



# Building Futures: Head Start Impact Study

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Study Background and Objectives

#### 1. What is the Head Start Impact Study?

It is a Congressionally mandated study designed to address two questions (1) What difference does Head Start make to key outcomes of development and learning for low-income children and (2) Under which conditions does Head Start work best and for which children?

#### 2. Why does Head Start need this kind of study?

The Congress, in part based on the recommendations of the Government Accounting Office (GAO), believed it was important to show stronger evidence of Head Start's effectiveness in order to justify the large annual public investment in the program. Therefore, Congress mandated this study as part of the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start. The study will not only tell us about the effectiveness of Head Start overall, but will also give us information about how and where it's working best. This is critical for improving Head Start.

### Study Program Participants

#### 3. Who is participating in the study?

The study includes a nationally representative sample of approximately 5,000 Head Start-eligible children and their families selected from among all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. These 3- and 4-year-old children are newly enrolling in Fall 2002, and settings include full- and part-time program services and both center- and home-based program options from 75 grantee and delegate agency groups and over 400 Head Start centers.

#### 4. Will the study include children with siblings who are currently enrolled or were enrolled in Head Start in previous years?

All children who are new to Head Start may be selected for the study, even if they have siblings who are currently enrolled or who were enrolled in Head Start in previous years. If two newly-entering siblings are selected for the study, both are included in either the Head Start group or the non-Head Start group.

5. Is participation in the study mandatory for programs?

The Department's Office of General Counsel (OGC) clarified early in 2002 that grantee/delegate agency participation in this study is mandatory versus voluntary in order for the Secretary of Health and Human Services to fulfill the congressional mandate.

6. How were grantees/delegate agencies selected?

Grantees and delegate agencies were selected from among the full set of Head Start programs operating across 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Programs serving special populations, including the Migrant/Seasonal Head Start programs and programs operated by Tribal organizations were not included in the study.

The full set of Head Start programs initially were organized into "geographic" clusters to help ensure national representation by considering the region of the country, urban vs. rural location, availability of state-funded comprehensive preschool programs, and, the ethnicity of the children being served. From this initial list of clustered programs, 25 geographic clusters were randomly selected and then subsets of grantees/delegate agencies from each of the 25 clusters were randomly selected to participate in the study.

Great care was taken to only include programs that were not currently serving all of the eligible children in their community and therefore their community was not "saturated". It was important to have a sufficient number of unserved, eligible children available who could be randomly assigned to a comparison group, while at the same time not resulting in any fewer children being served by the program than would otherwise be the case. These "saturation" determinations were based on grantee/delegate agencies' own reports of enrollment levels as of October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, along with other available information. In locations experiencing changes in the anticipated number of eligible children for 2002, efforts have been made to adjust the study requirements accordingly.

7. How are children and families being selected for the study?

Programs selected to participate in the study were asked to communicate in writing to all potential applicants prior to their submitting an enrollment application that there would be a lottery-like process for making enrollment decisions in 2002 only. Families were informed that if selected for inclusion in the study, their contact information would be released to the study team unless they objected. The programs were to use their normal process of recruiting and rank ordering families based on their level of need. Study staff then used the resulting rank ordered list of applications to randomly assign families into either the program or comparison groups.

Only a relatively small percentage of families applying to any given program were selected for the study, which typically consists of up to 30-35 children per center/center group. Of these, 60% were assigned to Head Start, or the program group, and 40% to the comparison group. Study team staff then contacted selected families to fully explain

all aspects of the study and obtain their written informed consent. Families were informed that their participation in the data collection activities was voluntary and had no bearing on the child's receipt of services.

8. Will the children selected for the comparison group as 3-year-olds be able to apply for Head Start as 4-year-olds?

Yes. The children who are assigned to the comparison group will be allowed to reapply for enrollment in Head Start during the subsequent year. They will be considered for enrollment according to the program's usual selection process.

9. Can children selected for the comparison group be placed on a waiting list for the 2002-03 school year?

No. Children in the non-Head Start group have to continue as non-Head Start children for the first year of the research, the 2002-03 school year. This means that children in the comparison group should not be put on the waiting list or enrolled later in the 2002-03 school year. If children in the comparison group receive Head Start services it could later lead people to conclude that Head Start does not make a difference!

### Random Assignment

10. What is random assignment?

Random assignment means that chance alone (a lottery-like process) determines which children and families selected for the study receive Head Start services, and which are in the comparison group.

11. What do you mean by "comparison" group?

Congress mandated, and a national Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation supported, the use of random assignment for this study. Random assignment means using a lottery-like system to choose which children selected for the study would be in Head Start and which would not (the comparison group) for a one-year period. It is both the most rigorous method for measuring the effectiveness of a program and a fair way to allocate openings given that not all eligible children could be served.

12. Why is it necessary to use random assignment?

It is the most rigorous method for measuring the effect of a program on its participants because any observed differences between the program (Head Start) and comparison group must be due to the program. Because the decision regarding which children end up in either of these two groups is determined by chance alone (e.g., by the "toss of a coin") the two groups are comparable on important child and family background characteristics (e.g., their families are equally interested in seeing that the children receive services). Comparing what happens to both groups of children represents the best test of the effect of Head Start on children and their families. This is why Congress, and the national Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, recommended the use of random assignment for this study.

13. Are children being denied access to Head Start services because of the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS)?

No. No fewer eligible children whose parents want them to participate in Head Start are being served by the program as a result of the study. Some eligible children will not be served by Head Start, but this is because there are insufficient openings to serve them all, not because of the HSIS.

14. Were some children exempt from random assignment?

A very limited number of very high-risk children were excluded from random assignment and, therefore, the study, because of particularly acute need for Head Start services. In a small number of cases, a program was able to request that a family be moved into Head Start, but this has come under the limited number of exclusions that are allowed for very “high risk” children. Both study and program staff have made these decisions together.

15. Does the study include children with disabilities in random assignment?

Because an important part of what Head Start does is to provide needed services to children with disabilities, it is important to include children with disabilities in the study. A small number of children with the most severe disabilities were excluded from random assignment as part of the very limited number of exempted children mentioned above.

16. What will happen to those children assigned to the comparison group?

The same thing will happen to children in the comparison group that happens to all children who are not able to get into Head Start. Typically, program staff provide parents with information on other available community programs for low-income children. It then is up to the parents to decide the appropriate placement for their child.

#### Confidentiality

17. What assurances of confidentiality will be provided to families?

No information on individual children or their parents will be released to anyone outside the small research team. All information will be held in strict confidence and will be protected using a variety of confidentiality systems that have been approved by the researchers’ Institutional Review Board (IRB).

18. What do centers/grantees/delegates need to do to help protect the confidentiality of the families?

This study is likely to generate interest from many sources, including members of the media. It is vital to remember Head Start staff should never release confidential information about any individual child or family without the parent’s written permission, as specified in the Head Start Performance Standards.

19. How should centers/grantees/delegates respond to requests for information about the study?

If asked about the study, Head Start employees should feel free to refer questions or concerns either to their local site coordinator or to the toll free study hotline (1-888-280-5081).

### Measuring Program Effectiveness

20. What will determine if the program is effective?

The growth and development of Head Start children will be compared with the group of children who were assigned to the comparison group. Children will be assessed at the beginning of their first Head Start year, or, in the case of children in the comparison group, at a comparable time. Both groups will be followed through the end of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, with data collected annually for each child, his/her parents, and the Head Start program or other preschool (or child care) program they attend. As there are considerable variations across communities in the types and alternatives to Head Start, careful attention will be paid to assessing these alternate child care settings.

### Study Schedule

21. What is the planned schedule for the study?

A field test of all study procedures was conducted and began in early spring of 2001. Head Start programs were recruited for the full-scale study during the spring of 2001. The selection and random assignment of children for the full-scale study occurred between the spring and fall of 2002, with initial data being collected from the study participants in the fall of 2002 (near the beginning of the Head Start year).

### Study Reports

22. When will study information and results be available?

Ongoing and updated information about the study are provided on the study web site at: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing\\_research/hs/impact\\_intro.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/hs/impact_intro.html). As interim findings and other information regarding the study become available they will also be posted on the study website. The current projection for the final report for the study is 2006, once all the children have completed kindergarten (3-year-old group) and/or first grade (4-year-old group).

## Study Contacts

### 23. Who is conducting the study?

The study is sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families of the US Department of Health and Human Services. It is being conducted by Westat of Rockville, Maryland, in collaboration with the Urban Institute and the American Institutes of Research, both in Washington, DC, and Decision Information Resources in Houston, Texas.

### 24. Who should be contacted with further questions?

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