

# Powerful Outcomes for Abused Children: Partnerships Between Head Start and Child Welfare

by Emmalie Dropkin



Researchers have recently found some impressive effects of Head Start many years after children graduated from the program. First data from the Head Start Impact Study revealed that children who are in foster care (or otherwise separated from their parents) are more ready for school and have stronger relationships with their teachers when they're able to attend Head Start (Lipscomb et al., 2013). Another group of researchers followed children from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project and found that compared to children who couldn't attend Early Head Start, infants and toddlers in the program had significantly fewer child welfare encounters during their elemen-

tary school years (Green et al., 2014). These findings speak to the powerful effects of Head Start and Early Head Start programs in the aggregate across the country, but some individual programs are achieving even more. Two of the bright spots in working with families involved in the child welfare system are Economic Opportunity Agency of Washington County Head Start in Arkansas and Community Services for Children's Head Start/Early Head Start of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania.

The Economic Opportunity Agency of Washington County has operated Head Start since 1965 and has worked with neglected and maltreated children since the beginning. In 1978, the agency began a separate program for such children, but in recent years that work has been incorporated into Head Start and Early Head Start services. Today, Washington County Head Start has 94 spaces at a site known as the Children's House, for children who are in foster care, involved with the court system, or identified as experiencing maltreatment. These services are supported and sustained by a broad coalition of community partnerships and allow children to have an even more specialized early learning

experience that Head Start Director Brenda Zedlitz describes as "Head Start plus." Many of the enrolled children exhibit extreme behavioral and development issues as a result of their early experiences, so families have nearly weekly home visits and children interact in small groups with 4:1 or 5:1 child to adult ratios depending on age. They also have access to onsite occupational, physical, speech, and mental health therapists. As children make progress, there are transitional classrooms in the same facility to help them return to a community of their peers.

"The secret," as Zedlitz puts it, "is do the same thing in the same place at the same time with the same people every day." Helping children who have experienced trauma to relax and build trust with the adults in their lives, providing them with continuity of care and a sense of stability, is the first step to healing and learning. This is certainly a resource- and labor-intensive model, and can be emotionally taxing for the adults who provide it; but ultimately this effective early intervention can change children's and families' trajectories for years to come.



Emmalie Dropkin  
 2015 Exchange Emerging Leader  
[www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership)



Emmalie Dropkin is the Director of Policy, Data, and Research at the National Head Start Association. She previously taught elementary special education in the Baltimore City Public Schools. Emmalie earned a Master's degree in teaching from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and a Certificate of Mind, Brain, and Teaching from Johns Hopkins University School of Education.



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) of the Lehigh Valley began their targeted work with this population about 15 years ago, growing out of a coalition of organizations in their community who felt a pressing need to better support preschool children who had experienced maltreatment or exposure to drugs and alcohol. A planning grant from the state Department of Public Welfare helped the group research service models and community need, and they found that children birth to three were involved with child welfare at the highest rates but had the lowest access to services. Those findings drove the design of their intervention: an Early Head Start partnership with child welfare, first funded in 2002 and expanded twice since, that now serves 72 infants and toddlers and their families. All children enrolled in the program are involved in the child welfare system, have experienced prenatal exposure to toxic substances, and/or are in the care of a drug-involved parent. These children face an uphill battle to healthy and optimal development, and their parents face the tremendous challenges of coping with addiction and poverty.

Like Washington County Head Start, EHS of the Lehigh Valley provides multi-disciplinary, therapeutic care, and intervention at a specially-designed facility for both infants and parents, that includes therapists, social workers, and child development teachers who have specialized training and are assigned to work with the same children over long periods of time. Staff is trained in infant mental health and promoting attachment to build the supportive relationships that enable healthy brain development in young children. Executive Vice President Paula Margraf says, "With the resources to look at these children a little bit differently and provide the individualized services they require, by providing a high level of intensive,

coordinated services to families, and by engaging community partners, you can make an enormous difference."

Both of these programs rely on partnerships to connect with families, provide additional comprehensive services, and further their missions. Partnerships enable Early Head Start of the Lehigh Valley to deepen their two-generation approach to changing family trajectories by focusing on parents or guardians at the same time that they care for children. One partner organization provides onsite counseling for family members working with drug and alcohol issues, which in time can help rebuild family stability. EHS of the Lehigh Valley also provides office space to their child welfare partner, who can then co-locate child welfare staff and a supervisor with Early Head Start services; this allows them to keep a close eye on families, coordinate care, and intervene quickly to support child permanence and reduce the need to remove children from their homes. Child welfare also contributes one-third of the funding for the specialized program. Embracing whole families enables long-term success and gets to the mutual goals of EHS and child welfare, including child well-being, child safety, and permanence — all of which are necessary for lifelong success.

Brenda Zedlitz of Washington County Head Start describes the challenges some of their children's families bring and the successes they've achieved in partnership with Head Start:

- children transitioning through half a dozen foster homes during two months in the program, whose teachers are able to carry the knowledge of the child and provide a stable relationship.

- premature babies enrolling in the program who needed intensive therapy, but are now developing normally as they approach their first birthday.
- parents who have never had the opportunity to be deeply engaged until they enter Early Head Start.

The experience of these children and families includes the full range of Head Start classroom experiences and comprehensive services, with added intensity. Both programs have found that these can make all the difference.

At first glance, children who have experienced abuse and neglect seem to face impossible barriers that hinder their development. It's true, in fact, that their development is often affected, but with the right supports and early, specialized intervention both young children and their parents can show tremendous resilience and growth. It happens in Early Head Start and Head Start every day.

## References

- Green, B. L., Ayoub, C., Bartlett, J. D., Von Ende, A., Furrer, C., Chazan-Cohen, R., Vallotton, C., & Klevens, J. (2014). The effect of Early Head Start on child welfare system involvement: A first look at longitudinal child maltreatment outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review, 42*, 127-135.
- Lipscomb, S. T., Pratt, M. E., Schmitt, S. A., Pears, K. C., & Kim, H. K. (2013). School readiness in children living in non-parental care: Impacts of Head Start. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 31*(1), 28-37.