

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Home Visiting Services in
Promoting Children's Adjustment in School

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

The current study examines the effects of home visiting on the academic adjustment of children following their transition to school. Based on the national Healthy Families America (HFA) model, Healthy Families New York (HFNY) is a strengths-based, intensive home visitation program designed to 1) promote positive parenting skills and parent-child interaction; 2) prevent child abuse and neglect; 3) support optimal prenatal care, and child health and development; and 4) improve parent's self-sufficiency.

In 2000, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) was initiated at three HFNY sites. Eligible families at each site were randomly assigned to either an intervention group that was offered HFNY services or to a control group that was given information on and referrals to other services. Baseline interviews were conducted with 1173 women (intervention, n=579; control, n=594). Mothers were again interviewed around the time of the child's first, second, third, and seventh birthdays. At Year 7, field staff completed 942 interviews with the original study participants. A release form authorizing the researchers to obtain the target child's first grade school records was obtained during this process. Target children were also interviewed (n=800).

In 2010, a grant from the Pew Center on the States made it possible obtain and analyze the school records to address several critical gaps in the home visiting knowledge base: (1) What effect does home visiting have on children's academic outcomes following the transition to school?; (2) Are there conditions under which home visiting is particularly effective at promoting positive child development?; and (3) What is the relationship between service duration, intensity and content and children's adjustment to school?

Methodology

Of the 942 mothers interviewed at Year 7, 766 provided releases with complete information. The releases were sent to over 175 different schools in 15 states. We received 577 useable first grade school records. The school record sample was representative of the baseline sample on the majority of the baseline characteristics.

To code the school records, we developed a rubric and coding sheet that considered students' best and worst grades reported for each of several academic subject areas (e.g., reading, writing, math, physical education, music, art, science, and social studies) and for each of a number of behaviors that promote learning (e.g., working or playing cooperatively with others, following oral directions or classroom rules, listening attentively, organizing or managing personal belongings, working independently, and completing home or class work on time). We also extracted data on the number of days absent and tardy, grade retention and summer school recommendations, special education, remedial and other academic intervention services receipt, and disciplinary actions.

Limitations of the data available prevented us from assessing several important outcomes. Many school records did not provide information on receipt of special education, remedial or other academic intervention services, or disciplinary actions. We had fairly complete information on only three of the behaviors that promote learning: working or playing cooperatively with others, following oral directions or classroom rules and completing home or class work on time. Reading and math were the only academic subjects for which grades were consistently reported. Almost half of the school records provided only a single grade for the academic subjects and behaviors that promote learning, limiting our ability to identify areas in which children were performing exceptionally well or poorly.

We used the school record data to create indicators of excelling academically or performing poorly academically. We defined excelling academically as scoring above grade level (based on the best grade recorded) on both reading and math or scoring above grade level (based on best grade) on all three behaviors that promote learning. Doing poorly academically was defined as scoring below grade level (based on best grade) on any of the academic subjects or behaviors that promote learning. We also constructed separate outcome measures for performance in academic subjects (reading and math) and behaviors that promote learning.

We used information gathered at baseline to assess whether individual and family characteristics and resources differed across the treatment arms within the school record sample and to identify appropriate covariates. We obtained data from the HFNY Management Information System (MIS) for the families who were randomly assigned to the HFNY arm of the study to better understand how program components, such as visit duration, intensity and content, related to the outcomes experienced by children as they transitioned to school.

Results

- Children in the home-visited group were half as likely to repeat a grade (3.54%) as those in the control group (7.10%, $p=.03$);
- A higher percentage of children in the home-visited group than in the control group excelled on all three behaviors that promote learning (13.15% versus 7.74%, $p=.03$);
- Although no significant effects were found for excelling academically overall, excelling in reading and math, performing poorly overall, doing poorly in reading or math, or doing poorly in any of the behaviors that promote learning, in every case the pattern of results favored the home visited group. Limitations in the quality of the school record data and the size of the sample may account for the lack of significant results for these measures;

- No significant differences between the intervention and control groups were found for the number of days absent;
- Early positive parenting behaviors may explain how HFNY produced effects on grade retention and competence in behaviors that promote learning;
- Significant interactions between treatment arm and gender on children's academic outcomes emerged. Compared to girls in the control group, girls in the intervention group were more likely to excel academically (32.62% vs. 17.47%, $p < .01$) and less likely to do poorly academically (19.71% vs. 32.17%, $p = .02$). No differences were found for boys;
- The intensity of home visits was a significant predictor of children's outcomes. Children who had a higher percentage of service levels where they received at least 75% of their expected visits were 2.28 times more likely to excel academically ($p = .05$) and 47.4% less likely to do poorly academically ($p = .10$).

The current study has demonstrated that HFA-based programs can produce positive effects on children's academic outcomes, most likely through the program's effect on early parenting behaviors. The findings pertaining to retention in first grade and competence in behaviors that promote learning are especially important because negative outcomes in these areas can contribute to poor academic performance, and even school dropout. To achieve these outcomes, however, home visiting programs should develop policies to make sure that families receive the intended intensity of service. Additional research is needed to confirm the possible mechanisms for how home visiting influences children's educational outcomes and to address the differential effects of the intervention noted for boys and girls with regard to academic achievement. Policies should also be put in place to enhance communication and collaboration

between home visiting programs and school systems to better support families through this transition.