



Estimating the effects of Head Start on parenting and child maltreatment[☆]

Fuhua Zhai^{a,*}, Jane Waldfogel^{b,1}, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn^{c,2}

^a School of Social Welfare, Stony Brook University, L2-093 Health Sciences Center, Stony Brook, NY 11794, United States

^b School of Social Work, Columbia University, 1255 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027, United States

^c Teachers College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, United States

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ABSTRACT

We examine the effects of Head Start participation on parenting and child maltreatment in a large and diverse sample of low-income families in large U.S. cities ($N=2807$), using rich data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). To address the issue of selection bias, we employ several analytic approaches, including logistic regressions with a rich set of pretreatment controls as well as propensity score matching models, comparing the effects of Head Start to any other arrangements as well as specific types of other arrangements. We find that compared to children who did not attend Head Start, children who did attend Head Start are less likely to have low access to learning materials and less likely to experience spanking by their parents at age five. Moreover, we find that the effects of Head Start vary depending on the specific types of other child care arrangements to which they are compared, with the most consistently beneficial protective effects seen when Head Start is compared to being home in exclusively parental care.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment affects an estimated 3.5 million children in the United States each year, and young, low-income children are at particularly high risk (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2009). Yet, we know remarkably little about what programs might effectively reduce the risk of maltreatment for vulnerable young children (Waldfogel, 2009). Many existing preventive programs have not been studied, and others have been studied without rigorous research designs or adequate data.

Among the programs potentially available to prevent maltreatment among young children, Head Start is particularly relevant. Head Start is the largest publicly supported child care program in the United States and is targeted to low-income children, as well as children with disabilities, both groups at high risk for maltreatment. There are many reasons to believe Head Start might improve

parenting and reduce maltreatment. In addition to reducing parental stress and opportunities for maltreatment by providing out-of-home care for children, Head Start also promotes parental involvement and parent education, which might improve parenting and reduce the use of abusive discipline or neglectful behaviors. In addition, like other child care programs, Head Start might serve a monitoring function; parents may be deterred from abusing or neglecting their children because Head Start staff might observe that behavior and report the family to child protective services (CPS).

However, in spite of the many studies of Head Start, little research has been conducted on its effects on parenting and child maltreatment, and the research that has been conducted is limited in three respects. First, available studies have focused on spanking, often finding protective effects of Head Start. These studies, however, have not included standardized instruments to measure abuse and neglect directly. While this omission is understandable, given the rarity of abuse and neglect data in population samples, it leaves open the question whether Head Start reduces abuse and neglect. Second, selection bias remains a perennial challenge. Head Start serves the most disadvantaged children who may experience inadequate parenting and maltreatment. To date, only one randomized controlled study of Head Start has been carried out. That study, the Head Start Impact Study, suggested that Head Start reduces parents' use of spanking but like other studies did not examine child maltreatment. Third, prior studies, including the Head Start Impact Study, have not clearly defined the counterfactual, or reference group with which

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 631 444 3176.

E-mail addresses: fuhua.zhai@stonybrook.edu (F. Zhai), jw205@columbia.edu (J. Waldfogel), brooks-gunn@columbia.edu (J. Brooks-Gunn).

¹ Tel.: +1 212 851 2408.

² Tel.: +1 212 678 3369.

Head Start is being compared. Failing to specify the counterfactual may result in inconsistent findings across studies depending on the alternative care arrangements children in the samples have received.

In this study, we analyze Head Start and abuse and neglect using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). We examine the effects of Head Start participation on parenting and child maltreatment when children are five years old. As detailed below, we use standardized instruments to measure parenting and child maltreatment. We employ several analytic methods, including both logistic regression models with rich controls and a propensity score matching method, to address the issue of selection bias. We estimate the average effects of Head Start by comparing Head Start participants to all non-participants and also compare the former to children in other specific types of care arrangements (i.e., exclusively parental care, pre-kindergarten programs, other center-based care, or other non-parental care).

1.1. Prior research on Head Start and child maltreatment

Child maltreatment has long been recognized as a major social problem (Baumrind, 1994; Chen, Dunne, & Han, 2004; Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988; Hahn & Guterman, 2001; Park, 2001; Tang, 2002; Zhai & Gao, 2009). In 2007, more than 3.5 million children were the subject of child abuse or neglect reports and were investigated or assessed by CPS agencies. Eight hundred thousand were identified as victims of maltreatment, suggesting a victimization rate of 10.6 per 1000 children in the population (USDHHS, 2009). Young children are at highest risk for maltreatment. Other factors associated with increased risk include low family income and child disability (Waldfoegel, 1998).

Child maltreatment has been found to be negatively associated with children's short- and long-term developmental outcomes, including those in the social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and general health domains (see research and reviews by Berger & Waldfoegel, 2010; Bogat, DeJonghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Suglia, Enlow, Kullowatz, & Wright, 2009; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003; Zhai & Gao, 2009). Thus, identifying services that might reduce maltreatment is important. However, to date, we know remarkably little about such services (Waldfoegel, 2009). Relatively few studies of preventive services have been carried out, and those have not produced valid estimates of causal effects, due to limitations of data or methods or both.

Given the elevated risk of maltreatment facing young children, understanding the role of early childhood care and education programs in improving parenting skills and preventing child maltreatment is particularly relevant. Child protection agencies have long viewed child care as a service to prevent maltreatment of young children, as well as to promote parenting skills and child health and development. For example, the Alaska CPS agency explains that "protective day care services provide day care to children of families where the children are at risk of being abused or neglected. The services are designed to lessen that risk by providing child care relief, offering support to both the child and parents, monitoring for occurring and reoccurring maltreatment, and providing role models to families" (State of Alaska, Office of Children's Services (OCS), 2008).

Current research provides some evidence about the effects of Head Start on parenting and child maltreatment but is also plagued by several limitations. The strongest evidence comes from the Head Start Impact Study, the only study to assess the impacts of Head Start using a random assignment method. This study found that after one year's participation, parents of 3-year olds who had been randomly assigned to Head Start were less likely to report spanking their child in the prior

week and reported spanking less frequently (however, there were no effects on spanking for parents of four year olds); effects were strongest for teen mothers (USDHHS, 2005). In related research on younger children (age 0 to 3), reduced spanking was also found in a random assignment study of the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP), an early child care program for low birth-weight children (Smith & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) and in a random assignment study of the Early Head Start program, which provides in-home and/or child care services to low-income infants and toddlers (Love et al., 2005).

Prior observational studies provide some suggestive evidence. Analyses of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) cohort, a large nationally representative sample of children entering kindergarten in the fall of 1998, found that parents of children who had attended Head Start were more likely to report that they never used spanking than were parents of children who had not attended any child care center (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). In addition, Head Start parents were more likely to say they would not use spanking in a hypothetical situation.

However, measuring effects on spanking is not the same as measuring effects on other aspects of parenting or child maltreatment. In this regard, the results from a quasi-experimental evaluation of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers are particularly interesting. This program, which like Head Start provided preschool child care to children from disadvantaged neighborhoods during the two years prior to kindergarten, was found to reduce court petitions related to maltreatment by close to 50% as compared to similar neighborhoods that did not have the program (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003). However, even this study did not measure actual abuse or neglect in the home. In summary, although Head Start (and related programs) has been extensively studied, little research exists on their effects on measures of parenting and child maltreatment (beyond spanking).

Another issue is selection bias, which has been a perennial problem in Head Start research. Head Start by definition serves disadvantaged children who may be at elevated risk of poor outcomes, including low-quality parenting and elevated rates of child maltreatment. Indeed, some children may be referred to Head Start because they have already been exposed to poor home environments or child maltreatment, or because they have been identified as at high risk for such exposure. Analyses that do not take this negative selection account will produce biased estimates. As discussed above, the Head Start Impact Study, the only existing randomized experiment on Head Start, showed evidence that Head Start participation reduced parents' use of spanking. Nevertheless, it is unknown whether Head Start participation reduces child maltreatment as measured by indicators other than spanking.

In addition, most studies have not clearly defined the reference group to which Head Start children were compared, even though children not attending Head Start attend a variety of alternative care settings, depending on the localities and time periods (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, & Schnur, 1988; USDHHS, 2005). The Head Start Impact Study compared children assigned to Head Start to all others who were not assigned. We might expect, however, that the effects of Head Start (on parenting and child maltreatment, as well as other outcomes) might vary depending on what the counterfactual is. If, for example, what produces protective effects is the monitoring of children by professionals in child care settings, we might expect particularly strong protective effects for children who otherwise would have remained at home or in informal care, as compared to lesser or null effects for children who otherwise would have attended some other form of formal preschool or pre-kindergarten. Alternatively, if what produces protective effects is parent support and education, then Head Start, with its extensive parental involvement and education programs, might be more protective than other types of preschool or pre-kindergarten programs.

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