

# America's Future Needs Early Head Start

## Early Head Start Talking Points



Use these talking points to communicate with your policymakers about the Early Head Start program and its benefits for infants, toddlers, and pregnant women.

### **It is Time to Think Babies™!**

- The science is clear. Our brains grow faster between the ages of 0 and 3 than at any later period in life, forming more than one million new neural connections every second.<sup>i</sup>
- When babies have nurturing relationships, positive early learning experiences, and good health and nutrition, those neural connections are stimulated and strengthened, laying a strong foundation for the rest of their lives.<sup>ii</sup>
- When babies don't get what their growing brains need to thrive, they don't develop as they should. This leads to life-long developmental, educational, social, and health challenges.<sup>iii</sup>

### **America's Future Depends on Early Head Start**

- Of the 12 million infants and toddlers across the United States, nearly 1 in 5 lives in poverty.<sup>iv</sup>
- That means that far too many families face persistent hardships – such as food insecurity, unstable housing, unsafe neighborhoods, and exposure to violence – that create unrelenting stress that impacts a family's ability to provide the nurturing experiences babies need to thrive.<sup>v</sup>
- Early Head Start is the only federal program specifically focused on the early development and learning experiences of babies and toddlers living in families with incomes below the poverty line. The program uses a two-generation approach, offering comprehensive services to children and families with the goal of supporting the child.
- Currently, Early Head Start only reaches 8% of eligible infants and toddlers.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Impacts of Poverty on Child Development**

- Poverty affects children's brain development and learning. Children who start out in poverty are more likely to fall behind in self-regulation, learning, memory and language and emotional control. Gaps in development appear before a child's second birthday.<sup>vii</sup>

- Young children living in poverty are more likely to experience learning disabilities or developmental delays.<sup>viii</sup>
- Because this is such a formative time for children, every second a baby and toddler lives in poverty is another second his or her brain development and future success is threatened.

### Early Head Start Approach<sup>ix</sup>

- Early Head Start is an evidence-based and community-driven program that supports the healthy development of babies, toddlers, and pregnant women living in poverty to ensure that all children have the same opportunities to succeed.
- Infants and toddlers whose families have incomes below the Federal Poverty Guidelines are eligible for Early Head Start. Children under the age of three in foster care or experiencing homelessness are also automatically eligible.
- As a two-generation program, Early Head Start creates opportunities for both parents and very young children, helping parents improve their prospects for economic security while simultaneously ensuring their children are on a solid path from the earliest age to engage in lifelong learning.
- Early Head Start programs:
  - **Provide child development services** through early childhood education settings (high-quality centers or family child care homes meeting Early Head Start requirements) or weekly home visits with program staff. Local agencies determine the program options that will best serve eligible children and families in their communities.
  - **Partner with parents**, supporting them in parenting and shaping their children’s development.
  - **Address the multiple risks of poverty** through a full range of individualized services for young children and their families, including child development, health and mental health, nutrition, and family support services.
  - **Conduct annual community assessments** to ensure the programs offer the most meaningful program options to address local family needs, identify resources and gaps in services, and reach the families that are most in need.
- Early Head Start programs must follow national standards for high-quality and comprehensive services.

## Research Demonstrates that Early Head Start Shows Success for Children and Families:

- Early Head Start received a rigorous longitudinal, large-scale, randomized-control trial study. Researchers found that the program makes a positive difference across a broad set of factors associated with children’s success in school, family self-sufficiency, and parental support of child development.
- Early Head Start benefits children and their families. Enrolling early is best, for both pregnant mothers and their children.
  - Children in Early Head Start showed positive impacts at ages 2 and 3, including enhanced cognitive and language skills, decreased aggressive behaviors, increased engagement with parent during play, and increased rates of immunization.<sup>x</sup>
  - Parents offer more stimulating home environments, read more with their children, use less physical punishment, and have higher levels of self-sufficiency.<sup>xi</sup>
  - Early Head Start mothers who enrolled during pregnancy made more gains in emotionally supporting their children, and their children demonstrated stronger impacts on their social-emotional and cognitive development at age three.<sup>xii</sup>
- Continuous services yield the best results.<sup>xiii</sup> At age five, children who had Early Head Start followed by a formal preschool program at age four to five, such as Head Start, had the best outcomes. Families with multiple risk factors appear to particularly benefit from five continuous years of comprehensive services.
- Subgroup findings can help communities effectively target and improve services. For example:
  - Particularly strong and lasting impacts were found for African American children, including through fifth grade.<sup>xiv</sup>
  - For children who had attended center-based Early Head Start programs, at fifth grade, grade retention was cut by more than half compared with the control group.<sup>xv</sup>
- Investing in Early Head Start has unexpected welfare benefits. Research found that participation in Early Head Start led to a long-term reduction in children’s involvement with the child welfare system.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Early Head Start Supports Community Development

- Early Head Start takes an active role in community leadership in early childhood education and family support. They regularly convene stakeholders to assess community needs and plan and innovate response.
- Early Head Start supports child care and family child care partners in meeting high standards for care and comprehensive support, raising the quality of care and services for all children enrolled in those community programs.

## Policy Recommendations:

- With its flexible design and strong *Head Start Program Performance Standards*, Early Head Start offers high-quality child development and comprehensive services to young children and families most in need.
- Policymakers should increase federal and state investments in Early Head Start, and programs modeled on Early Head Start, to ensure that more eligible infants and toddlers are served.
  - Congress should continue directing federal funding to expand Early Head Start capacity.
  - The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should encourage programs to convert funded Head Start slots to Early Head Start openings wherever doing so meets community needs.
  - State policymakers should direct state resources to fund comprehensive services for infants and toddlers who are most in need by expanding Early Head Start.
- Policymakers should continue to anchor Early Head Start in adequately resourced community assessments and informed local choices for the program options most needed in communities.
  - Ensure that Early Head Start programs are supported in offering the high-quality services through the program options that make sense for their community.
  - Continue the option for local programs to partner with child care centers and provide extra training and technical assistance resources.
- Policymakers should support efforts to grow a well-qualified and fairly compensated Early Head Start workforce, prepared to serve the youngest children and families.
- Policymakers should emphasize enrolling pregnant women in Early Head Start to maximize the time they and their children can benefit.
- Finally, policymakers should fund new research to assess how programs that are implementing new *Head Start Program Performance Standards* benefit families and children.

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<sup>ii</sup> Thompson, R. A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *The Future of Children*, 11(1), 20–33.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> US Census Bureau. (2019). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/income-poverty/p60-266.html>

v. Magnuson, K. A., & Duncan, G. J. (2019). Parents in Poverty | Handbook of Parenting. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429398995-9>

<sup>vi</sup> ZERO TO THREE calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/income-poverty/p60-266.html>

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- <sup>vii</sup> Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wander, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009, June). Disparities in early learning and development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Birth Cohort. Retrieved from <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2009-52DisparitiesELExecSumm.pdf>
- <sup>viii</sup> Rosenberg, S.A., Zhang, D., & Robinson, C.C. (2008). Prevalence of developmental delays and participation in early intervention services for young children. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 121(6), 1502-1509.
- <sup>ix</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2016). Head Start Program Performance Standards (45CFR, Chapter VIII). Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>
- <sup>x</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2002). Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impact of Early Head Start Volume I: Final Technical Report. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/making-a-difference-in-the-lives-of-infants-and-toddlers-and-their-families-0>
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xii</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Research to practice: Services and outcomes for Early Head Start families enrolled during pregnancy: Is there a magic window?* Retrieved from: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/pregnancy.pdf>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Love, J. & Vogel, C. (2016). Early Head Start. In D. Couchenour & J. Chrisman (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of contemporary early childhood education* (pp. 488-491). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc doi: 10.4135/9781483340333.n133
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Green, B.L., Ayoub, C., Bartlett, J.D., Furrer, C., Chazan Cohen, R., Buttita, K., Von Ende, A., Koepp, A., Regalbuto, E., & Sanders, M.B. (2018). Research Brief: How Early Head Start prevents child maltreatment. Retrieved from [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/EarlyHeadStartBrief\\_ChildTrends\\_October2018.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/EarlyHeadStartBrief_ChildTrends_October2018.pdf)