



Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Retention Strategies with Head Start-Eligible Families Experiencing Adversity

A Review of the Literature
Executive Summary

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Executive summary

The Head Start REACH project is designed to take an in-depth look at the recruitment, selection, enrollment, and retention (RSER) strategies used by Head Start programs (those for infants/toddlers and preschoolers) to engage Head Start eligible families experiencing adversities. “Adversities” is a broad term that refers to a wide range of circumstances or events that pose a threat to a child or caregiver’s physical or psychological well-being. The adversities that families experience are often intertwined with poverty, may co-occur, and are affected by systematic factors, such as structural racism. Common examples include (but are not limited to) families experiencing poverty, those experiencing homelessness, those involved in the foster care or child welfare system, and those affected by substance use. In this literature synthesis, we focus on families facing these common adversities, based on priorities identified by staff at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) or emphasized in Head Start standards, policies, or initiatives.

Overview of the literature review

This literature review is one of the first activities of the Head Start REACH project. It aims to understand who is and is not being served by Head Start among families experiencing specific adversities; the range of RSER strategies that programs use with families experiencing these adversities; the factors that shape the use of RSER strategies; and the effectiveness of specific strategies with these populations. The review also reveals gaps in knowledge and opportunities for future research related to the RSER strategies that support families experiencing these adversities. It explores how commonly families eligible for Head Start experience these types of adversities, how more than one of those adversities can be faced simultaneously by the same family (that is, co-occur), and the factors that help determine how families experience those adversities. The findings presented in this report, including the research gaps, will inform the project’s conceptual framework and the design of case studies to provide an in-depth examination of Head Start RSER processes from the perspectives of both families and programs. We also expect the findings to inform the broader field and future research, including the large-scale study that may be designed as part of Head Start REACH.

The review addresses the following research questions:

- How commonly are Head Start-eligible families experiencing specific adversities? Do these adversities co-occur and, if so, in what way and in what likely combinations?
- Which factors shape or influence the RSER strategies that Head Start programs use? What factors shape the effectiveness of RSER strategies used by programs?
- Which RSER approaches are the most promising for recruiting, selecting, enrolling, and retaining families experiencing adversity and facing barriers in Head Start programs?

To answer these questions, we reviewed 39 research studies and six practice-based resources geared toward practitioners. We identified the research studies by searching for peer-reviewed articles conducted in the past 10 years and checking websites for grey literature conducted during the same time period. The search involved a set of pre-identified sources and parameters, followed by a screening of results to identify the most relevant studies for addressing the project’s research questions. We selected practice-based resources that could fill some gaps in the academic literature, using recommendations from the study team, experts, and keyword and topic area searches of official ACF documents on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC). We provide more information on the sources and

parameters used for the search in the methods appendix for the literature synthesis report. The research studies focus primarily on Head Start and early care and education (ECE) settings; one study is not specific to ECE. The studies provide information on RSER from the perspective of both families and programs. In the report, we highlight findings separately by these factors (that is, resource type, study setting, and respondent perspective).

Most of the literature is descriptive and based on qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups with families and program staff. Only one study used an experimental design, and only a few conducted correlational or regression analyses. In addition, although many recommendations overlap with findings in the reviewed literature, the practice-based resources typically do not include citations indicating the presence of empirical support for recommended strategies or expected successes or barriers. Therefore, the findings presented here are largely descriptive and suggestive about the RSER strategies that could be effective. They do not constitute empirical evidence of effectiveness. As a result of these limitations, we were not able to fully address our second and third research questions with this review. These may be further addressed in planned data collection and analysis activities of the project.

Key findings from the review

Chapter III provides important context about RSER. Specifically, we describe each component of RSER, including the activities required by Head Start standards and policies. We also acknowledge the different ways RSER may be defined or referenced in the studies and practice-based resources used in the review.

Chapter IV describes the Head Start-eligible population and the adversities many families face (the first research question). We include statistics on the prevalence of different adversities and their potential co-occurrence. Where possible, we also describe racial and ethnic differences and disparities in families' experiences of adversity, given that systemic inequities may shape the experience of adversity overall. Although the chapter focuses on the adversities that families experience, it also acknowledges that all families have strengths and are resilient, achieving positive outcomes and revealing their capacity in the face of adverse experiences. Key findings include:

- Experiencing poverty is the most common adversity that families in Head Start experience.
- Family adversities often co-occur, including poverty, homelessness, involvement with foster care and the child welfare system, substance use, domestic violence, and mental health issues.
- Families experiencing poverty, experiencing homelessness, affected by substance use, and involved in the foster care and child welfare system face significant challenges to their overall physical and mental health and well-being.
- There are racial and ethnic differences and disparities in the likelihood that families will experience adversities.

Chapters V, VI, VII, and VIII describe findings on factors that have implications for RSER strategies and their potential effectiveness, including family, program, and community or other factors (the second research question) for each of the primary populations: families experiencing poverty, experiencing homelessness, involved in the foster care or child welfare system, or affected by substance use. These chapters also describe what we learned about promising RSER strategies (the third research question) for each population. Given the limited ECE literature on RSER strategies for families experiencing adversities, we could not fully address these research question. Most studies described factors that might influence the RSER strategies appropriate for families and thus may have implications for the RSER

strategies that programs use. In addition, most studies are descriptive and qualitative, providing largely suggestive evidence and very little empirical evidence for strategies that might be most effective. Key findings by adversity include:

- Families experiencing poverty
 - There is little to no ECE literature on selection and enrollment strategies focused on families experiencing poverty. Most of the available research on RSER is descriptive. Only two studies use an experimental design to test specific engagement strategies.
 - Some groups of families experiencing poverty may experience unique challenges to program attendance and engagement. These groups comprise families of color and families with parents experiencing emotional distress, weak social and staff connections, and cultural isolation or discrimination.
 - Social connections within the program may encourage family engagement in programs.
 - Recruitment efforts may be more successful if they include clear messages about how families can benefit from the program. Families may be more responsive to accessible, culturally responsive language that reflects—but does not make assumptions about—their preferred languages.
 - Text messaging may be a promising tool for encouraging and coaching families through the Head Start/Early Head Start eligibility verification process.
- Families experiencing homelessness
 - All of the available ECE research on families experiencing homelessness is descriptive. None of the studies uses an experimental design to test specific engagement strategies.
 - Families experiencing homelessness may face a variety of practical and logistical barriers to participation in Head Start (for example, lack of transportation, high mobility, inconsistent phone access). Many of the reviewed studies suggest that programs carefully consider these barriers and implement supportive and creative policies to address them throughout the RSER process, including flexible enrollment and retention processes (such as transportation supports).
 - Several of the reviewed studies suggested that staff may benefit from professional development on the identification and experience of family homelessness and how to best support this population. Recommendations include specialized training in the McKinney-Vento definitions related to education and health and human services (see Chapter III), and related rules around selection and eligibility for children experiencing homelessness; building positive relationships; trauma-informed care techniques; and individualized strategies.
- Families involved in the foster care and child welfare system
 - All of the available ECE research on families involved in foster care or child welfare systems is descriptive. None of the studies uses an experimental design to test specific engagement strategies.
 - Building strong collaborations with the foster care and child welfare systems may be essential to supporting this population of families.
 - Head Start screening and data collection processes could be tailored to better capture the experiences, needs, and attendance of children and families involved in the foster care and child welfare systems.

- Head Start staff may benefit from professional development focused on foster care and child welfare systems, issues around mandated reporting, and how best to support families involved in these systems.
- Families affected by substance use
 - All of the scant available ECE research on families affected by substance use is descriptive. None of the studies uses an experimental design to test specific strategies.
 - Government policies, community context, and stigma around substance use issues may shape how well programs retain families experiencing substance use.
 - Retaining families experiencing substance use issues may require specialized services and supports, including substance use case management, coordination with treatment providers, and coordination with other providers, to prevent co-occurring adversities, such as homelessness.

Chapter IX summarizes the findings and expands the discussion of their implications, gaps in the literature, and directions that research could take going forward. We highlight implications for the Head Start REACH case studies and conceptual framework. Implications and gaps include:

- In some instances, the factors that may shape the RSER strategies appropriate for families overlap across families experiencing different adversities. For example, logistical barriers, such as high mobility, may greatly shape the program participation of families experiencing homelessness and those involved in foster care or the child welfare system, and in turn the RSER strategies that programs use. Social connections within programs may also be important for retaining families.
- In other instances, these factors may be unique to families experiencing specific adversities. For example, the lack of local treatment programs and stigma attached to substance use issues can make it difficult for programs to identify and retain these families.
- Promising RSER approaches also often overlap, regardless of the adversity experienced by families. For example, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment and building high quality relationships between families and staff are important for all families. Social networks may be especially useful for recruiting both families experiencing poverty and those experiencing homelessness. Staff training and professional development on the experience of homelessness and child welfare involvement likely support RSER for these populations. Strong community partnerships also appear important for the RSER process with families experiencing homelessness, those involved in the foster care and child welfare systems, and those affected by substance use issues.
- In some instances, promising strategies are unique to a family's experience of adversity. For example, improving screening tools and modifying data collection and storage procedures to track risk factors more easily may be especially helpful for RSER with families involved in the foster care and child welfare systems. Specialized services and supports likely are also important for RSER with families affected by substance use issues.
- There is limited ECE literature on RSER strategies with families experiencing the adversities examined in this literature synthesis. Studies predominantly focus on recruitment and retention strategies for families experiencing poverty (or low incomes). Very few focus on enrollment and selection strategies, and only a limited number focus on families affected by substance use. Few studies examine factors shaping programs' use of RSER strategies, but several examine family factors (for example, child care needs or constraints, social connections, housing stability and mobility) that may have implications for the RSER strategies that programs use and the potential effectiveness of

those strategies. There is limited empirical evidence indicating which strategies might be most effective.

- It may be useful to review studies that examine the day-to-day experiences of families who experience these adversities or that focus on interventions with these families. Literature focused on the characteristics and experiences of families with young children from low-income backgrounds may also be helpful. Although such studies will not reveal which strategies are used and effective, the additional perspective they offer could suggest possible ways for programs to shape RSER strategies to be responsive to these populations. Practice descriptions of model programs could also be useful for highlighting how programs have implemented and adapted RSER strategies.

Appendix A in the literature synthesis report has tables with details on the process and methodology of the review; strategies, settings, and populations of focus in the reviewed studies; and key aspects catalogued for each of the reviewed studies. We also provide information on the approach to reviewing the practice-based resources.

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