Supporting Parents in Early Childhood Education Programs

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Early Childhood

Introduction

Early care and education (ECE) programs can improve not only children's development but also the parenting skills and wellbeing of their parents and caregivers. In addition to providing families with critical work support, some ECE programs offer supports to enhance parent–child relationships, strengthen parents' capacity to deepen their children's learning outside of school, and improve parental well-being. Many ECE programs encourage parental involvement through opportunities for parents to assist in ECE program activities, such as volunteering in the classroom or at special events. Some ECE programs provide targeted services designed to strengthen parent–child relationships and expand parents' capacity to support their children's learning beyond the classroom. These parent-focused services vary widely in their intensity and approach. They may include light-touch interventions, such as sharing information on child development through written materials or workshops, or offering periodic, tailored suggestions about activities or strategies that align with their child's specific developmental stage. More intensive supports may involve curriculum-based programs targeting specific parenting skills or the provision of home visits where trained staff model stimulating and supportive home behaviors.

This chapter summarizes evidence on initiatives targeting parents and caregivers that are provided through ECE programs and are specifically designed to enhance child development and/or the parenting skills and well-being of parents and caregivers. The chapter provides information on ECE-based activities intended to provide parents with skills to support their children's development outside of the preschool program and activities designed to involve parents in the functioning of the ECE program itself. It does not cover home visiting programs, such as the Nurse Family Partnership, that are provided to parents independently of an ECE program, nor does it cover other interventions intended to support parents and caregivers that are not directly connected to children's ECE program participation. The chapter also does not provide detailed information on the cost of ECE-based, parent-focused services, as this information is typically not included in program evaluations.

The effectiveness of ECE-based parent support initiatives varies, and no single program should be expected to be successful in every context. Nevertheless, research evidence points to four key findings (described below) that can guide policymakers and program

leaders in designing, implementing, and funding ECE-based supports for parents and caregivers. These key findings detail the range of different types of parent-focused interventions provided thorough ECE programs, the impacts of those interventions on child and parent/caregiver outcomes, and factors influencing parent and caregiver use of these programs. While the research base includes numerous studies, the rigor and consistency of findings vary across different aspects of ECE-based parent support. This chapter highlights both well-established conclusions and areas where evidence is mixed or limited.

Key findings

Key finding #1: *ECE programs support parents through a range of activities and services.*

There are two main types of parent-focused activities provided through ECE: (a) parental involvement initiatives that focus on building collaborative relationships between early childhood providers and families and (b) targeted parent-support services to enhance parenting skills and child development. Parental involvement activities include volunteering and participating in school-activities. Targeted parent support services range from structured workshops and home visiting services to lighter-touch supports like sharing general parenting tips or periodic reminders aligned with children's developmental stages. The content and intensity of parent-focused services vary widely across ECE programs.

Key finding #2: *Higher-intensity parent support programs generally lead to stronger results, but some low-intensity programs have demonstrated positive impacts on parent and child outcomes.*

Meta-analyses of ECE-based parent programs show that more-intensive interventions, particularly those offering frequent home visits and opportunities for parents to practice skills, have larger effects on the development of key child skills. However, well-designed, low-intensity interventions, such as those using technology-based tools like text messaging, have also shown promise in improving parental involvement and children's early literacy skills.

Key finding #3: *Program and family factors influence parent participation in ECE-based parental involvement initiatives and targeted support services.*

Strong relationships between parents and teachers, regular communication, and culturally relevant resources are key to increasing parent involvement and participation in targeted parent support programs. Teacher training in parent engagement is also positively associated with parental take-up of ECE-provided involvement and targeted support services. Family characteristics such as teen or single parenthood, mobility, presence of children with disabilities, language spoken, race/ethnicity, and employment hours are also associated with service utilization. Additionally, matching the racial/ethnic characteristics of families with their children's teachers is associated with greater parent engagement and fewer student absences.

Key finding #4: *The mechanisms linking parental involvement in ECE and participation in ECE-provided services to children's skills are not fully understood, but some evidence suggests that improved quality of parent–child interactions at home may be a key factor.*

Parents and caregivers who participate in ECE-offered parental involvement and/or targeted support services on average engage in more cognitive stimulation with their children and use less harsh discipline. These changes in parenting behaviors are associated with improvements in children's academic and behavioral skills. However, this finding is based on correlational evidence and it remains unclear whether participation directly causes these improvements.

Evidence

Key finding 1: *ECE programs support children's parents through a range of activities and services.*

Many parents express the need for help in parenting their young children. In a 2023 national survey, 62% of U.S. parents indicated that parenting was *somewhat or a lot harder* than they had imagined, with this challenge being particularly acute for parents of children under five, who reported experiencing a higher prevalence of fatigue and stress than parents of older children.[1] Many parents report being interested in improving their parenting skills. A 2015 nationally representative survey of parents of children under five indicated that a large majority (80%) of parents believed that parenting skills could be learned, and more than half (54%) were interested in receiving information about how to be a better parent.[2]

ECE programs represent a potentially powerful platform to support young children's parents and caregivers. In 2022, approximately 59% of U.S. three- to five-year-olds were enrolled in some form of ECE program.[3] Many publicly funded ECE programs in the U.S. include parental support services, though the range and intensity of supports vary across settings. These supports can generally be categorized into two main types: (a) parental involvement initiatives that focus on building collaborative relationships between early childhood providers and families and (b) targeted parent support services to enhance parenting skills and child development. The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), which supports child care for over 1.3 million children annually in the U.S., encourages state agencies and ECE programs to engage families in their children's development and learning based on current research and best practices. However, the CCDF does not mandate specific parental support services, leaving the extent of such services to vary across settings.[4] By contrast, Early Head Start and Head Start, which provide ECE services to nearly 900,000 young children across the U.S., are conceived as multigenerational interventions with goals for both children and their parents. These programs are required to involve parents in all program aspects and provide direct services to strengthen parents' skills, knowledge, and understanding of their children's educational and developmental needs. Head Start programs also help parents with other needs, including connecting to available services to support job training, housing, nutrition, and health care.[5] While not as intensive as Early Head Start and Head Start supports, some form of parent engagement is mandated for participating programs in nearly all state-funded ECE programs,[6] and the provision of services for parents is a common marker of quality in most state quality rating systems.[7] The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the largest professional organization for early childhood educators, requires that accredited programs establish and maintain collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings.[8]

Parental involvement initiatives in which parents engage with, support, or participate in the delivery of the ECE services are related to but distinct from targeted parent support

services to enhance parents' capacity to support their children outside of the ECE program. These targeted parent support services may include parent training and education through workshops and classes that focus on child development, positive parenting techniques, and effective communication skills.[9] ECE programs may also provide parents and caregivers with information and resources on child health, nutrition, and wellness, sometimes including access to healthcare services or nutritious food programs. ECE programs may also provide educational resources, such as books and activities to support children's learning at home or send parents texts or information to reinforce material being taught in the child's classroom.[10]

Key finding 2: *Higher-intensity parent support programs generally lead to stronger results, but some low-intensity programs have demonstrated positive impacts on child outcomes.*

Research demonstrates varying levels of effectiveness across different types of ECE-based, parent-focused programming. In general, parents of young children, like most adult learners, benefit most from hands-on experiences.[11] A meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies of ECE demonstrated that among ECE-based programs that offered parenting education, those that included opportunities for parents to practice parenting skills were associated with greater short-term improvements in children's pre-academic skills.[12] This meta-analysis also found that ECE programs that offered frequent parenting education through home visits—defined as one or more visits per month—produced larger effect sizes for children's skills than those that provided home visits less frequently than once a month. A separate meta-analysis examined 10 ECE-based parent programs that were curriculum-based, targeted specific outcomes, and employed professional staff.[13] It found that the effect of adding parent enhancements to ECE programs was associated with moderately sized effects on children's cognitive abilities and on behavioral, health, and socio-emotional outcomes versus a child attending preschool without these enhancements.

The Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) intervention is an example of an effective ECE-based parent support program. PALS provided parents of ECE-enrolled 3- to 5-year-old children with training to use a responsive style and strategies that supported children's academic and social skills. The program was implemented in the families' homes by trained facilitators over 14 weekly sessions, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The intervention was delivered through a combination of video demonstrations, discussions of key responsive behaviors, and guided practice with the parent and child. An experimental evaluation of PALS indicated that the children of parents who received PALS showed greater gains in direct measures of print knowledge and self-regulation, as well as social and language skills observed during interactions with their parent.[14]

The Research-based Developmentally Informed Parent (REDI-P) program is another intensive ECE-based parent support program that produced positive outcomes for children and their parents. The REDI-P program offered parents training to implement learning activities and games to engage their children at home. Parents received 16 home visits from project staff over a two-year period (8 visits per year) that lasted approximately 1 hour each. During these visits, parents were given a set of learning activities and games, along with modeling of effective teaching strategies. The home visitors reviewed the parents' use of the materials and provided supportive feedback. The learning activities and games focused on promoting children's language-emergent literacy skills and social-emotional skills. In addition, parents received six booster sessions to review and practice the strategies they had learned. In a randomized controlled trial, children whose parents

participated in REDI-P demonstrated small to moderate improvements with effect sizes ranging from 0.25 to 0.29 across a range of academic, social-emotional, and parent-reported home learning outcomes, relative to children whose families received the same ECE classroom programming without the parent-focused component.[15]

Several evidence-based, intensive parenting education programs have demonstrated significant and lasting benefits for both parenting skills and child outcomes across diverse populations.[16] The Incredible Years program was a 10-week intervention focusing on proactive, nurturing parenting and discouraging harsh, punitive approaches. An experimental evaluation of the program found that, compared to a waiting-list control group, participating parents reported reduced child behavior problems and disruptive behaviors and improved parent–child interactions, with benefits maintained at 12-month follow-up (effect sizes ranged from 0.40 to 0.83).[17] Similarly, a comprehensive, systematic review of studies of the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program, which offers tiered support to parents, found small to moderate effects on parenting practices, parenting satisfaction and efficacy, parental adjustment and relationships, and children's social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (effect sizes ranged from 0.23 to 0.58). These benefits were observed in both short- and long-term follow-ups.[18] Additionally, the Chicago Parent Program (CPP), a 12-session parent training program developed in collaboration with African American and Latino parents, has also shown promising results. An experimental study of 253 parents of 2–4-year-old children from low-income families compared CPP participants to a waitlist control group receiving usual care. At one-year follow-up, CPP-participating parents used less corporal punishment ($d = -0.24$) and issued fewer commands to their children ($d = -0.29$ to -0.32). Children of CPP participants exhibited fewer behavior problems during observed play and clean-up sessions ($d = -0.43$ to -0.46). Moreover, parents who attended at least half of the CPP sessions reported greater improvements in parenting self-efficacy ($d = 0.37$), more consistent discipline ($d = 0.29$), greater warmth ($d = 0.08$), and a decline in child behavior problems ($d = -0.31$ to -0.64) compared to control group parents.[19]

Some ECE programs have integrated job training and skill development into their curricula, allowing parents to enhance their job skills and gain confidence in their abilities. For instance, More than three-quarters of parents who participated in the CareerAdvance program, an ECE-based, healthcare-sector training for parents enrolled in Head Start, earned certifications to advance their careers within 16 months of enrolling.[20] Other research used data from the experimental Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project to examine how parenting and family self-sufficiency services embedded in Early Head Start can help families achieve greater economic stability and well-being.[21] The study highlighted that access to comprehensive services, including financial literacy training and employment assistance, not only enhances parents' job readiness but also contributes to a more supportive home environment.

While more-intensive parent support programs typically demonstrate stronger and more consistent impacts on targeted outcomes, some technology-based, low-intensity programs have also shown promise in producing positive impacts on child outcomes. For example, READY4K! provided parents of ECE-enrolled children with three text messages per week during the school year (starting in October and ending in May), each week addressing a particular set of skills. An experimental evaluation of the impacts of READY4K! found that it produced small to moderately sized impacts on children's literacy skills.[22] Similarly, an experimental study of preschoolers low-income families found that

providing parents with a digital tablet containing math apps or analog math materials combined with text messages to manage present bias increased children's math skills by about 0.20 standard deviations six months after the intervention. These interventions also significantly increased parents' self-reported time engaged in math activities with their children, suggesting a potential mechanism for the improvement in children's math skills.[23]

Key finding 3: *Program and family factors influence parent participation in ECE-based parental involvement initiatives and targeted support services.*

The utilization of ECE parent support services varies based on program-level factors and family characteristics. Although research indicates that, in general, the more opportunities ECE programs offer parents, the more involved that parents are with programs and take up targeted program initiatives,[24] other factors can influence the extent to which parents participate in offered services. At the program level, fostering strong relationships between parents and teachers appears important for encouraging participation in parent-focused services. Specifically, when educators actively communicate and build trust with families, parents may be more likely to participate in school activities and feel welcomed in the educational environment. A quasi-experimental study of A Companion Curriculum, an initiative that encouraged parent involvement and provided targeted services, found that the quality of the parent–teacher relationship was significantly correlated with parental participation in the program. This suggests that fostering strong connections between parents and teachers can enhance involvement in both general ECE-based activities and targeted parent support services.[25] Another quasi-experimental study conducted in Head Start programs found that ECE teachers' direct training in parent engagement strategies, such as effective communication, was positively associated with parents' level of involvement in both general preschool activities and targeted support services.[26]

Parents' participation in ECE-based parental involvement initiatives and targeted support services varies across families with different demographic characteristics. A study focused on Head Start home-visiting programs found that teens and single mothers received fewer services overall, while more-mobile families had shorter program durations. Conversely, families of children with disabilities remained in the programs longer and demonstrated higher levels of engagement as rated by program staff. African American families and families with more risk factors received fewer services that directly targeted child development, learning, and well-being, such as structured learning experiences, activities promoting cognitive and language ability, support for parent–child interactions, and school readiness activities focusing on pre-academic skills. Although White families received a greater number of services they did not exhibit higher levels of engagement (e.g. showing interest, responsiveness, or participation) during those visits.[27] Another study found that matching racial/ethnic characteristics between families and teachers enhances parental involvement in Head Start and decreases student absences, particularly among Hispanic families, suggesting that family engagement may be one potential mechanism by which racial/ethnic match improves educational outcomes.[28] Relatedly, providing culturally relevant resources and support tailored to minoritized families' needs—such as incorporating cultural artifacts, texts, and diverse perspectives into the curriculum, providing materials and communications in native languages, offering translation services, or holding meetings in familiar community spaces—improves ECE involvement and initiative participation from these groups.[29]

Key finding 4: *The mechanisms linking parental involvement in ECE and participation in ECE-provided targeted support services to children's skills are not fully understood, but some evidence suggests that improved quality of parent–child interactions at home may be a key factor.*

Parental involvement in ECE programs and engagement in ECE-provided, parent-focused interventions could lead to various outcomes that indirectly benefit children's development. These might include parents acquiring more cognitively stimulating materials for independent child use, changes in other supportive behaviors like establishing regular sleep routines or improving nutrition, or improvements in parental well-being leading to better financial security for families. While these factors may contribute, there is not strong evidence that they are the primary mechanisms through which parental involvement and engagement lead to better child outcomes.

Instead, evidence suggests that parent participation in ECE-based involvement and support activities is beneficial because they encourage parents to provide a more developmentally appropriate home learning environment and strengthen the parent–child relationship.[30] Parents' involvement in ECE programs may also improve their skills, attitudes, and knowledge related to child development, which can then improve children's learning in the home setting.[31] Research has emphasized the critical role of parent responsiveness in child development, highlighting how sensitive and contingent responses from parents significantly influence a child's emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes.[32] Parental responsiveness is defined as the ability of parents to accurately interpret and appropriately react to their children's signals, which is essential for fostering secure attachments and promoting healthy development.[33]

Research using longitudinal data from the nationally representative Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) suggests a connection between parental involvement and parenting behaviors. Parents who participated more in Head Start programs were found to engage in more cognitive stimulation with their children and use less spanking and controlling behaviors.[34] These differences in parenting behaviors, in turn, were associated with improvements in children's academic and behavioral skills. Although these findings are correlational and may reflect that parents who are more engaged with children's child care programs are also more engaged with parent-focused activities at school, they suggest a potential pathway through which parental engagement in ECE programs may influence children's development. Specifically, increased parental involvement in ECE activities could lead to enhanced parenting practices at home, which may in turn contribute to improved child outcomes.

Future directions

Research on ECE-based parent support programs has yielded valuable insights, yet several areas warrant further investigation to better understand the effectiveness and scalability of these interventions. A critical area for future research is the cost-effectiveness of parent support programs, particularly those involving intensive interventions like frequent home visits. While these programs have shown promising results, their resource-intensive nature raises questions about scalability. Future studies should systematically document the costs associated with different types of interventions and explore innovative approaches to provide personalized, high-intensity support at scale. This information is crucial for policymakers and program administrators to make informed decisions about resource allocation and program design.

The potential of emerging technologies to support parent engagement and child development represents another exciting frontier. While text-based interventions have demonstrated effectiveness, the increasing competition for parents' attention in the digital space demands exploration of novel delivery mechanisms. Artificial intelligence (AI) is promising in this regard, potentially offering personalized, just-in-time support based on the unique needs of specific families and children. For instance, AI could analyze videos of parent–child interactions to identify areas for improvement and provide tailored guidance. However, as we explore these technological solutions, it is imperative to address potential biases in AI systems and ensure robust safeguards for family privacy.

Further research is also needed to elucidate the unique benefits of delivering parent-focused services through ECE programs. While ECE settings offer a convenient point of contact with parents, it remains unclear whether this context provides additional advantages over standalone parent support programs. Future studies should investigate the extent to which the alignment of ECE curriculum and parent interventions yields synergistic effects on child outcomes. Additionally, research should examine the professional development needs of ECE teachers and program leaders to effectively integrate parent support into their existing responsibilities and expertise.

Last, additional longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impacts of ECE-based parent support programs on both child and family outcomes are essential. Such research could provide valuable insights into the sustained effects of these interventions and inform the design of more effective, multi-generational support strategies.

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