

# **Investigating the Role of Head Start Parents as Primary Nurturers of Their Children**

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# Introduction

The initial conceptualizations of the Head Start program placed families in a central position within the Head Start program philosophy. This is emphasized by the program's formal focus on families, particularly parents, within the Program Performance Standards. These Performance Standards detail a set of requirements that include family goal setting, parent involvement in child development and education, and parent involvement in health, nutrition, and mental health education.

With low-income populations shifting in both makeup and physical location, and with changes in the availability of work and services for these families, the typical activities of Head Start families have changed over the past decade. The goal of this poster is to provide updated information on the activities of parents in their roles as the primary nurturers of their Head Start children, with a focus on three areas: 1) changes in households; 2) fathers' presence in the households; and 3) the working status of parents. These data were collected through the administration of a comprehensive interview to the primary caregivers of selected Head Start children (See the 'Design and Implications' poster).

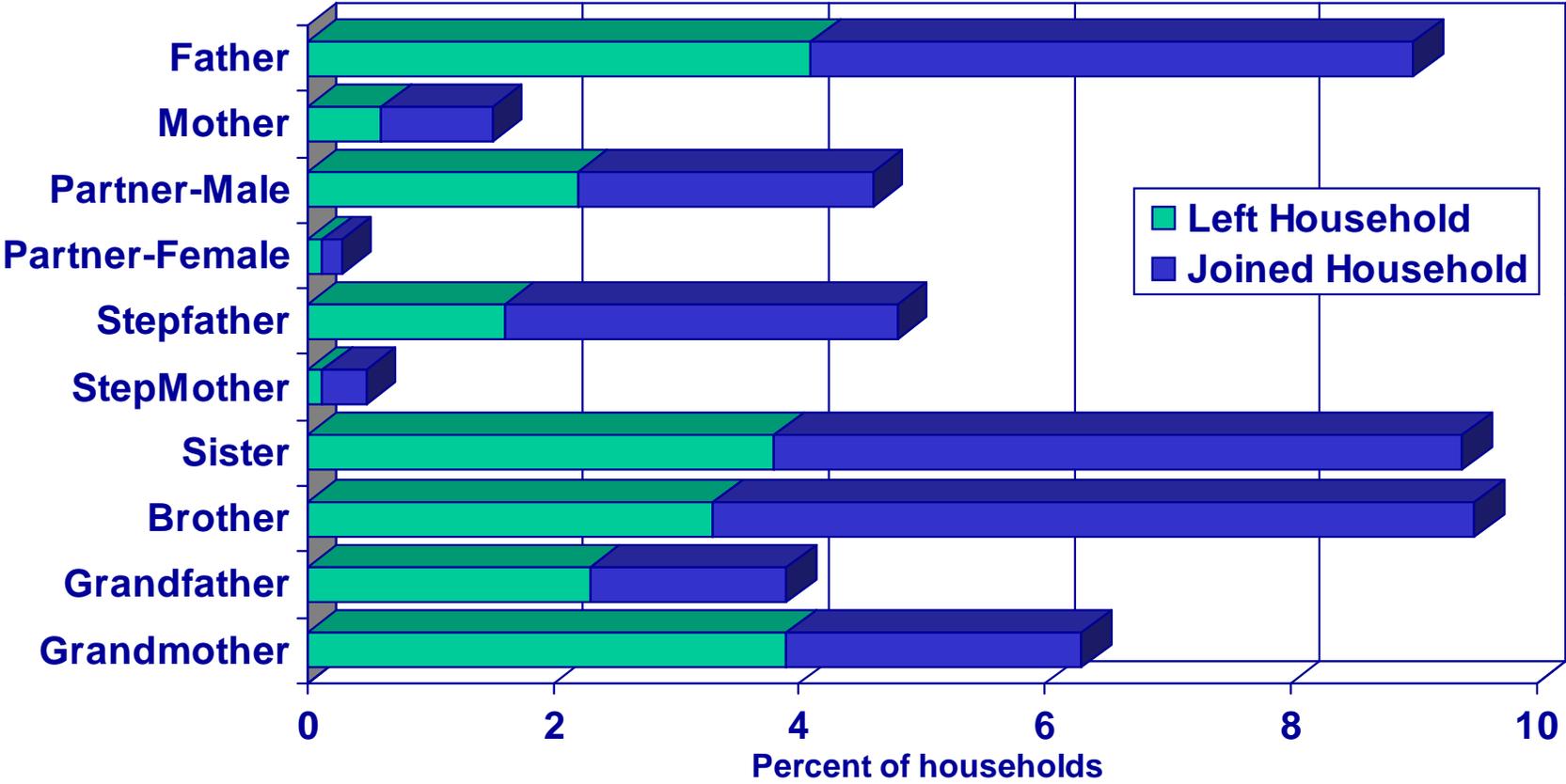
## Demographic Characteristics of Head Start Families

| Characteristic                      | Category                          | Percent |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Respondents                         | Mothers                           | 87.8    |
|                                     | Fathers                           | 5.1     |
|                                     | Grandparents                      | 4.2     |
|                                     | Other                             | 2.9     |
| Ethnicity (Child)                   | African American                  | 36.6    |
|                                     | Hispanic/Latino                   | 24.2    |
|                                     | White                             | 27.4    |
|                                     | American Indian/Alaskan Native    | 1.9     |
|                                     | Asian/Pacific Islander            | 1.1     |
| Primary Caregiver Age               | 18-20                             | 2.4     |
|                                     | 20-30                             | 59.3    |
|                                     | 30-40                             | 29.0    |
|                                     | 40+                               | 9.3     |
| Primary Caregiver Education         | Less than High School Diploma/GED | 27.6    |
|                                     | High School Diploma/GED           | 36.5    |
|                                     | Some College                      | 27.8    |
|                                     | AA Degree                         | 5.7     |
|                                     | College Degree or higher          | 2.8     |
| Primary Caregiver Marital Status    | Single                            | 36.0    |
|                                     | Married                           | 42.7    |
|                                     | Separated                         | 8.7     |
|                                     | Divorced                          | 10.9    |
|                                     | Widowed                           | 1.7     |
| Family Structure                    | Mother and Father                 | 42.3    |
|                                     | Mother Only                       | 33.3    |
|                                     | Mother and Other                  | 16.9    |
|                                     | Father Only/ and Other            | 2.0     |
|                                     | Other                             | 4.4     |
| Primary Caregiver Employment Status | Working Full time                 | 34.6    |
|                                     | Working Part time/Seasonal        | 17.5    |
|                                     | Unemployed, looking for work      | 19.8    |
|                                     | Unemployed, not looking for work  | 28.2    |

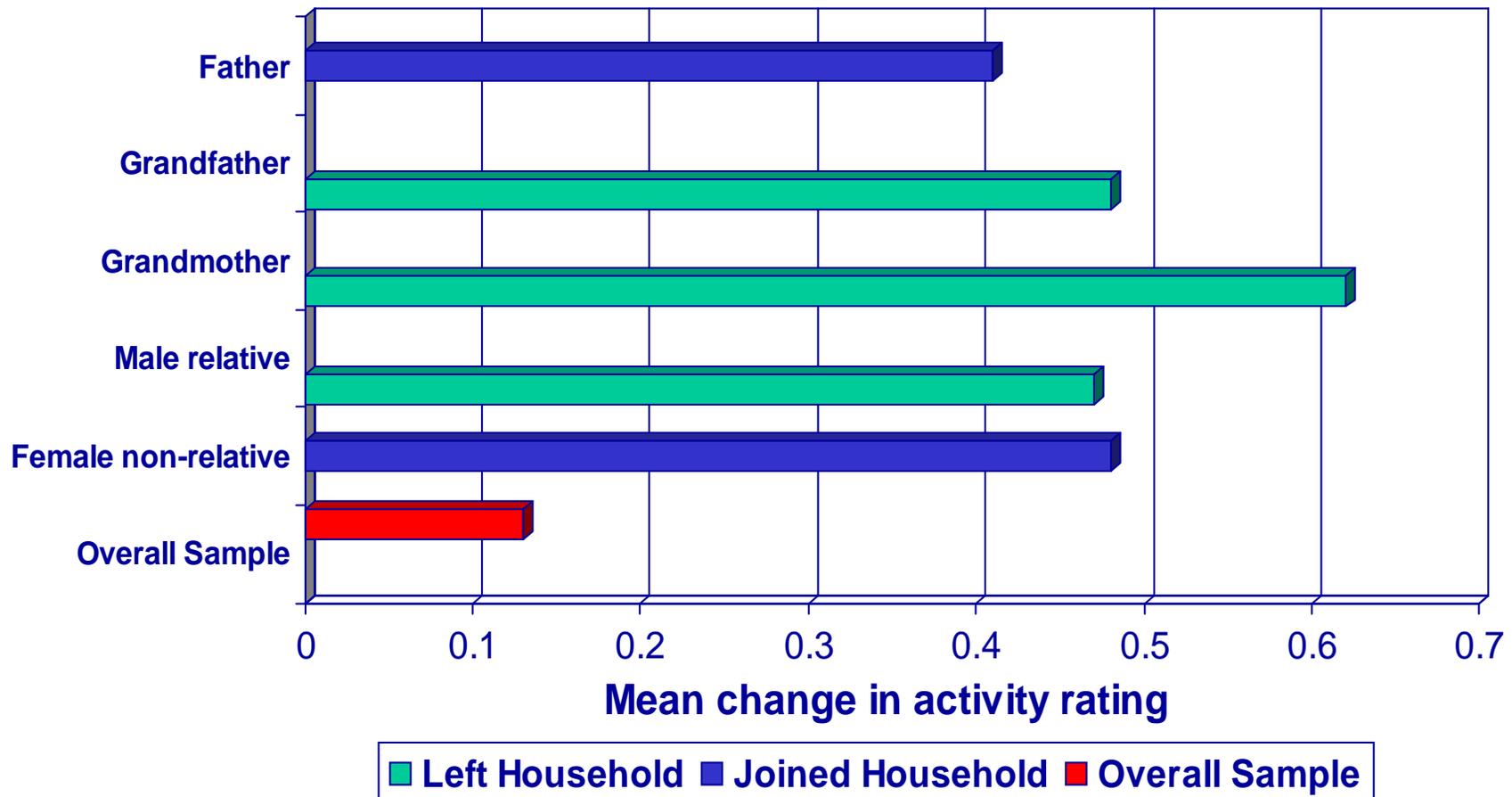
## **Summary of Household Changes for Families Reporting in Fall 1997 and Spring 1998**

- 42.5% of these families experienced some household change.
- 27.7% of these families experienced someone leaving the household.
- 31.6% of these families experienced someone entering the household.
- 32.7% of these families experienced someone leaving and someone entering the household.
  
- There was no significant association between household change and the reported use of child care services in addition to Head Start.

# Between Fall 1997 and Spring 1998, Fathers and Siblings were Most Likely to Enter or Leave the Household



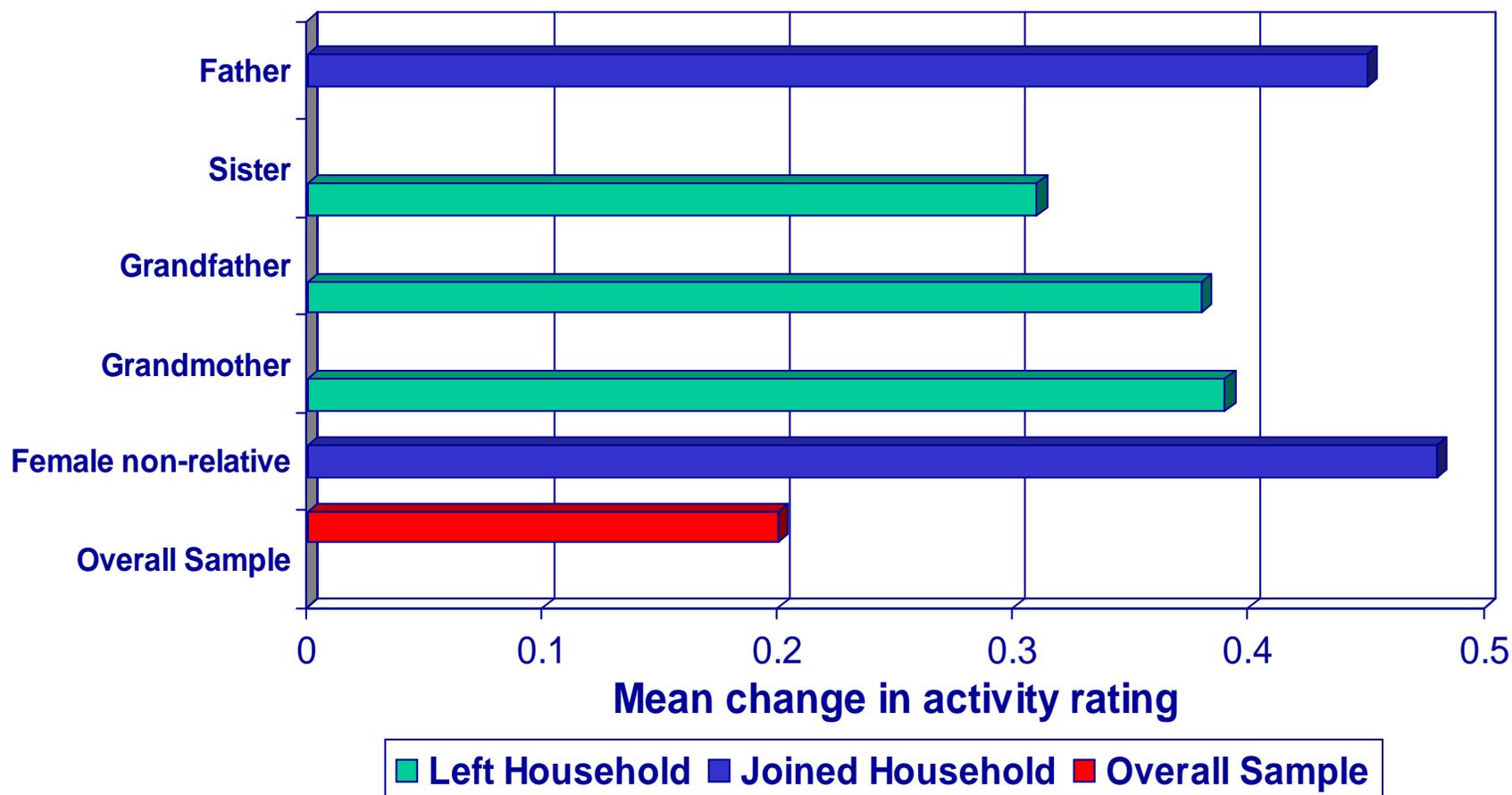
# Some Household Changes Brought Increases in Weekly Family Activities With the Children



Changes are significant,  $p < .05$

Actual scale range = 0 to 7

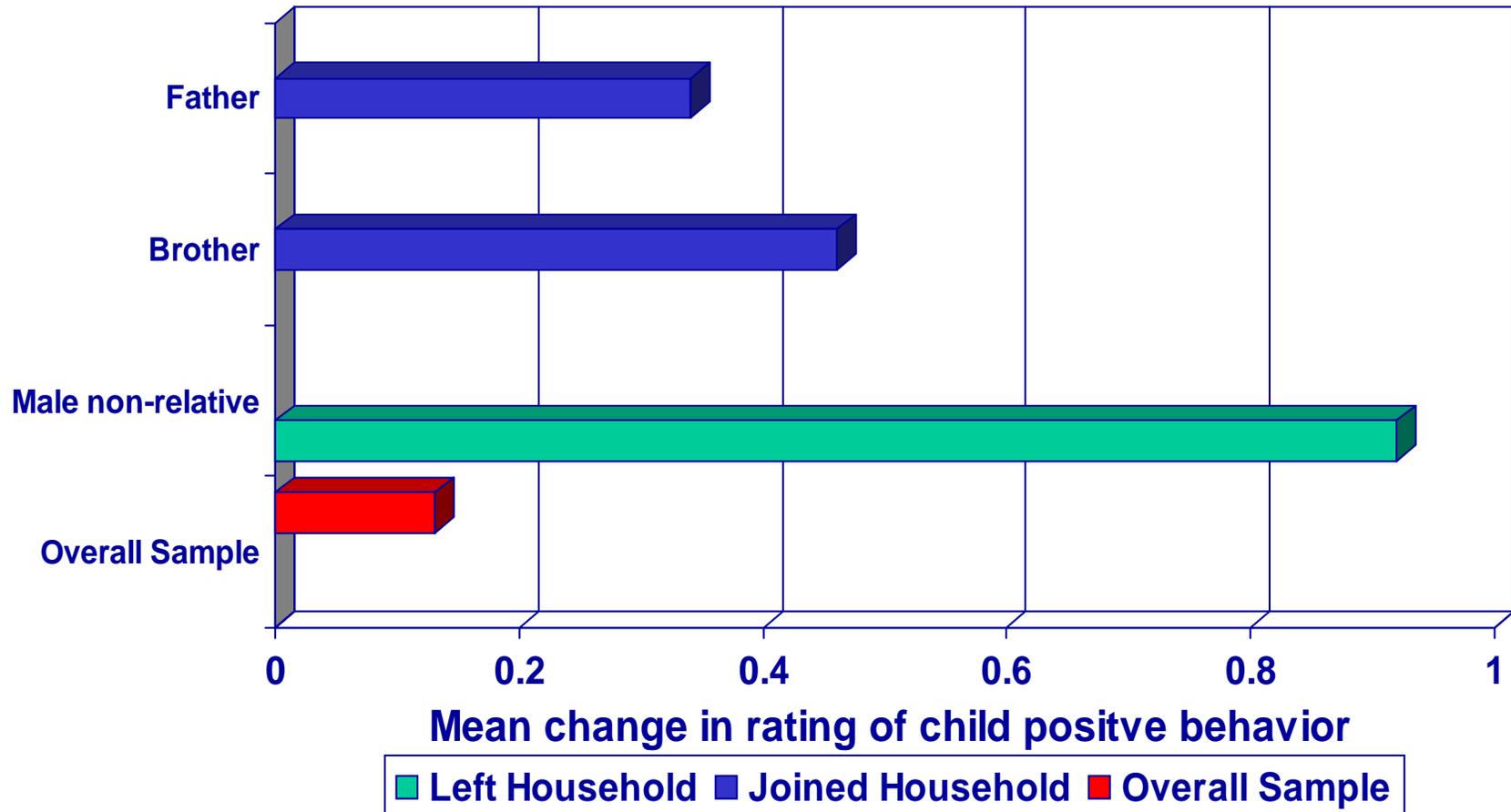
## Some Household Changes Brought Increases in Monthly Family Activities With the Children



Changes are significant,  $p < .05$

Actual scale range = 0 to 7

## Some Household Changes Corresponded with Improved Ratings of Positive Child Behaviors

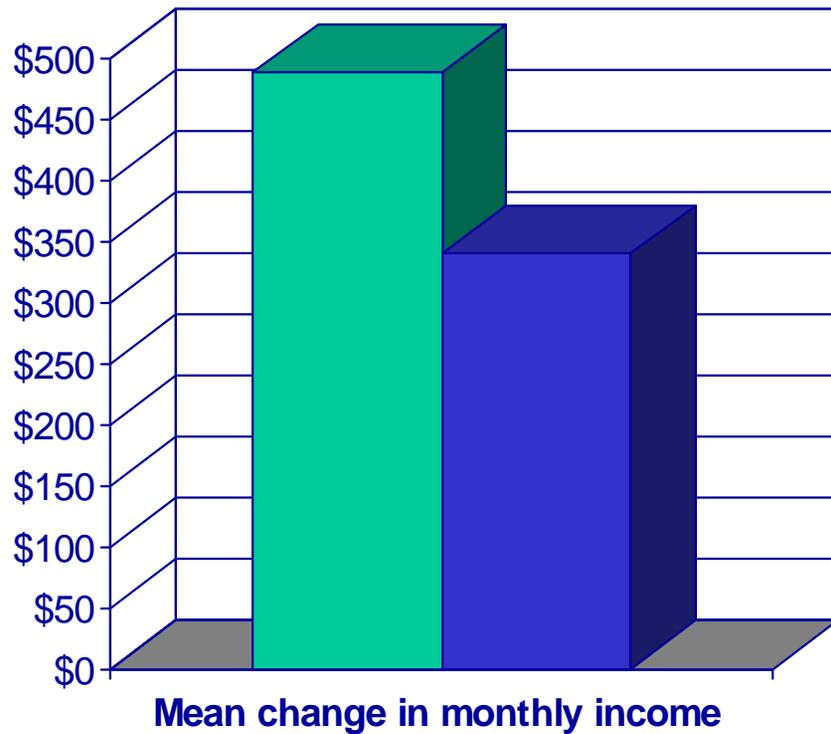


Changes are significant,  $p < .05$

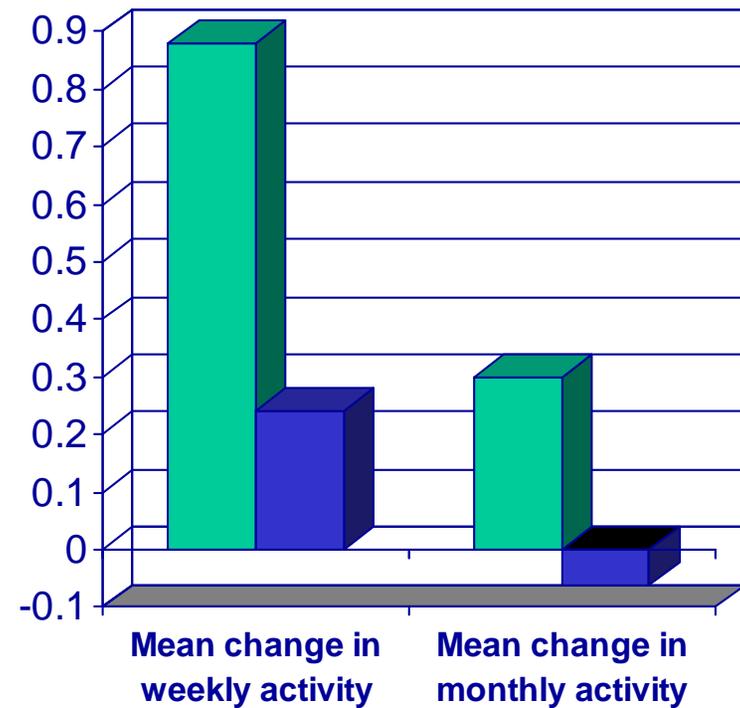
Scale range = 0 to 14

# Income and Family Activities with the Children were Related to a Significant Adult Female Entering or Leaving the Household

Mother, Stepmother, Grandmother, Foster Mother, Partner-female



■ Left Household /N=22 ■ Joined Household/N=105

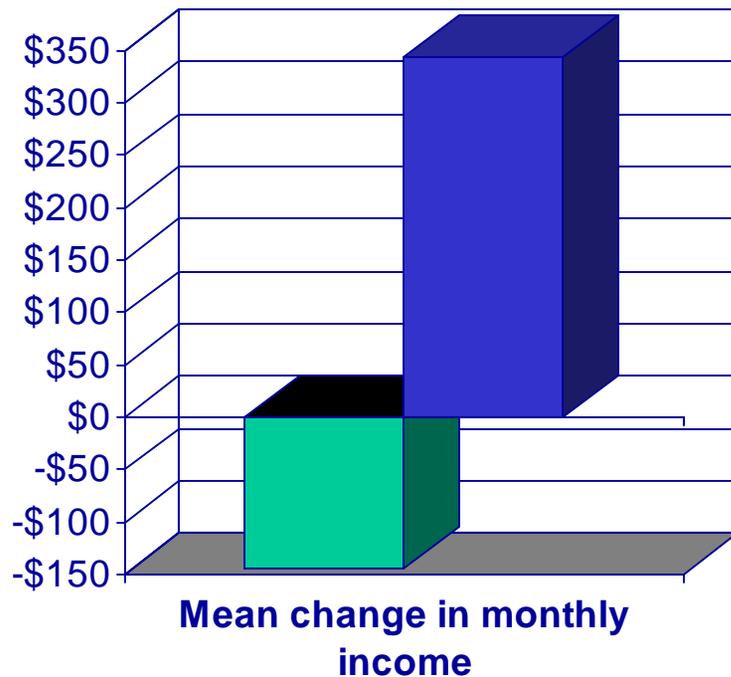


■ Left Household/N=13; 23  
■ Joined Household/N=91; 115

Both changes are significant,  $p < .05$

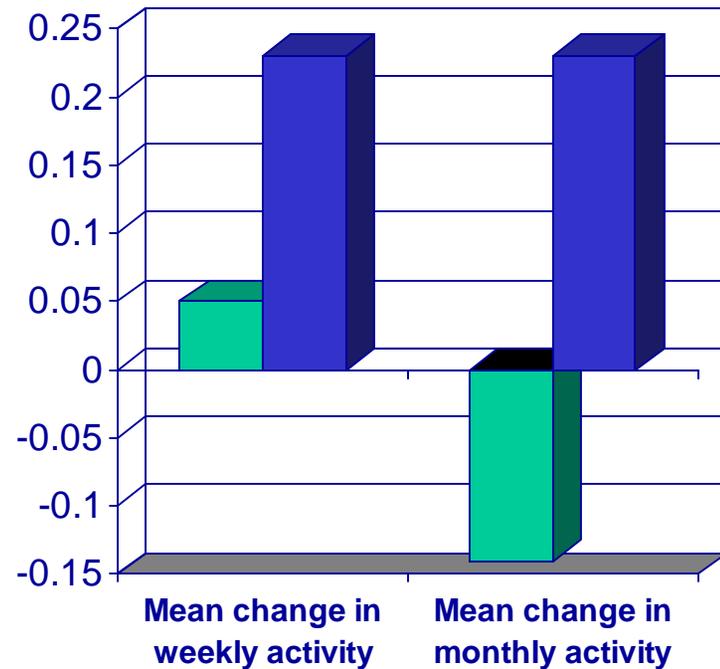
# Income and Family Activities with the Children were Related to a Significant Adult Male Entering or Leaving the Household

Father, Stepfather, Grandfather, Foster Father, Partner-male



■ Left Household/N=99  
■ Joined Household/N=306

Joined Household change is significant,  $p < .01$



■ Left Household/N=78, 103  
■ Joined Household/N=244, 317

Joined Household changes are significant,  $p < .01$

## Baseline Information on Fathers Not Living with Their Head Start Children (55.6% of sample)

- 73.9% were reported to be working (82.5% for household fathers).
- 54.5% had less than a high school diploma or GED (31.6% for household fathers).
- 1.6% were in the military; 8.0% were in jail.
- 45.1% contributed to their children's financial support.
- 55.0% lived within an hour drive of their children.
- 28.5% see their children at least several times a week; 41.9% never or rarely see their children.
- 61.3% of the children living without their father in the household were reported to have a father-figure available to them.
- 8.4% of the children living without their father rarely or never saw their father and had no reported father-figure. This represents 4.9% of the entire child sample.
- Across the three study timepoints (total=18 to 20 months), about 5% of the households had a change in father residency status, with about equal numbers of fathers entering and leaving the households.

## Having a Non-household Father Increased a Family's Risk for Exposure to Violence

Primary caregivers from households where fathers were not present were significantly more likely than those in households with fathers to report:

- having seen non-violent and violent crimes in their neighborhood
- having been a victim of violent crime in the home

Among all the children in the study sample:

- Of those who were witness to a violent crime or domestic violence (n=518; 17.4%), 72.8% did not have their father living in their home
- Of those who were victim of a violent crime or domestic violence (n=87; 2.9%), 81.6% did not have their father living in their home

## Fathers' Support for the Mothers in Raising their Children was Associated with Child Behavior Ratings

Fathers who were reported by mothers to be more supportive in raising their children were more likely to have children with higher positive social behavior ratings and lower problem behavior ratings than fathers who were reported to be less supportive, regardless of presence in the home.

|  | Social Behavior               | Behavior Problem Index         | Aggressive Behavior Subscale   | Hyperactive Behavior Subscale  |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Level Of Support from a Father Present In The Home                 | r= .06<br>p= .0194<br>n= 1306 | r= -.08<br>p= .0028<br>n= 1303 | r= -.06<br>p= .0361<br>n= 1316 | r= -.07<br>p= .0157<br>n= 1316 |
| Level Of Support from a Father Not Present In The Home<br>Positive | r= .07<br>p= .0039<br>n= 1587 | r= -.08<br>p= .0016<br>n= 1587 | r= -.11<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1600 | r= -.08<br>p= .0019<br>n= 1599 |

## The Fathers' Child-Directed Activities were Associated with Child Behavior Ratings

Fathers who were present in the household and were reported by primary caregivers to engage in more activities with their children were more likely to have children with higher positive social behavior ratings and lower problem behavior ratings than fathers who were reported to engage in fewer activities. This finding was not significant for non-household fathers.

|   | Positive Social Behavior      | Behavior Problem Index         | Aggressive Behavior Subscale   | Hyperactive Behavior Subscale  |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Household Father's Weekly Activity Rating | r= .06<br>p= .02<br>n= 1307   | r= -.11<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1307 | r= -.11<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1307 | r= -.10<br>p= .0003<br>n= 1307 |
| Household Father's Total Activity Rating  | r= .09<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1307 | r= -.11<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1307 | r= -.12<br>p= .0001<br>n= 1307 | r= -.10<br>p= .0004<br>n= 1307 |

In families where the fathers engaged in more day-to-day activities with the child (weekly activity rating), **mothers** also engaged in more activity with the child (weekly activity rating).

- Correlation between fathers' and mothers' child-directed activity when father was:
  - present in the household:  $r = .15$ ,  $p = .0001$
  - not present in the household:  $r = .20$ ,  $p = .0001$

In families where the fathers engaged in more day-to-day activities with the child (weekly activity rating), **non-household members** also engaged in more activity with the child (weekly activity rating).

- Correlation between fathers' and non-household members' activity when father was:
  - present in the household:  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .0009$
  - not in the household:  $r = .09$ ,  $p = .0001$

## Categories of Working & Non-Working Head Start Parents

| <u>Parent Work Status</u>  | <u>Fall '97</u> | <u>Spring '98</u> |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Single, non-working parent | 21.8%           | 20.0%             |
| Single, working parent     | 27.5%           | 30.2%             |
| Two parents, both work     | 16.1%           | 19.1%             |
| Two parents, one works     | 19.8%           | 19.5%             |
| Two parents, neither works | 3.8%            | 2.7%              |

Among single parents:

4.8% went from not working (fall) to working (spring)

3.5% went from working (fall) to not working (spring)

Among two-parent families:

2.6% went from both parents working (fall) to one parent working (spring)

3.6% went from one parent working (fall) to both parents working (spring)

## Parent Work Status was Associated with Child-Directed Activity and Social Support

Across the five categories of parent work status, significant differences were found in the levels of activity in which parents engaged their children and the level of social support parents received for raising their children.

Mothers' Activity with the child in the past week:  $F=3.86(df=4, 2801)$ ;  $p<.01$

Mothers' Activity with the child in the past month:  $F=3.33(df=4, 2801)$ ;  $p<.01$

- Single parents (working or not working) engaged in more weekly activity with their children than mothers from two-parent families where neither parent worked.

Fathers' Activity with the child in the past week:  $F=104.31(df=4, 2801)$ ;  $p<.0001$

Fathers' Activity with the child in the past month:  $F=87.23(df=4, 2801)$ ;  $p<.0001$

- Fathers from all categories of two-parent families engaged in more monthly and weekly activities with their children than fathers of children from single parent households (the latter group included mostly non-household fathers).

Social Support for Raising Child:  $F=54.74(df=4, 2792)$ ;  $p<.0001$

- Single working parents and two-parent working families reported higher levels of social support than all other groups of parents.

## The Work Status of Single Parents was Associated with Family and Individual Functioning

| Variable   | Single Parents                |                                |                          |
|--|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
|  | Not Working Group             | Working Group                  | Between Group Difference |
| Level of social support for raising child                    | Mean = 12.4<br>SD = 3.1       | Mean = 14.4<br>SD = 3.5        | t=12.28<br>p<.0001       |
| Child problem behavior rating                                | Mean = 6.3<br>SD = 3.7        | Mean = 5.9<br>SD = 3.4         | t=-2.24<br>p=.0253       |
| Level of mothers' child-directed activity for previous month | Mean = 1.4<br>SD = 1.3        | Mean = 1.5<br>SD = 1.4         | t=-2.59<br>p=.009        |
| Maternal depression scale score                              | Mean = 9.6<br>SD = 7.7        | Mean = 7.8<br>SD = 6.4         | t=5.04<br>p<.0001        |
| Previous month family income                                 | Mean = \$838.90<br>SD = 599.7 | Mean = \$1188.50<br>SD = 690.3 | t=10.37<br>p<.0001       |

# Summary

The findings suggest that the role of families in the lives of their children draws well-justified emphasis under the guidelines that drive the Head Start program. Under the three areas of study, it is clear that changes in the makeup of a child's household and the working status of the child's parent(s) have important implications for the development of that child and family.

It is evident that changes in the presence of fathers and others in the household as well as the work status of parents do have the potential to impact the children in those households. Continued work will focus further on the impact of changes, particularly changes in parental work status, on the household in general, on the parents, and on the children. One approach will be to explore differences between families and children who experience change and those who are in more stable households, and how any differences relate to the amount and type of interactions children have with their family.

The findings of this poster point to areas where the national Head Start program can target training and assistance for local staff, and where local programs can promote specific services for families and children (See the 'Design and Implications' poster). The number of low-income families experiencing change and the impact this may have on different family members suggests that Head Start should train local staff to recognize the potential for problems that come with change, and to assist families in the prevention of possible negative outcomes for children.