



EVIDENCE BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How does high-quality early care and education **improve safety, permanency, and well-being?**

About half of all children involved in reports of maltreatment are under age 5, and children who experience trauma during these early years of rapid brain development are particularly vulnerable to [negative outcomes](#). While **high-quality early care and education (ECE)** programs vary greatly in terms of quality, structure, and schedule, research generally shows they **can mitigate some risks and improve child safety and well-being**, demonstrating many [benefits for children involved with the child welfare system](#).

Despite these positive results, ECE programs currently are underutilized among children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Existing research highlights the broad impact of ECE programs on child maltreatment, along with the potential to benefit a large number of children and families, warranting increased partnerships between ECE and the child welfare system.

Benefits for children and families

[High-quality ECE makes a difference](#) in the lives of young children and their families, during program participation and beyond. Research has documented a range of ECE programs that [can put children and families successfully on the path toward lifelong good health and well-being](#), especially among the most vulnerable.



How does high-quality early care and education improve safety, permanency, and well-being?

In particular, ECE helps:

- Reduce parental stress by providing needed respite.
- Inform parents about normal child development and behaviors.
- Provide parents with models of appropriate and effective disciplinary approaches for children.
- Connect families to the supports they need.

For children involved in the child welfare system, high-quality ECE programs have been found to improve language development,¹ school readiness,² and social skills.³ They also have been shown to result in reduced subsequent reports of child maltreatment, and a lower likelihood of removal from the home and placement in out-of-home care.⁴

Child safety

Studies have demonstrated positive associations between participation in ECE and child safety. For example, children who participated in the Chicago [Child-Parent Centers](#) preschool program experienced fewer reports of indicated maltreatment by age 17 (5.0% vs. 10.5% in the comparison group).⁵ The lower maltreatment rates were explained in part by greater parental involvement in their children's schools, which may have resulted in improving parental attitudes and behaviors, and parent-child relationships.⁶

Similar outcomes have been found for children participating in Early Head Start programs (prenatal to age 2). A national randomized trial found that, compared to a control group, children who attended Early Head Start were less likely to have an encounter with child welfare between the ages of 5 and 9, had fewer subsequent child welfare encounters from age 5 onward, and were less likely to have substantiated physical or sexual abuse. (However, children who attended [Early Head Start](#) were more likely to have substantiated physical neglect, possibly due in part to increased opportunities for observation within the school setting.)⁷

Permanency

Although more research is needed to better understand the relationship between ECE and permanency outcomes, some evidence suggests that participation in ECE programs is associated with improved permanency.⁸ A nationally representative sample of children ages 0 to 5 found that **children placed in Early Head Start (prenatal to age 2) or [Head Start \(age 3 to 5\) were 93% less likely to enter foster care](#)**, compared to children who received no ECE. This study also found that the type of ECE matters. Children who received ECE from a non-Head Start early childhood education center, a family, friend, or relative, or another type of provider did not experience the decrease in out-of-home placement rates experienced by those who attended Head Start.⁹

Child well-being

Several studies demonstrate the benefits of high-quality ECE on children's academic and behavioral outcomes, particularly for children from high-risk socioeconomic backgrounds. These benefits are evident not only by the end of the ECE program, but extend throughout the K-12 years and well into adulthood.

Head Start is the most widely researched ECE program, with participant outcomes tracked longitudinally and across generations. Outcome studies of Head Start participants have identified numerous positive well-being indicators, especially among African American children, Hispanic/Latino children, and children whose initial skill levels were low.¹⁰

The benefits of ECE extend well into adulthood. [Research](#) using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that adults who attended Head Start as children demonstrate improved postsecondary educational outcomes (more likely to attend college, and more likely to earn a postsecondary degree), higher self-esteem, and better self-control. Similarly, participants in the [Abecedarian Project](#), which provides year-round, full-day care for children from highly disadvantaged families, have better health outcomes and less criminal involvement as adults in their mid-30s

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BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN BY THE END OF THE HEAD START PROGRAM

- Increased school readiness^{11,12}
- Better social-emotional development,^{13,14} including decreases in hyperactivity and aggressive behaviors¹⁵
- Better health, including healthier weight and improved eating habits¹⁶

BENEFITS FOR HEAD START PARTICIPANTS THROUGHOUT K-12 AND INTO YOUNG ADULTHOOD

- Better cognitive and social-emotional functioning compared to children who did not attend pre-kindergarten or other center-based child care¹⁷
- Greater likelihood of meeting kindergarten reading benchmarks¹⁸
- Lower usage of special education services¹⁹
- Higher math scores, lower rates of absenteeism, and a lower risk of repeating a grade in middle school²⁰
- Increased high school graduation rates²¹

compared to the control group.^{22,23} By age 40, participants in the [Perry Preschool Project](#) were more likely to be employed, own their own home, have higher lifetime earnings, and have committed fewer crimes compared to a control group.

Given the high economic and societal costs of child welfare, decreases in child welfare usage among children and families who participate in ECE offer a positive [return on investment](#). **Participation in ECE results in decreased spending on special education, the criminal justice system, and healthcare** — all of which have been examined as [outcomes related to participation](#). The [Perry Preschool Project](#), for example, resulted in a \$12.90 return on investment per \$1 invested, due to savings in education spending (\$7,303 per participant), welfare spending (\$2,768), criminal justice spending (\$171,473), and increased taxes on income (\$14,079). [Analyses](#) using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that adults who had attended Head Start were 29% less likely to receive public assistance compared to similar adults who had not attended Head Start.

These society-level benefits also translate into individual-level economic benefits, as [Head Start participants were 12% less likely to live in poverty](#) in adulthood. The estimated net effects vary by program.

For example, the [Head Start Impact Study](#) found that former participants earned an average of \$5,513 more after-tax over their lifetimes compared to a control group. In contrast, participants in the [Perry Preschool Project](#) are predicted to earn \$145,000 (for males) to \$211,600 (for females) more in their lifetimes compared to a matched group of children who did not participate in ECE. It is estimated that attending a full-day pre-kindergarten program for one year can [increase lifetime earnings](#) by 10%, while attending a more intensive program from birth through age 5 can increase lifetime earnings by 25%.

Family engagement and well-being

Some ECE programs, such as Head Start and Early Head Start, employ the [two-generation approach](#) (2Gen) to address poverty and improve child and family well-being by supporting the needs of children as well as their families. This approach includes five key components:

- Bolstering families' post-secondary education and employment opportunities
- Ensuring children are involved in early childhood education and development
- Increasing families' economic assets

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- Improving the health and well-being of children and their families
- Cultivating social capital (such as family and peer networks)

Key principles of the 2Gen approach include tracking child and family outcomes, engaging family voice, and aligning systems and funding.

The importance of family engagement is specifically included in Head Start's [Code of Federal Regulations](#), which encourages programs to develop innovative two-generation approaches to addressing the needs of families and leverage community resources and other funding sources to do so. Head Start also developed a [framework to further guide and support parent, family, and community engagement](#). A national study using a representative sample of 1,020 children and families examined the impact of parental involvement in the Head Start program on parenting behaviors.²⁴ Head Start programs with policies promoting family involvement had higher levels of family engagement, and parents who were more involved in their children's Head Start programs decreased their use of spanking, decreased behaviors in which they exert excessive control over their child, and increased their use of cognitively stimulating activities (such as telling a story to a child). Children whose parents changed their behaviors in these ways had greater gains in academic outcomes.

ECE programs that include supports also benefit the entire family. For example, parents whose children attend Head Start are more likely to further their own education compared to similarly situated parents whose children do not attend.²⁵ The [Early Head Start-Child Welfare Services Initiative](#), which supported partnerships between Early Head Start programs and child welfare agencies in 24 jurisdictions, focused on children involved in the child welfare system (including those in foster care and those living with family) as well as children whose parents were in substance abuse recovery programs or were incarcerated. [Reported outcomes](#) included reduced parental stress, increased

parental skills and knowledge, and increased safety in a family's home environment.

Intergenerational benefits

Longitudinal studies of Head Start participants demonstrate long-term positive outcomes that benefit the next generation. For example, adults who participated in Head Start as children demonstrate greater use of positive parenting practices, including spending more time reading to their children and teaching them the alphabet, numbers, shapes, and colors.²⁶ [Studies also have found](#) that children of Head Start participants also are more likely to complete high school and enroll in college, and are less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system or become teen parents.

Follow-up findings 50 years after children enrolled in the Perry Preschool Project show that benefits extend not only into adulthood for the children who participated, but for their children as well. A recent [paper](#) illustrates that children (ages 21 and older) of Perry Preschool Project participants were more likely to have had no school suspensions, more likely to complete high school, less likely to participate in criminal activities, and more likely to be employed than the control group, ultimately as a result of more positive home environments.

Quality matters

ECE programs are not identical and research has demonstrated that programs of high quality result in better outcomes. Two [features of high-quality programs](#) noted in the research include well-trained staff and lower child-to-staff ratios. There is also some evidence suggesting that more intensive programming also leads to better outcomes. [Accreditation status](#) has been noted as another indicator of quality. A Florida study examined child care quality (using accreditation status) and outcomes among children involved in the child welfare system found that children (both those involved in child welfare and those who were not involved) attending accredited child care centers had better

outcomes than those attending unaccredited child care centers.²⁷

Underutilization

Despite these benefits, **ECE programs remain underutilized by families involved in the child welfare system.**²⁸ For example, the Florida study noted above also found that children involved in the child welfare system were significantly less likely to attend accredited child care centers than children not in the system.²⁹ In addition, surveys of foster parents indicate that a considerable portion have unmet child care needs and that very few receive child care subsidies.³⁰

However, there is evidence of some progress. When a 2010 [information memorandum](#) calling for Head Start to focus more heavily on serving families involved in the child welfare system was issued, only 9% of children in foster care ages 0 to 5 were enrolled in

Head Start or Early Head Start. By 2017, the rate had increased to 14%.³¹

In addition to increasing utilization through Head Start, states can use their [Child Care and Development Fund](#) block grants both to improve ECE program quality and increase program access to underserved populations. Lead agencies receiving these block grants can define [priority populations](#) (typically children from very low income families, children with special needs, and children experiencing homelessness) to include children served by the child welfare system as well.

The strategic development of collaborative relationships between child welfare and ECE providers also can increase utilization, ensuring that child welfare caseworkers and supervisors are knowledgeable about the importance of ECE, and that they have access to a network of high-quality ECE opportunities for the young children and families they serve.

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How does high-quality early care and education improve safety, permanency, and well-being?

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