

Impact Findings from the Head Start CARES Demonstration

National Evaluation of Three Approaches to Improving Preschoolers' Social and Emotional Competence

Low-income preschool children face risks to their social-emotional development that can affect them later on. Although there are promising approaches to promoting preschoolers' social-emotional skills, the evidence base is limited, particularly on their effectiveness when implemented at scale.

The Head Start CARES demonstration evaluated the effects of three distinct classroom-based approaches to enhancing children's social-emotional development on a large scale. **The Incredible Years Teacher Training Program** focuses on teachers' management of the classroom and of children's behavior. **Pre-school PATHS** uses structured lessons to help children learn about emotions and interact with peers appropriately. **Tools of the Mind-Play** is a one-year

version of the Tools curriculum that promotes children's learning through structured "make-believe" play. A comprehensive professional development package (including teacher training, ongoing coaching, and related technical assistance) supported delivery of the enhancements over the course of one year.

The demonstration was conducted with 17 Head Start grantees that generally represent the diversity of Head Start settings nationally. Head Start CARES rigorously evaluated the impacts of the interventions, or "enhancements," by randomly assigning approximately 100 Head Start centers within the grantees to a program group that received one of the interventions or to a control condition without any of them. The estimated

impacts should be interpreted as the effects of the enhancements beyond any effects of the existing Head Start program in these classrooms. Head Start CARES tested each enhancement’s impacts on teachers’ practices and on children’s outcomes in the spring of the preschool year, comparing those impacts with the team’s theory of change for each approach.

KEY FINDINGS

- All three enhancements changed observed teachers’ practices in the expected ways, confirming that their theoretical differences were reflected in classroom implementation. Impacts on classroom climate were fewer and less consistent.
- Two of the three enhancements showed consistent positive impacts on a range of children’s social-emotional outcomes in preschool, although not as predicted.
 - As expected, PATHS showed small to moderate improvements in children’s knowledge and understanding of emotion (emotion knowledge), social problem-solving skills, and social behaviors.
 - The Incredible Years improved children’s emotion knowledge, social problem-solving skills, and social behaviors. It did not produce expected impacts on chil-

dren’s problem behavior and executive function (except for highest-risk children).

- Tools of the Mind–Play did not demonstrate expected impacts on executive function or self-regulation; it produced only positive impacts on emotion knowledge.
- There was no consistent evidence that these enhancements improved children’s pre-academic skills during preschool, although those skills were not key targets of the enhancements. While based on very limited information, there were virtually no impacts on outcomes in kindergarten as reported by teachers and parents.
- Findings show that evidence-based approaches can improve preschoolers’ social-emotional competence when implemented at scale with appropriate supports.

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