000.

In all three studies, participating parents reported improvements in the following areas:

- Increased knowledge and awareness of child development, greater confidence as parents, and increased interaction with and support from other parents of young children.
- Improved parent-child interactions, including more time spent with their child, using more varied strategies for discipline and child guidance, and feeling more aware of and responsive to their child's understandings and feelings.
- Enhanced child development, such as greater independence, stronger language development and communication skills, better interactions with other children, and greater self-confidence.

Parents reported increased knowledge of child development and positive parenting practices and were observed in more small improvements in their actual parenting behavior.

The benefits of ECFE were experienced by many different kinds of families – families with different educational backgrounds and incomes, and parents with both low and moderate initial levels of knowledge and parenting behaviors.

Follow-up studies of former ECFE participants demonstrated higher levels of parent involvement in their child's education at home and with the school, for kindergarten and third-grade groups. ECFE parents interacted more with their child on school and learning issues, engaged in more active problem solving and information seeking activities, and were more involved in their child's classroom and school activities.