

InFOCUS



New Data Highlight Progress and Challenges of Head Start Children and Families

A new report, *Child Outcomes and Classroom Quality in FACES 2009*, provides insight into the demographics of Head Start families; children's cognitive, social-emotional and physical development and health during a year in the program; and key attributes of Head Start classrooms and programs. The report paints a vivid portrait of children who entered Head Start for the first time in fall 2009 and were completing a year in the program in spring 2010, including their family backgrounds and the Head Start classrooms and programs that serve them. Data for the report are drawn from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), a periodic, longitudinal study of Head Start funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and its partners—Educational Testing Service and Juárez and Associates. Key findings of the report include the following:



26%

of Head Start children live in households in which the language primarily spoken to them is a language other than English.

Head Start serves a diverse population of low-income children and their families.

Thirty-six percent of children completing their first year of Head Start are Hispanic/Latino, 34 percent are African American, and 22 percent are White. Twenty-six percent of Head Start children live in households in which the language primarily spoken to them is a language other than English.

Families of many Head Start children face a number of economic risks.

Thirty-two percent of children live with a parent who is unemployed or who has less than a high school education. Fifty percent of Head Start children live with a single mother.

Despite challenges, Head Start parents actively support their children's learning, health, and well-being.

Seventy-seven percent of families read to their child three times a week or more. On average, families eat dinner together more than five nights per week. Almost all children had a medical and dental check-up in the past year (98 percent and 95 percent, respectively).

Children make progress in cognitive skills.

Children assessed in English (based on their home language and proficiency) progress at a rate greater than their same-age peers, across domains. However, those assessed in Spanish make progress toward the average in letter-word knowledge only.

Despite challenges, Head Start parents actively support their children's learning, health, and well-being

77%
of families read to their child three times a week



On average, families eat dinner together more than five nights per week.



Children show growth in social-emotional development during their first Head Start year that may affect their ability to learn and interact with peers and adults.

Improvements include an increase in social skills; a decline in problem behaviors; an increase in positive approaches to learning (such as attention, persistence, adaptability, and independence); and an increase in executive functioning, evidenced by ability to control their first impulse and follow directions.

Head Start children are rated generally healthy, but are at risk for obesity.

Eighty-one percent of children are in excellent or very good health at the end of the Head Start year, by parent report. More than one-third of children (37 percent) are overweight or obese at the end of the year.

Head Start teachers bring substantial credentials and many years of experience into the classroom, with 85 percent having an associate's degree and 50 percent having at least a bachelor's.

Classroom group size and child-adult ratios meet or exceed professional standards. On a measure of observed classroom quality, classrooms were rated in the low range for instructional support and in the middle range for social and emotional functioning and organization. This pattern is consistent with other studies of preschool settings.

The Head Start program is designed to promote school readiness, physical health, and social-emotional development for a diverse population of low-income children and their families. FACES 2009 is the fifth in a series of national cohort studies to describe the population served, staff qualifications, classroom quality, and child and family outcomes.

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