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Early Head Start Programs Deliver a Variety of Quality Services to Families with Infants and Toddlers

Designed for low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers up to age 3, Early Head Start programs are comprehensive, two-generation efforts that enhance children's development while strengthening families. The programs offer a comprehensive array of services—child development services delivered in home visits or child care settings, case management, parenting education, health care and referrals, and family support.

Mathematica's descriptive study of Early Head Start builds on the success of Head Start's flagship study, the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES). The Early Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (Baby FACES) is a study of Early Head Start programs designed to inform policy and programmatic decision-making at both the national and local levels. The study provides a snapshot of Early Head Start services, including their intensity and quality, the characteristics of the children and families they serve, and how those children and families fare in key areas of development.

In 2007, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and its partners to implement this six-year longitudinal study of 89 Early Head Start programs around the country. Baby FACES is designed to be a rich source of data that can be used to describe Early Head Start services and the effects of individualized services—in terms of type and quality—on child and family well-being. The following are key findings from the Baby FACES Age 2 Report, the second installment of the study.

KEY FINDINGS

Early Head Start Programs Provide Services at Recommended Levels; Family Uptake Varies Program directors reported that all home-based services offered families using that option weekly home visits and at least two group socializations a month. All programs providing center-based services offered four or five center days a week. Families' use of the services varied. On average, the families in the home-based option received 37 visits in the year between ages 1 and 2. Families in the center-based option attended, on average, 179 days (about 3.5 days per week) during the same period.
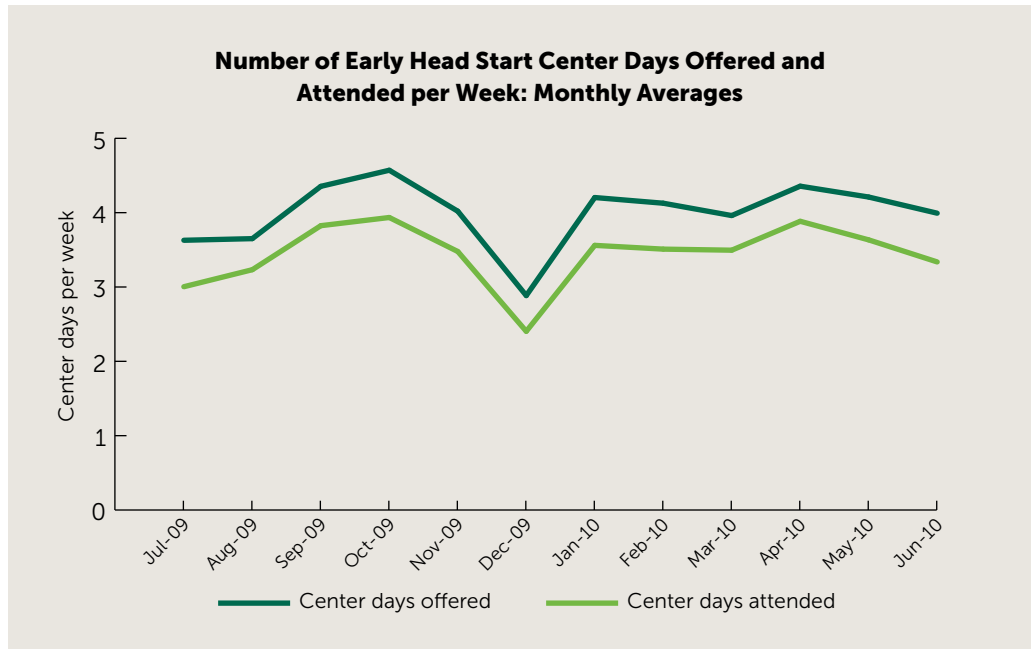
Home Visiting and Center Quality Scores are in the Midrange Overall quality scores are in the midrange for both home visits and classrooms. Early Head Start home visits score highest in the areas of child engagement and relationship with the family, and lowest in nonintrusiveness and facilitation of parent-child interaction. Classroom quality scores are highest in the area of emotional and behavioral support, which includes positive climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for children's perspectives, and behavioral guidance; classroom scores are lowest in the area of engaged support for learning, which includes facilitation of learning and development, quality of feedback, and language modeling. Home visit quality and emotional/behavioral aspects of center quality are positively associated with the staff member having a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, regardless of overall educational level, and negatively related to teachers' depressive symptoms and staff turnover.

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Number of Early Head Start Center Days Offered and Attended per Week: Monthly Averages

Parents and Home Environments Support Cognitive and Physical Development; but Children Score Lower than National Norms on Language Development According to Baby FACES, about 60 percent of parents read to their child more than once a day, and an additional 30 percent read about once daily. More than half of all households (57 percent) have at least 25 books for the child, and nearly another quarter of them have 11 to 25 books for the child. Also, parents reported that 80 percent of 2-year-olds have excellent or very good health; only 5 percent have fair or poor general health. Parents also reported that all the 2-year-olds received some type of health services, including doctor or dentist visits, immunizations, and evaluation for disabilities, in the past year. According to parents' reports, 2-year-old Early Head Start children were near their same-age peers in general development. However, children in Early Head Start placed below national norms in language development, and according to benchmarks set for children of this age, nearly one-half of 2-year-olds in the Baby FACES sample demonstrated or were at risk for delays in expressive language.

Although Most Children Stay in Early Head Start, More Than One-Fifth Leave by Age 2 Overall, early exiters come from families that face a higher number of maternal risks. For example, 75 percent of exiting families receive public assistance, compared with 68 percent of continuing families, and 31 percent of exiting mothers are teenage mothers, versus 21 percent of mothers who continued with Early Head Start. Families most commonly cited moving away from the program area as their reason for leaving the program (31 percent), and on average expressed satisfaction with the program (97 percent were very or somewhat satisfied and 74 percent were very satisfied). About one-quarter of early exiters move on to another Early Head Start or early childhood program.

NEXT STEPS/LOOKING AHEAD

This report sets the stage for a final report on 3-year-old Early Head Start children, expected for release in early 2015. This next report will include information collected in spring 2011 and 2012, and will cover all study children who remain in the program through age 3. It will focus on understanding and modeling the longitudinal aspects of the data to develop an understanding of relations among family and child characteristics, service uptake, and outcomes.

To view the full Baby FACES Age 2 Report, please click here.

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