



Parent-Child Interactions

Head Start's Ninth National Research Conference, Creating Connections: Linking Policy, Practice, and Research across Early Childhood Development, Care, and Education occurred in June, 2008 in Washington, D.C. This biannual conference brings together practitioners, researchers, administrators and policy makers involved in Head Start, early childhood, childcare, and health care to share research that promotes positive development in young children. Through the conference's varied presentations, roundtable discussions, and posters, attendees learned about new research and how it can be effectively transformed into practical applications. Parent-Child Interactions was one key topic of the conference. All researchers who presented papers or posters related to this topic were invited to submit their presentations for inclusion in this summary sheet; all presentations received were included.

Parents are children's primary nurturers, educators, and advocates. For this reason, Head Start considers support of the whole child within the important context of their family environment. Head Start parents are empowered to determine the direction of the family's partnership with Head Start, identifying primary needs and working with Head Start staff to achieve identified goals. In addition to working on family needs, Head Start recognizes that parent involvement is directly related to children's cognitive and social outcomes, concentrating on encouraging parents to be educational advocates for their children. The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) found that children with more involved parents scored higher on emergent literacy and math tasks, and also demonstrated more positive social behavior than children whose parents were less involved.¹ This finding suggests that parental involvement in Head Start plays an important role in decreasing the negative outcomes associated with low-income risk factors.

As summarized within the conference session and poster descriptions below, researchers across the country are examining such varied parent-child issues as ethnic differences in family structures and parenting practices; the associations between storytelling techniques, enhanced parent-child interactions, and children's literacy; and the effectiveness of parent training programs for reducing children's disruptive behaviors. Head Start looks forward to applying the results of these and other research studies to the continued work of helping parents better understand, respond to, and communicate with their young children.

Highlights on Parent-Child Interactions: Key Points Presented at Head Start's Ninth National Research Conference

- Research conducted by Dr. Ashley Smith and colleagues found that fathers' parenting activities vary as a factor of time and children's gender. Overall, low-income fathers of preschoolers engaged in higher levels of caregiving and physical play activities compared to literacy and social activities. However, both caregiving and physical play decreased over time. In addition, by the time the child was 24 months, fathers of daughters were significantly more likely to engage in literacy activities as compared to fathers of sons, while at 36 months fathers of sons engaged more frequently in physical play activities

compared to fathers of daughters. The gendered patterns of literacy and physical play activities hold true across races. This finding suggests that practitioners can help fathers support their children's learning by capitalizing on those activities that fathers typically engage in (caregiving, physical play), and help fill in the gaps where fathers are currently less engaged, particularly in literacy activities with their sons. ([Paper Four: Fathers' Activities with Their Sons and Daughters](#))

- Dr. Natasha Cabrera and colleagues, members of the Early Head Start (EHS) Father Consortium explored the roles of home environment, parent mental health, and gender on children's behavior and social emotional development. The researchers found that, as is often true, children's gender had some consistent associations on parenting and on social and emotional development. Mothers displayed more sensitivity to boys and boys displayed fewer social and emotional skills than girls. However, low levels of chaos in the home, not gender, had the strongest association to mother supportiveness and to children's social and emotional behaviors (e.g., paying attention, not being over-reactive.) Mothers' depressive symptoms were not related to mothers' parenting, but both mothers' and fathers' depression was linked to more child behavior problems and fewer social skills. ([Paper Two: Low-Income Mother and Father Interactions with their Preschool Children's Social and Emotional Development: Gender Effects](#))
- As presented by Dr. Helen Holz Raikes at the conference, key parent findings from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP) include favorable parent impacts found when the children were age 3 that were sustained until the children were at least 5 years old. Most of the longer lasting parenting impacts were in areas related to parents' home stimulation of children's learning and parents' mental health. In addition, parents of 3-year-olds in the highest risk group showed no parenting impacts, reduction in risky environments was found at age 5. ([Paper One: Parent Findings from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project](#))

Special Sessions

This section includes poster symposia and paper symposia related to the topic of parent-child interactions.

ROUNDTABLE: Parenting and Family Outcomes in Head Start and Early Head Start

Chair: Benjamin Allen

PAPER One: Parent Findings from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project
Presenter: Helen Holz Raikes, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Begun in 1995, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP) is a rigorous, large-scale, random-assignment evaluation study of 3,001 children and their parents recruited from 17 research sites across the country. Half received Early Head Start services, while the other half were randomly assigned to a control group that did not receive Early Head Start, although they were free to use other services in the community. Parents and children were assessed when the children were 14, 24, and 36 months old.

Families were also interviewed at 6, 15, and 26 months after enrollment and when they exited the program. Key findings from the EHSREP include favorable parenting impacts found when the children were age 3 that were sustained until the children were at least 5 years old. Most of the longer lasting parenting impacts were in areas related to parents' home stimulation of children's learning and parents' mental health. For example, EHS parents were more likely to report reading to their children every day than the control group parents and less likely to demonstrate depressive symptoms. In addition, EHS parents in the highest risk group showed some parenting impacts (e.g. reduction in risky environment) at child age 5 that were not seen at age 3. Parenting outcomes also differed for different subgroups. For example, parents of children in home-based Head Start programs were more likely than parents of children at center-based Head Start programs to report reading to their children daily and having books in the home at child age 5. Many of these home-based programs subscribed to a theory of change that presumed short-term impacts on parenting would lead to long-term impacts on child development.

PAPER Two: Assessing Parenting Styles in National Studies

Presenter: T'Pring R. Westbrook, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

It is important for researchers and those who will apply research information to understand the concepts and constructs being used. Without a clear understanding of the terminology, results could be misinterpreted and misapplied. One construct used frequently in parenting research are "parenting styles." In their basic definitions as used in the Family and Child Experiences Survey, parents are considered along two factors: warmth and control. Parents who report High Control, High Warmth have an authoritarian style of parenting; those with Low Control, Low Warmth demonstrate neglectful parenting. Such variations in parenting styles have been associated with important child and family outcomes. More authoritative parenting (consistent, attentive, distinct boundaries, and warm) is usually associated with the most positive outcomes, while authoritarian (harsh, overreactive), permissive, and neglectful parenting styles each are associated with negative consequences.

PAPER SYMPOSIUM: Parent-Child Interactions & Development within American Indian, Migrant and Seasonal Farm Worker Families: Lessons for Head Start and Early Head Start

Discussant: Michael Lopez

PAPER One: Storytelling for the Home Enrichment of Language and Literacy (SHELLS): Impacts on Language and Emergent Literacy through the Parent-Child Relationships in Migrant Head Start Families

Presenter: Lisa K. Boyce, Utah State University

Authors: Lisa K. Boyce, Lori A. Roggman, Vonda K. Jump, Mark S. Innocenti

The SHELLS program was designed to promote young children's language and literacy through family storytelling, book-making activities, and the engagement of parent-child interactions. Preliminary findings from SHELLS study suggest that preschoolers' language

development can be promoted through supporting parent-child relationships and interactions in culturally meaningful ways.

PAPER SYMPOSIUM: Father and Mother Involvement: Differences in Socialization and Effects by Gender and Culture

Chair: Helen Holz Raikes

PAPER One: Human Development in the Context of Poverty

Presenter: Robert H. Bradley, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Physical, social, and emotional outcomes of poverty can be buffered or enhanced by parenting and family structures. Effective family strengthening interventions are difficult because poverty is a complex system composed of many interlinked components. Research on resilience holds promise for helping to inform the development of effective interventions; improvements in theory, research design, and statistical analyses hold promise for advancing the information available on poverty and human development; and implementation and refinement of interventions are showing some positive impacts.

PAPER Two: Low-Income Mother and Father Interactions with their Preschool Children's Social and Emotional Development: Gender Effects

Presenter: Natasha Cabrera, University of Maryland

Authors: Natasha Cabrera, Jacqueline D. Shannon, Robert H. Bradley, Catherine Tamis-LeMonda

This study examined child gender, parental mental health, partner conflict, and chaos in the home and their association to low-income mother and father engagement and to young children's social-emotional development. Children's gender was found to have some consistent associations with parenting and social and emotional development. Mothers tended to display more sensitivity to boys and boys tended to display fewer social and emotional skills than girls. However, low levels of chaos in the home, not gender, were the strongest predictor of mother supportiveness and of children's social and emotional behaviors (e.g., paying attention, not being over-reactive.) Mothers' depressive symptoms were not related to mothers' parenting, but both mothers' and fathers' depression were linked to more child behavior problems and fewer social skills. Fathers' intrusiveness had no effect on children's social and emotional behaviors, but mothers' intrusiveness did.

PAPER Three: Father Presence and Aggressive Behavior Problems in Pre-kindergarten Boys and Girls

Presenter: Michelle Simpson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Authors: Michelle Simpson, Helen Holz Raikes, Eunju Jung

Presence of the father in the home was hypothesized to be associated with children's aggressive behavior problems, as reported by mothers and teachers. This association was expected to differ depending on the child's gender and ethnicity. As expected, boys were rated higher than girls on aggressive behavior problems by both their parents and

teachers, and father residence did appear to be a factor in buffering children from aggressive behavior problems. Race was found to be a factor when children were rated by their parents, but not by their teachers: White parents rated their children higher on aggressive behavior than African American and Hispanic parents; teachers, however, did not report a difference.

PAPER Four: Fathers' Activities with Their Sons and Daughters

Presenter: Ashley Smith, New York University

Authors: Ashley Smith, Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda, Karen McFadden, Diane N. Ruble, Kristina Zosuls

The daily activities of fathers and their children change as children become older. Results of this study showed low-income fathers of preschoolers tended to engage in higher levels of caregiving and physical play activities compared to literacy and social activities. However, both caregiving and physical play decreased over time. In addition, fathers' activities tended to be gendered, meaning by the time the child is 24 months, fathers of daughters engaged more frequently in literacy activities while fathers of sons engaged more frequently in physical play activities. These gendered patterns of literacy and physical play activities were significant regardless of the child's race.

PAPER SYMPOSIUM: Creating Connections Between Latino Families and Early Childhood Programs: Investigating the Role of Language and Literacy in Latino Families

Discussant: Marlene Zepeda

PAPER One: Beliefs about School Readiness among Latino Parents and Early Childhood Professionals

Presenter: Dina C. Castro, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This work examined Latino parents' and early childhood educators' beliefs and practices about school readiness and dual language learning. The study found a high level of agreement between parents and professionals on their views about school readiness. When asked what children need to know before entering kindergarten, both Latino parents and early childhood professionals emphasized academic skills, closely followed by social skills. The majority of parents (62%) believed that helping children develop basic skills in all domains is the most important thing teachers can do to help their children succeed in kindergarten. Professionals generally agreed with that view, but at lower percentages. Regarding dual language learning, when asked if they had "any concern about Spanish-speaking children learning two languages," the majority of both parents and professionals answered "No." Most parents and professionals also agreed with the view that learning two languages does not confuse children.

PAPER Two: Cultural Communities, Family Practices, and Language Practices in Mexican-Heritage Families

Presenter: Alison G. Wishard Guerra, University of California, San Diego

Cultural communities are groupings of people who share goals, beliefs, and everyday practices, and often a racial or ethnic identity as well. Four distinct cultural communities were identified within a group of low-income families of Mexican heritage: 1) family cluster in the extended family home, 2) family cluster in the neighborhood, 3) family cluster straddling the border, and 4) those independent from a family cluster. Each cultural community has different language practices that are useful to understand in order to design effective learning environments.

Conference Posters

This section includes posters related to the topic of parent-child interactions that were presented during the poster sessions at the conference.

- Fatherhood
- Parenting Interventions
- Parent Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices
- Other Parent Research

Fatherhood

African American Men Caregivers of Children with Disabilities: Rewards and Challenges

Presenter: James C. Bridgers, Jr., The MayaTech Corporation

Authors: James C. Bridgers, Jr.; Suzanne M. Randolph; Sally A. Koblinsky

There is limited existing research regarding Black fathers, and virtually no efforts have been made to identify the strengths of this group of parents. An ecological systems framework is suitable for examining the rewards, challenges, and needs of African American male caregivers of young children with special needs. Thirty men in a hospital support group for caregivers of children with disabilities provided data for the study, analyzed qualitatively. Domains explored included Generative Fathering, Social Support, and Advocacy. Analyses of the recurring themes from group conversations generated recommendations for developing culturally sensitive programs and policies to improve parenting and educational outcomes, strengthen family systems, and provide support services for male caregivers.

The Many Faces of Father Involvement: Profiles of Fathers' Responsibility, Accessibility, and Engagement with Their Children

Presenter: Kimberly Sue Howard, New York University

Authors: Kimberly Sue Howard, Catherine S. Tamis-LeMonda, Natasha Cabrera

This study examined patterns of father involvement within a sample of 542 resident and non-resident fathers who were part of the Early Head Start Father Involvement with Toddlers Study. A set of 31 items was identified that described different ways fathers were involved with their children. Analyses suggested that these items grouped together into

six categories of father involvement: providing childcare, engaging in learning activities, going on outings, spending time with the child, providing financial support, and caring for a sick child. Further analyses revealed there were five distinct patterns of variables, indicating clusters of fathers who shared similar patterns of involvement with their children: high time (high number of hours spent with child per day, after school, and on weekends), low financial, low involvement, financial provision, and high involvement. These clusters were differentiated on the basis of the mother-father relationship, the fathers, human capital (e.g. income, education, job status, and symptoms of depression), and demographic characteristics. The results suggested that there are predictable patterns of involvement for resident and nonresident fathers. Future research might explore the potential for assessing fathering styles and their associations with child outcomes.

Church-Partnered Fatherhood Programs Guided by Secondary Analysis of Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

Presenter: Wrenetha A. Julion, Rush University

Authors: Wrenetha Julion, Louis Fogg, Waldo Johnson

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) was a venue for identifying variables that might inform the development of fatherhood programs to be implemented in church-based or church-partnered programs. In exploratory analyses, the researchers found the more religious the father, the more likely he was to live with the child's mother and the greater the frequency of his involvement with the child. The authors suggest that this data indicates that church-based and church-partnered initiatives may be effective collaborative partners for developing and implementing fatherhood programs.

Predicting the Quality of Low-Income African American Father's Interactions With Their Children and Toddlers Social and Emotional Development

Presenter: Stephanie Jolley Mitchell, University of Maryland

Authors: Stephanie Jolley Mitchell, Natasha J. Cabrera

Little work has been done to specifically explore these associations with low-income fathers. Hypothetically, fathers' social contexts (e.g. partner and extended family relationship quality) directly influence father involvement and child development; these authors further hypothesized that fathers' social contexts directly influence fathers' quality of involvement, and it is through this influence that social context is associated with child outcomes (i.e., father involvement is mediator between social context and child outcomes). Participants included 49 African American fathers of Early Head Start children in Washington, D.C. Parents were interviewed and father-child interactions were videotaped. Results indicate that fathers who had more positive partner relationships and fewer negative controlling (e.g. intrusive) behaviors while interacting with their children had children who were more socially competent. However, a mediating role for quality of father involvement was not confirmed.

Parenting Interventions

Parent Engagement and Infant-Toddler Development: Interim Effects of a Parent Engagement Intervention

Authors and Presenters: Keely Dyan Cline, Lisa L. Knoche, Carolyn Pope Edwards

Several dimensions of parental engagement are known to relate to child language and socio-emotional outcomes—parents' warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness; support for the child's emerging autonomy; and active and meaningful participation in the child's learning and literacy. Baseline measures and interim associations of Getty Ready (HHS, NICHD), a large-scale, longitudinal, child- and parent-focused intervention on parental engagement and related child outcomes, were explored. The 127 families participating in the study were part of a home-based Early Head Start program. After 8 months of participation, patterns of associations could be identified between baseline measures and changes in those measures over time. For example, change in "amount" behaviors, (including amount of constructive behaviors, negative statements, control and directives and demands) were related to the change in "quality" of behaviors. In the Spanish-speaking subsample, increases in the amount of constructive behavior were positively related to increases in the amount of negative statements. In the English-speaking subsample, increases in the amount of constructive behavior were positively related to increases in the amount directives and demands. It may be the case that parents are becoming more interactive with their children as their children increase in age, with interactive behavior including negative statements and/or directives and demands. Future research will investigate the long-term effects of the intervention on dimensions of parent engagement.

Factors Influencing Mothers' Levels of Engagement in a Comprehensive Parenting Intervention Program

Presenter: Elaine Williams Domian, University of Kansas

Authors: Elaine Williams Domian, Kathleen M. Baggett, Judith J. Carta

Home visitation coaches' perceptions of their clients' risks for child abuse and neglect may be associated with a variety of family factors. These factors may also minimize the effects of a comprehensive parenting intervention program. A qualitative descriptive approach provided a summary of three themes reflecting coaches' perceptions of the fragile state of these mothers' and children's lives (including perceptions of fragility of mothers' and children's lives; and life distractions). Gathering information regarding dedicated home visitors' perceptions and attitudes may contribute to an improved understanding of the effects of home-based intervention programs and the factors influencing at-risk mothers' lives and decisions.

Parenting Club: Supporting Early Childhood Development Through Structured Parent-to-Parent Interactions

Presenters: W. Brad Faircloth, Melanie Mikusa, Family, Infant, and Preschool Program, Morgantown, North Carolina

Authors: W. Brad Faircloth, Melanie Mikusa, Vito Di Bona

Parenting Club aimed to support children's development by promoting parents' confidence and competence. Parents in the club met weekly for 8 weeks with a trained facilitator. Each meeting consisted of a 90-minute parent/facilitator meeting, followed by 30 minutes of parent-child interaction which included the facilitator being available to provide skill modeling, feedback, and support. In this pilot implementation, 35 parents of children age birth-5 years who had participated in at least one session of Parenting Club completed a 20-item survey. Parents reported improvement in five domains of parent development: understanding child and home safety, coping with parenting stress, providing appropriate activities for children, encouraging positive child development, and meeting medical needs. Parents also reported a high level of satisfaction with the program.

Brief Behavioral Intervention for Early Childhood Behavior Problems

Presenter: Beth H. Garland, Baylor College of Medicine

Authors: Marni E. Axelrad and Beth H. Garland

Research suggests that disruptive behavior problems are established in early childhood and may continue or worsen without intervention (Brotman et al., 2005; Marchant, et al., 2004). Behavioral parent training is a common intervention for children's disruptive behavior problems; however, the majority of these programs are lengthy and rigid. A brief (six session) parent training program designed to teach parents such skills as demonstrating positive attention, actively ignoring negative behavior, and implementing effective commands resulted in significant change in children's disruptive classroom behaviors. Implementation occurred with 31 families whose children had been referred for behavior difficulties. The researchers examined parent and teacher reports of children's externalizing disruptive behaviors pre- and post-treatment. Post-treatment ratings by teachers and parents indicated significant improvements in child behaviors. No This is an ongoing study; future work should include experimental intervention, including randomly assigned treatment and non-treatment comparison groups, as well as a more diverse sample. Outcome measures should include direct child observations to independently assess change in the children's disruptive behaviors.

Examining the Impact of a Parent-Intervention Program for Head Start Families Designed To Enhance the Parent-Child Communicative Relationship and Child Language

Author and Presenter: Patricia Ann Griffin, Oakland University

Talk with Your Child is designed to teach parents strategies they can use when reading, talking, and playing with their children for the purpose of enhancing communicative relationships and children's language development. The intervention was developed and implemented with six parent-child dyads from a Head Start program. The preliminary data

were collected from both standardized and researcher-developed instruments, Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) of parent-child interactions, and parent exit interviews. Additional efforts assessed usefulness of coding of the parent-child communications and the most likely outcome measures. Future work for this intervention should include larger and more diverse samples and an experimental design, including randomly assigned treatment and comparison groups.

Parent Beliefs, Attitudes, and Practices

What Do Parents Want? Parenting Program Preferences among Culturally Diverse Caregivers

Presenter: Ernesto Ricardo Barnabas, Jr., Lehigh University

Authors: Ernesto Ricardo Barnabas, Jr.; Patricia H. Manz; Brook Sawyer

Parent management training is an evidence-based approach to prevention and intervention for children with or at-risk of developing emotional behavioral disorders. Thirty low-income and ethnic-minority parents reported on their preferences for components of parent management training programs, using a Q-sort mechanism. For a Q-sort, parents sort cards into preferred and non-preferred categories. Each card represented a possible training topic or goal that addressed immediate, long-term and community level needs (i.e., help my child when they do not listen, help my child achieve at school, reduce community barriers, etc.). Interestingly, factor analyses of the Q-sort reflected three subscales, termed Resilient Parent, Overburdened Parent and Counteractive Parent subscales. Low-income and ethnic minority parents demonstrated a desire for increased social-emotional and academic development support. However, patterns of scores across the Q-sort scales suggested that low-income and ethnic minority are heterogeneous in their expectations from training. Many programs could benefit from gathering parent preference data prior to finalizing parenting intervention plans.

Una Madre Buena: A Qualitative Study of Mexican Mothers' Childrearing and Teaching Strategies

Author and Presenter: Augustina M. Brooks, Texas Tech University

The author conducted a qualitative study of eight Mexican mothers to determine how a mother's role in the home is defined; the role the teacher-child relationship plays on maternal attitudes toward the school experience; and whether the quality of the parent-teacher relationship influences parents' involvement in the child's school. All mothers had at least one child between the ages of 5–8 years. Desire to be "una madre buena" (defined as "a good mother who stays at home with her children") emerged as a common theme among mothers. "Putting family first" and "respect for elders" also emerged as important cultural values. Parents were active in the child's school if teachers supported parents' requests that their children be academically challenged. Parents were inactive if teachers were perceived to be unsupportive. Further investigations are needed to understand how cultural values influence the parent-teacher relationship and parent involvement at school.

Racial Socialization and the Verbal and Nonverbal Skills, Attention Skills, and Behavior of African American Preschoolers Attending Head Start

Authors and Presenters: Danielle D. Brown, Deborah Winders Davis, Barbara M. Burns, University of Louisville

Previous research indicates that many African American parents use racial socialization to prepare their children for the consequences associated with being a minority within the United States (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph & Nickerson, 2002). Racial socialization practices include promoting mistrust, cultivating spirituality, preparing children for bias, and teaching racial pride. This preliminary work (N=11) investigated individual differences in parents' racial socialization practices and the association of these practices with children's school readiness. Although power was low, review of associations supported previous work identifying associations between racial socialization factors and children's abilities. Even with the small sample, a few significant correlations were identified. For example, higher parental 'preparation for racial bias' scores were associated with higher alert attention for the child ($r=.70$, $p<.05$). Future studies should consider mechanisms for these associations, and the potential of racial socialization as a possible protective factor among children living in poverty.

Adaptive and Challenged Parenting among Low-Income African American Mothers: Linkages to Preschoolers' Externalizing Behaviors

Author and Presenter: Johanna L. Carpenter, Temple University

In a sample of 359 low-income African American mothers, five distinct patterns of parenting emerged: no nonsense, cross-domain competent, vulnerable, uninvolved, and high psychological resources/low school involvement. At the beginning of the project (Fall), Uninvolved parents had children with significantly more externalizing behaviors than Cross-Domain Competent parents; in the Spring, however, results indicated that Vulnerable parents had children with significantly more externalizing problems than Cross-Domain Competent parents. Generally, adaptive parents had lower levels of children's problem behaviors compared to challenged parents. In addition, results suggest that depression may have a cumulative effect, undermining challenged parents over time. These results indicate the variations of parenting within an economically disadvantaged context; deeper understanding of these variations could lead to more effective targeted supports. Further, the results highlight that there are multiple pathways for parental competence: goals and trainings might be usefully tailored based on caregivers' preliminary orientation to parenting.

Mother-Child Storytelling Interactions: Implications for Literacy Interventions and Adult Education Policies

Presenter: Stephanie M. Curenton, Rutgers University

Authors: Stephanie M. Curenton, Michelle Jones Craig, and Nadia Flanigan

Mothers and preschoolers can tell stories using books, but often storytelling involves oral interactions that do not involve books. These researchers observed "decontextualized"

maternal language in 33 parent-child dyads, across three story contexts—oral storytelling, shared reading, and emergent reading (children’s creating stories from picture books). Decontextualized language involved considering the story topics and connecting them to multiple “out of story” domains, such as asking the child to make predictions (e.g., “What do you think will happen next?”), or recalling similar events in the child’s past (e.g., “Remember when your sister was born?”). Parents with higher literacy skills used more complex decontextualized language. Future research should explore potential strengths of oral storytelling and its links to children’s literacy development. The authors also highlighted that their results indicate additional support for emphasizing parental literacy programs, which might result in more sophisticated scaffolding in parent-child storytelling interactions.

Pathways from Parenting to Problem Behaviors for Toddlers Enrolled in Early Head Start: The Roles of Toddlers’ Sustained Attention, Negative Affect, and Family Risk.

Authors and Presenters: Nicole Marie Denmark, Brenda Jones Harden, University of Maryland, College Park

Parenting attitudes and behaviors and toddlers’ problem behaviors consistently demonstrate associations across development. One model explored by this study was based on the hypothesis that those families with multiple risk factors have the most depleted attitudes and in turn, the most child behavior problems. Another model suggested that parenting attitudes undermine children’s attention and emotional affect, and these in turn are associated with more behavior problems. Sixty-six mother-child pairs were examined. Overall, mothers’ sensitive parenting was strongly associated with toddlers’ lower problem behaviors. However, family risk changed the nature of this relationship—at higher levels of family risk, maternal sensitivity had a positive association with toddlers’ problem behaviors. In high-risk environments, sensitivity may need to be combined with other parenting dimensions, such as firm control, to be a protective factor (McCloyd, 1998). Further work will include a path analysis and a comparison of high- and low-risk families.

Ethnic Variation in the Association between Family Structures and Practices on Child Outcomes at 36 Months: Results from Early Head Start

Author and Presenter: Iheoma Iruka, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Family structural characteristics, parenting practices, and child outcomes were expected to differ by ethnicity. Participants were part of the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study. While a few differences in family structural characteristics and parenting practices were found among African American, Hispanic, and European American households, these differences did not result in differential effects for children’s outcomes, with one exception. (Hispanic children exhibited more problematic behaviors when in nonmaternal child care.) In other words, warm and sensitive parenting and a stimulating home environment were found to be positively influential regardless of a child’s ethnicity. Findings indicate that early childhood programs should continue to focus on positive and

responsive parent-child interactions and enriching activities in the home prior to children's entry into preschool.

Maternal Self-efficacy: Does it Explain School Involvement?

Author and Presenter: Iheoma Iruka, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Using a predominantly African American Head Start sample, the author examined the link between maternal self-efficacy and school involvement and children's school readiness. Maternal self-efficacy is a mother's belief that she can competently impact her child's academic, social, and emotional development. Findings provide evidence of the importance of maternal self-efficacy and school involvement in children's school readiness. This evidence supports Head Start programs' continued focus on increasing the involvement and engagement of low-income and ethnic minority mothers in their children's learning; empowering parents, and increasing maternal perceptions of self-efficacy in the school and home setting.

Unpackaging Early Literacy Beliefs and Practices of Low-Income, Latino Parents with Children in Head Start Programs

Presenter: Eli Lieber, UCLA Center for Culture and Health

Authors: Eli Lieber, Helen Miller Davis, Thomas S. Weisner, Sloane Lefkowitz-Burt

The home literacy environments (HLEs) of low-income Latino families include a variety of activities that may be associated with children's emergent literacy skills. For this study, focus was on HLE activities that support three key components of emergent literacy: oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge. A few differences in literacy-supportive parenting activities were found across households based on language(s) spoken. For example, English and bilingual homes demonstrated more pre-writing activities than Spanish-only homes; bilingual homes had more parent-child communications than either English speaking or Spanish speaking households. Many families practiced at least one activity, but they were not always used in combination to create a richer learning environment. Overall, families who combined all three HLE components believed these activities benefitted their children. These parents were more likely to actively communicate with their children's teachers and steadily monitor their children's progress in Head Start. Interestingly, English Speaking, Spanish Speaking and Bilingual families that combined HLE components differed in background characteristics and parenting beliefs.

Assessing Play Beliefs of Parents of Head Start Children: Linkages to School Readiness Outcomes

Presenters: Julia L. Mendez and Judy Wong, Temple University

Authors: Julia L. Mendez, Jeremy S. Cohen, Judy Wong, and Johanna Carpenter

The Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBS; Fogle & Mendez, 2006) was examined with a sample of African American, low-income mothers. The PPBS measures parents' beliefs about their preschool children's play and the role of play in learning. This study presented the 30-item parent questionnaire to a sample of mothers whose children were attending Head Start.

With this sample, two subscales were derived from the PPBS: Academic Focus and Play Support. The PPBS' Play Support Subscale (16 items reflecting parents' beliefs that play is an enjoyable and valuable activity with many benefits for children) was positively associated with parents' reports of children's play competencies. The Academic Focus Subscale (8 items reflecting parent's beliefs that academically-oriented activities are more important than play in their child's development) was negatively associated with these constructs. Parents' attitudes toward play were associated with children's peer interaction competencies, but this association was not significant once children's temperament was incorporated into the analytic model. Future work with this scale should involve a larger more diverse sample, confirm the factor analyses; and perhaps consider the addition of other positively-phrased academic items (i.e., I enjoy reading with my child and make this a priority in my home).

Experiences of Non-Custodial Parents in Grand-Families

Presenter: Leah A. Pigatti, Mahube Community Council, Inc.

Authors: Leah A. Pigatti and Gregory Sanders

The authors conducted a qualitative study of the experiences of 16 noncustodial parents whose children are being raised by grandparents. Four common themes emerged: 1) noncustodial parents felt "forgotten;" 2) they did not view community social services programs as helpful; 3) they found informal support from churches, friends, Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous groups, and others; and 4) multiple resources could be helpful to them, including reunification assistance, parenting education, affordable and decent housing, and jobs. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples of noncustodial parents and should include the perspectives of grandparents and social services providers.

The Role of Parenting Attitudes, Depressive Symptoms, Maternal Education, and Social Support in the Relationship Between Economic Hardship and Parent Socialization in Single Mother, African American Families

Presenter: Kimberly Van Putten-Gardner, University of Maryland, College Park

Authors: Kimberly Van Putten-Gardner, Suzanne M. Randolph

Four factors—parenting attitudes, depressive symptoms, maternal education, and social support—were expected to influence and buffer the negative impact of economic hardship on the parental socialization of single mothers. Analyses were pursued with data from the Fragile Family and Child Well-being project, using a sample of 678 African American single mothers. Results indicated that maternal education and social support did not influence the negative impact of economic hardship. However, parenting attitudes were found to be a significant predictor of socialization practices (nurturing, teaching/providing stimulating materials, and spanking). Such studies indicate the potential benefit of assessing mothers in multiple domains to inform interventions and supports.

The Importance of Disciplinary Practices in Preparing Children for School Entry

Authors and Presenters: Aimee Kleisner Walker, David L. Macphee, Colorado State University

The authors examined at-risk families' child rearing practices (specifically child autonomy support and parental coercion) to determine if those practices were associated with children's school readiness. The child's social skills and mastery motivations were expected to mediate the associations between child rearing practices and school readiness. In two different samples of low-income families from diverse ethnic backgrounds—one recruited from Head Start and the other with a child entering elementary school (Total N=543)—child-rearing practices were modestly but significantly related to children's developmental levels (Head Start sample) and weakly related to teacher-rated academic skills (school transition sample). Native American were significantly lower than Hispanic or nonHispanic White families in 'autonomy granting,' but did not differ in terms of coercion. Within this sample, NonHispanic White children demonstrated significant higher school readiness scores than the Native American children. Findings further indicated that, across ethnic groups, children's social skills and mastery motivation (persistence and goal orientation) were significantly related to school readiness and fully mediated the association between parents' use of coercion and school readiness. In other words, it seems possible that parenting coercion undermines children's social skills and mastery motivation, and these poor social skills and motivation in turn reduce the children's abilities to learn school readiness skills. Future work should consider these hypotheses within a longitudinal design, to seek further evidence of the causal associations between child rearing practices and children's academic behaviors.

Other Parent-Child Research

How Does Having a Child with Behavioral Special Needs Affect Parents' Ability to Work, Access Child Care, and Maintain Financial Security?

Presenter: Julie Atkins, University of Southern Maine

Authors: Helen Ward, Lisa Morris, Julie Atkins, Angela Herrick, Erin Oldham

In Maine, an estimated one in ten children has a diagnosed disability and/or chronic health condition; the highest prevalence rate in the country (U.S. Census, 2004). This is a growing problem - between 1992 and 2003, the total number of children and young adults (ages 6 to 22) in Maine diagnosed with disabilities increased by 26% and the number diagnosed with autism increased by a remarkable 3,098%, from 46 to 1,471 statewide (IDEA Data). This multimethod study investigated the impact of having a child with behavioral special needs on parents' ability to balance work and family, using data from 1) a nationally representative sample of 81,841 families, including 4,713 families that identified as having a child with special needs (National Survey of American Families), 2) a statewide sample of 441 parents of children with special needs in Maine, 3) 179 Maine child care providers, and 4) qualitative interviews with 80 parents of children with special needs and their care providers. Child care decisions made by families and the issues they

face in keeping child care arrangements were examined. Parents' ability to retain their job, the impact on the number of hours worked, and the financial security of the family were also explored. Findings suggest that a large percentage of parents of children with behavioral needs use informal child care arrangements with family, friends, and neighbors who may not know how to best address the child's needs. Despite the large percentage of these parents working full time, the challenges associated with informal care and the high number of child care expulsions and work disruptions result in higher economic insecurity than those families without children with special needs. Programs should consider designing specialized supports for these families particularly at risk for economic challenges.

Implications of Physical and Mental Well-Being of Migrant Head Start Parents

Presenter: Raquel Cumba, The Catholic University of America

Authors: Raquel Cumba, Sandra Barrueco, Kendra Sena, Christine Alvarado

Little is known about the relationships between physical and mental health of Migrant Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) parents. Fifty MSHS parents in North Carolina were interviewed about their migratory-related stress, depression symptoms, overall physical health, current levels of pain, and participation in Head Start activities. Parents' physical health and mental health were consistently associated with parent involvement and participation in Head Start activities. The authors concluded that fatigue, pain, and sadness can make it difficult for migrant farmworker parents to actively engage in parent educational nights, parent council meetings, volunteering and home literacy activities. These results could help MSHS programs develop improved mechanisms to better support the participation of migrant farmworker parents.

A Multivariate Investigation of Maternal Risks and their Relationship to Low-Income, Preschool Children's Competencies

Presenter: Marlo A. Perry, Adagio Health

Authors: Marlo A. Perry, John W. Fantuzzo

The purpose of the study was to examine the unique impact of multiple maternal risks across time on diverse, low income preschool children's skills. Using data from the Comprehensive Child Development Program evaluation (N=3852), the researchers examined multiple maternal variables (e.g. education, mobility, single motherhood, depression, etc.) to determine how these variables relate to children's cognitive skills, prosocial behaviors, and behavior problems. Maternal education accounted for the most variance in children's cognitive skills and maternal depression accounted for the most variance in children's prosocial skills and behavior problems. In addition, eight distinct maternal risk profiles were identified: low risk; employed; low education, resident partner; relatively depressed; average; young mother; depressed, high mobility; and resident partner, low welfare receipt. An examination of these eight risk profiles confirmed and extended the variable findings. Optimal interventions could address the risk factors that contributed to these profiles.

The Influence of Home Learning Activities on Head Start Children’s School Readiness: A Longitudinal Analysis of Language and Emergent Literacy Skills from Preschool through First Grade

Author and Presenter: Heather See, University of Maryland

Family poverty has a strong and consistent association with children’s cognitive outcomes, perhaps partially caused by less stimulating home environments. This project examined the development of children’s receptive language and emergent literacy skills from preschool through first grade within the context of the home environment (Secondary data analysis, Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey, 1997). Findings revealed that Head Start children are engaged in different types of home learning activities, including academic stimulation activities, community enrichment activities, and family entertainment activities. Home activities focused on academic stimulation had the greatest association with children’s vocabulary, numeracy, and writing skills. Children who were highly engaged in cognitively stimulating home activities at the beginning of Head Start demonstrated significantly greater emergent literacy skills at the end of first grade than children who were less engaged in these activities; however, because these children started with higher scores, they grew at a slower rate over time. Findings emphasize that targeting parent engagement in educational activities is important pathway for supporting children’s development in low income families.

For Further Information

For more details on any of the selected presentations and posters, please contact the presenters listed directly. Presenter contact information can be found in the index of the conference program. ([Creating Connections: Head Start’s Ninth National Research Conference 2008 Program Book](#))

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Parent involvement. FACES findings: New research on Head Start outcomes and program quality*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families