



Parents as Partners in Early Education

Parents are children's first and foremost teachers. In today's world, a second significant influence on children ages 0 to 5 is the teachers or caregivers who provide child care and early education. Wisconsin's young children typically spend significant amounts of time in early care and education (ECE) programs, like family child care homes, child care centers, nursery schools or private preschools, 4-year-old kindergarten and Head Start. Today 71 percent of Wisconsin children have all available parents in the workforce (fourth highest rate in the nation), a dramatic change from 30 years ago.¹ Parent engagement in early learning and development is particularly important in today's environment, where increasing numbers of young children are in child care and other early childhood programs.

This policy brief is the third in a series exploring the components of a high-quality ECE program. It focuses on parents as partners in early education, examining what is known about the effectiveness of different approaches, possible models for programs, and options for public policy.

An overarching concept that informs this report is that young children should have nurturing child care and early learning experiences no matter what the setting, whether it be the child's home, family child care, preschool or a child care center. While there is a continuum of services and supports that involve parents in their children's early development and learning, this report concentrates on two major program areas:

1. Parent engagement in their child's education from an early age, and
2. Family support services provided through early care and education programs with a strong home visiting program.

Researchers generally agree that parents and family are the primary influence on a child's development. Parents, grandparents, foster parents and others who take on parenting roles strongly affect language development, emotional growth, social skills and personality. High quality

early childhood programs engage parents as partners in early education, encouraging them to volunteer in programs, read to their children at home, or be involved in curriculum design. Good programs maintain strong communication with parents, learning more about the child from the family and working together with the family to meet each child's needs. Some ECE programs include occasional home visits as a way of maintaining a relationship between the program and parents. These approaches are the more typical, standard way of involving parents in early childhood programs.

Another model provides family support services through ECE programs. In this model, regular home visiting plays a much more prominent role. This model has been a strong component of Head Start programs and a feature of high profile early intervention programs like the Chicago Child-Parent Centers and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, which have shown remarkable long-term benefits. This approach is seen by some experts in the field as an exciting, cutting-edge model for interaction between ECE programs and parents. The program functions as a way to provide family support and prevention services to a much larger group of parents than can be reached through traditional family support programs. The national Strengthening Families model that has been implemented in some Wisconsin communities is an example of this more extensive approach to family support services tied to ECE programs.





Early childhood programs now recognize that they alone cannot prepare children for kindergarten. Instead, they need the support of families and communities. To acquire this support, they need to encourage the family involvement processes that research has shown to be effective in encouraging children’s learning and socio-emotional development”

—Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education, Harvard Family Research Project, 2006.

“The family seems to be the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the child’s development. Without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and what few effects are achieved are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued.”
—Urie Bronfenbrenner, noted Child Psychologist, Cornell University.

Some recent reports provide encouraging findings about the impact of parent engagement.

A Harvard Study: Preschool and Child Care Programs Enhanced Parenting

A 2002 Harvard study of 200 low-income and ethnically diverse parents from one rural and two urban sites found that parents whose children attended a preschool or child care program were 10 times more likely to read to their children every day than parents of children with no early childhood group experience. The research also suggested that strong networks with other parents during early childhood may be linked to parents’ level of involvement later with their children’s public K-12 schools.²

The study also found that the interaction between parents and early childhood program staff is often more regular and more intensive than parent communication in schools later. This is partly because the settings may be less formal, and partly because parents tend to be particularly concerned about their children’s first experiences in group settings.

Head Start Research Shows Benefits from Parent Involvement

From its inception in the 1960s, the Head Start program encouraged parents to be involved at home and at school in their child’s learning. Several Head Start studies have found positive effects from parent engagement. A comprehensive national study, the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), found that greater parent involvement in Head Start is associated with increased involvement in their children’s education at home as well as at Head Start centers, leading to improved school readiness.³

Parenting Involvement: A Key Component of Successful Preschool Programs

A report by Ellen Galinsky published by the Committee for Economic Development analyzed the three most famous

Background and Research

Research on Parent Involvement in Early Care and Education Programs

Child development researchers have arrived at a strong consensus on the extraordinary influence parents have on a child’s development. They recognize the positive impact parents can have on lifetime learning for their children. However, the research about parent involvement in early childhood programs and its impacts is not so clear. Most research related to ECE programs has focused on other structural components, such as teacher qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, learning environments and curriculum, and on their relationship to child outcomes. However, a body of research is developing that suggests positive outcomes from strong connections between parents and ECE programs

It certainly makes intuitive sense that since parents play such a significant role in a child’s development and education, engaging parents as education partners early in a child’s life is likely to lead to positive outcomes.



early childhood intervention programs for young children, all of which had dramatic long-term positive benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and the Abecedarian Project. Two of the three programs had particularly strong parent involvement. The Perry Preschool project worked with families in their homes weekly, and the Chicago program brought parents into the classrooms once a week. Lead researchers of both programs believe that the parent involvement enhanced children’s learning in a lasting way.

According to Arthur Reynolds, the lead researcher in the Chicago project, follow-up studies found that a large part of the long-term gains were attributable to the families’ involvement in the program—what he calls the “school support hypothesis.”⁴ The 18-year longitudinal follow-up study at the University of Wisconsin found resource coordinators in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers helped parents obtain services they needed to care for their children at home.⁵ Children who attended this preschool intervention program had a 52 percent lower rate of maltreatment by age 17 than those who did not.

An earlier study by Ellen Frede found that close collaborative relationships with parents was one of the handful of factors shared by effective preschool models with positive child outcomes.⁶

Parental Involvement: Support Leads to Success

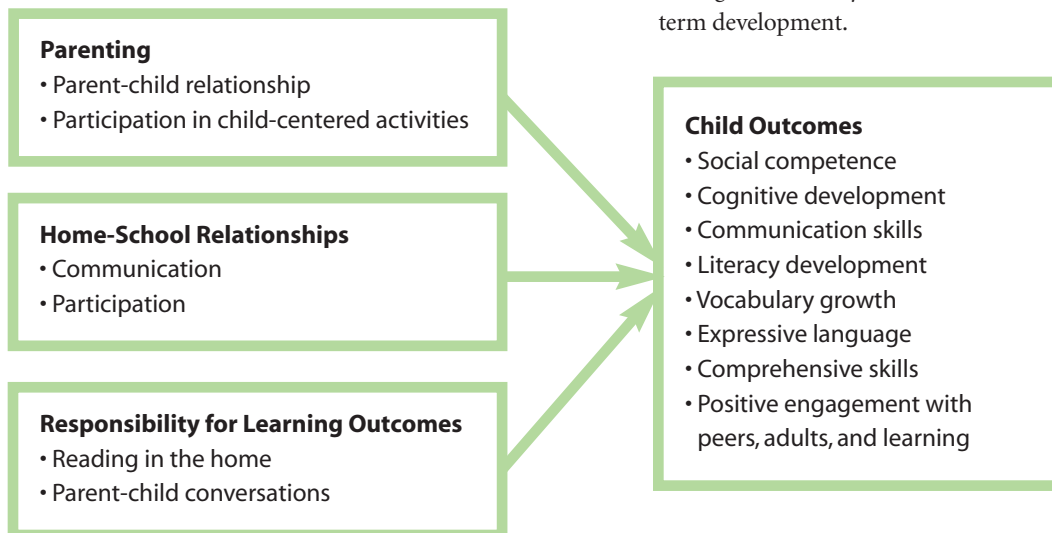
Most studies on parental involvement show a high correlation between the level of parent involvement and the educational achievement of children. Research shows that when parents and other family members take an interest in what children are learning, provide opportunities to do learning activities at home, and offer encouragement to a child’s learning efforts, the impact can be significant. It appears that the earlier parents are engaged in their children’s learning, the more likely that pattern will continue.

Harvard Family Research Project: Family Involvement Linked to Positive Outcomes

While this paper focuses on parent involvement during the early years, a significant evidence base related to school-aged children and their parents suggests that three family involvement processes aid in promoting healthy outcomes for young children: (1) parenting, (2) home-school relations, and (3) responsibility for learning.⁷ The diagram below, developed by the Harvard Family Research Project, shows the links between these family activities and child outcomes.

These positive child outcomes in school apply to parent engagement in early childhood as well. In fact, parents’ involvement in their children’s development and learning during the first five years is even more crucial to their long-term development.

“We’ve done some follow up work to show what is generating these long-term effects. In the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, we find that a large part of it is the family’s involvement in the program. I’ve always called it the “school support hypothesis.”
—Arthur Reynolds, lead researcher in the Chicago Child-Parent Center Project, 2006.





Research on Family Support Services with a Strong Home Visiting Program

“The empirical evidence generated so far does support the efficacy of the model (home visiting) and its growing capacity to achieve its stated objectives with an increasing proportion of new parents.”

—Deborah Daro, Ph.D., *Home Visitation: Assessing Progress, Managing Expectations*, 2006.

The term “home visiting program” in this paper refers to different model programs that provide in-home visits to families with young children. Typically, nurses, professionals or other trained members of the community conduct home visits on a weekly, bimonthly or monthly basis.

Program goals usually include one or more of the following:

an increase in positive parenting practices; an improvement in the health of the entire family; an increase in the family’s self-sufficiency; and enhanced school readiness for the children.

Home visiting programs have been expanding throughout the country as a strategy for improving outcomes for children. They can enhance parent-child interactions and child development,

promote early detection of developmental delays, and help improve literacy skills. Program goals may include reducing child maltreatment, reducing welfare dependency, and increasing school success. Home visitation programs serve an estimated 400,000 children annually between the ages of 0 and 5, and some serve families expecting a baby.

In this paper we are particularly interested in home visiting programs that are implemented as an integral component of an ECE program and are focused on school readiness and improving developmental outcomes.

“...the rapid expansion of home visitation over the last 20 years has been fueled by a broad body of research that highlights the first three years of life as an important intervention period for influencing a child’s trajectory and the nature of the parent-child relationship...”

—Deborah Daro, *Home Visitation: Assessing Progress, Managing Expectations*, 2006

Combining ECE programs and home visiting approaches appears to improve parent-child interactions and improve child behavior.

Research on Home Visiting in General

According to a 2005 analysis entitled “What Works, Wisconsin” by University of Wisconsin and UW-Extension, with Stephen Small as lead author, nearly all home visiting programs share three assumptions:

1. that parents play a critical role in the well-being and development of their children;
2. that intervening and supporting parents as early as possible is the best approach; and
3. that resources and education be brought directly to families rather than expecting families to seek them out on their own.⁸

According to researchers, the evidence has been mixed about the effectiveness of home visiting in general. Because home visiting programs vary widely in their design, intensity of service, and the extent to which quality standards are followed, it is not surprising that evaluation studies, especially those looking at large numbers of programs, have shown disappointing results. However, a growing body of research is finding positive outcomes from well-designed, evidence-based programs.

Six Family Visiting Models Work Together to Improve Practice and Evaluation

In the last few years a consensus has been building that if well-trained home visitors follow a detailed and effective curriculum, the result is significant benefits for both the child and parents.⁹ Six home visiting programs are working together to improve performance outcomes and share knowledge, improving practice based on research and assessment. They are:

1. The Nurse-Family Partnership Program
2. Early Head Start
3. Healthy Families America
4. Parents as Teachers
5. Parent-Child Home Program
6. HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) USA

Three research findings are noteworthy:

• **Nurse-Family Partnership:** This program, developed by David Olds and his colleagues, starts before birth and continues for two years after birth. It focuses on low-in-



come populations whose infants are at higher risk for adverse outcomes, and uses registered nurses trained in a curriculum focused on child development and health. A study of the Nurse-Family Partnership showed there was a 79% reduction in child maltreatment among at-risk families compared to other families in a control group. That same study also indicated a number of other benefits in the areas of health, employment and behavior.¹⁰

• **Parents as Teachers:** Missouri's Parents as Teachers program offers developmental information and support to all parents of infants and young children. A review of the Missouri-based Parents as Teachers home visiting program found that by age 3, the children were significantly more advanced in language, problem-solving and intellectual and social abilities than children in comparable groups.¹¹

• **Early Head Start:** Early Head Start, begun in 1995, helps to strengthen parent-child relationships and promote positive child development. Early Head Start programs can follow one of three models:

1. Home-based programs: Weekly home-visiting combined with regular activities that bring participating parents and children together twice a month.
2. Center-based services: Children are in a part-time or full-time early care and education setting, with home visits twice a year.
3. Combination services: Combines regular home visits with center-based services.¹²

A rigorous national evaluation found that 3-year-olds who had participated in Early Head Start “performed significantly better on a range of measures of cognitive, language, and social-emotional development than a randomly assigned control group.”¹³ Parenting behavior was also better by Early Head Start parents than the control group parents. A follow-up study found that the most positive outcomes were achieved in cases where the children and their families participated in Early Head Start when the children were under age 3 *and* the children attended formal early care and education programs when they were ages 3-5.

RAND Corporation's Synthesis Study

RAND Corporation did a thorough, objective review and synthesis of research on early childhood interventions, published in 2005. The study looked at 20 early childhood programs with strong research designs for evaluation, and found that five home visiting or parent education programs had a strong evidence base showing proven results, including the Nurse-Family Partnership and the HIPPY

programs. The study also showed that nine programs that *combined* home visiting or parent education with early education yielded strong evidence of effectiveness, including Head Start and the three intervention program mentioned earlier in this brief: the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and High/Scope Perry Preschool Project. Early Head Start was also noted as having a “promising evidence base.”¹⁴

Wisconsin's Early Years Home Visitation Outcomes Project

The Early Years Home Visitation Outcomes Project was established in 2001 to provide a common outcome measurement process and support its use in home visitation programs throughout Wisconsin. By providing the tools for effective program evaluation, the project seeks to improve the quality and accountability of home visitation. The project looks at six outcomes: parent interaction with children to enhance development and learning; child health; child safety; family access to support networks; child achievement in milestones in development and learning; and appropriate services provided for children with developmental delays.¹⁵ The project is in the midst of baseline data collection.

Summary of the Research on Parent Engagement

- Early childhood programs like child care, Head Start and preschool often enhance parenting due to interactions parents have with staff and providers.
- Engaging parents in their child's learning is a key ingredient for early childhood programs to promote positive child outcomes.
- The earlier parents are involved in their children's learning and development, the more parent involvement will continue later, leading to better child outcomes, including success in school.
- Well-designed home visiting programs support parents and enhance children's development.
- Linking early childhood programs to home visiting appear to lead to better outcomes for children and families



Parent Engagement in Wisconsin

Involving Parents Through Early Care and Education Programs in Wisconsin

Despite all that is known about the benefits of parental involvement, parent engagement efforts are not fully integrated into most ECE programs, and vary widely across settings.

Basic Requirements in Wisconsin's Early Care and Education Programs



Child Care: Child care programs, both centers and family child care homes, involve parents in highly individual ways, since there are few or no specific requirements for engaging parents. State regulatory requirements for child care programs require that parents be permitted to visit and observe at any time, and require minimum communication efforts with parents. Programs that seek voluntary accreditation such as National Association of the Education of Young Children must have a strong parental involvement component as defined by the accrediting body.

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4K: For public school 4-year-old kindergarten (4K) in Wisconsin, parental involvement is encouraged through fiscal incentives. Outreach activities are designed to support and nurture parents as the primary educators. If a school district provides 87.5 hours of parent outreach, the district receives a higher reimbursement rate through the state funding formula: the district would receive 0.6 in membership aid, rather than 0.5. Most districts provide parent outreach and receive additional funding through the formula.

Head Start: Head Start has perhaps the most robust parent involvement component of any large-scale early childhood program, with a significant requirement specified through federal statutes for its program serving 3-5 year-olds. Head Start families are encouraged to be full partners in their child's development and education, with opportunities to be involved in the program's governance and design and through classroom activities. Head Start

staff are required to have regular communication with parents, including home visits and staff-parent conferences.

Intervention Programs for Children with Disabilities: Young children with disabilities and their families are served by two targeted programs: the Birth to 3 Intervention Program and Special Education for children ages 3 to 5 in public schools. Both programs involve parents extensively in developing and implementing individualized plans for service. Goals of both programs are to partner with parents in meeting the developmental needs of their children.

Recent Wisconsin Parent Engagement Initiatives

In the last few years, there have been several examples in Wisconsin of efforts to support families' involvement in their children's early education:

1. Strengthening Families Initiative: For the past three years, Wisconsin has been implementing an innovative child abuse prevention strategy called Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education. This research-based initiative, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, outlines program strategies that ECE programs can use to build five protective factors for parents and children. Wisconsin was one of the first states to pilot this initiative. It is now being implemented in over half of the states.

Strengthening Families appears to be a promising strategy not just for promoting parent involvement in their children's education, but for making ECE programs a resource and support for all families. It builds on caregivers' existing positive relationships with parents and their daily contact with both children and parents.

2. Expansion of Home Visiting: In 1997 state legislation authorized the Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) to establish Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (POCAN) projects throughout the state. This project, later renamed "Family Foundations," was designed to reduce child abuse, neglect and out-of-home placements, and to improve child health and family functioning through a home visiting program for first-time low-income mothers (those who were Medicaid-eligible).

The program funds 10 projects across the state, supported by training and technical assistance provided by UW-Extension Family Living Programs under contract



with DHFS. A 2003 evaluation found that the project resulted in fewer substantiated abuse and neglect cases, lower out-of-home placements, and higher levels of children’s health exams and immunizations.

The Family Foundations home visiting programs are one part of a much larger set of home visiting programs that has been developing across the state. Pence Revington of UW-Extension estimates that there are now at least 78 agencies delivering home visiting services in 41 counties, under various auspices, often through public health departments and county human services.

Wisconsin Policy Implications

“Two types of programs seem most promising—those that help parents learn the behaviors that promote child development and school readiness and those that directly teach poor and low-income children school readiness skills, both intellectual and behavioral.”

—Closing Achievement Gaps, *The Future of Children*.

Options for State Policy Consideration

1. Enhance Parent Engagement in Child Care and Pre-school Programs

Since most children spend major portions of their lives in out-of-home early care and education settings before entering public schools, those programs are in a unique position to partner with parents, most of whom are in the workforce. Possible options include:

- increasing regulatory requirements for parent engagement in standards that govern child care and pre-school programs;
- providing incentives for child care programs to meet quality benchmarks for parent involvement by developing a set of standards and tying funding to the standards, particularly where children from disadvantaged backgrounds are being served; and
- developing and implementing training statewide on ways to effectively engage and support parents.



2. Expand the Strengthening Families Model

Wisconsin could expand the Strengthening Families initiative, continuing to train early care and education providers in the Strengthening Families approach and supporting them in building protective factors for the families they serve.

3. Link Early Care and Education Programs with Home Visiting

The research indicates particularly strong outcomes when high-quality child care and preschool programs link with home visiting programs. Wisconsin may want to increase the number of programs that combine home visiting with child care or preschool programs. One option is to provide state funding to expand Early Head Start combination models. Another is to establish programs where other well-designed home visiting programs are linked to child care and preschool programs. Both ECE programs and home visiting programs should meet evidence-based standards, with a statewide system of quality standards and technical assistance.

Conclusions

We know that the first five years provide the foundation for everything that happens afterwards. Parents, family members and early care and education providers play a crucial role in the healthy development of Wisconsin’s children.

Policymakers nationwide are considering a continuum of services that can support parents in enhancing children’s learning and development in the early years, from parent education to home visiting programs to improved child care and preschool services. The research evidence strongly suggests that well-designed early childhood programs that engage and support parents produce positive outcomes. Early investment in well-designed programs pays off.

Children benefit the most when ECE programs have a strong partnership with parents. Investing strategically in quality child care and early learning for our children, with an emphasis on parent engagement, is a wise investment in Wisconsin’s future. ■





Endnotes

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This policy brief series was produced with the generous support of the Joyce Foundation, The Faye McBeath Foundation and the Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation

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This policy brief is a publication of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, written by David Edie and Deborah McNelis. Helpful information and assistance was provided by Dianne Jenkins, Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services; Pence Revington, UW-Extension; and MaryAnne Snyder, Children’s TrustFund.



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