

Early Head Start at 25: Looking to the future ^[1]

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Source: Centre for Social Policy

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Dec 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The Center for the Study of Social Policy is pleased to feature a post by guest blogger Joan Lombardi, a national and international early childhood expert and relentless champion for innovative approaches to ensuring children's healthy development and family well-being. Joan's work is rooted in the understanding that children and their families thrive as part of strong, responsive, nurturing communities. In today's post, Joan calls for immediate federal action to extend and expand benefits to support families with young children during the pandemic.

This year Early Head Start turned 25. As we enter a new era, with the excitement and planning that comes with a new administration, it is time to pause, to take stock of the program, and look forward to fulfilling the potential that Early Head Start can bring to all eligible children and families.

Reflecting back: 25 years of progress, yet just a start

In 1965, Head Start was launched to serve children from families in poverty the summer before they entered school. Over the years the length and hours of the program were extended, with services provided to preschool children ages 3-5. In 1969, recognizing the needs of farmworkers' families with children 0-5, the Migrant Head Start Program began serving infants and toddlers. And during the 70's and 80's some demonstration programs serving younger children, such as Parent and Child Development Centers, were launched. Yet overall, almost three decades passed after the start of the program before Head Start was expanded to serve children under the age of three.

In the fall of 1995, the first 68 Early Head Start Programs were funded across the country. Since that time the program has served more than 3 million pregnant women, infants, and toddlers,^[1] and has established itself as a model of comprehensive services and a key pillar of an equity agenda for the county.

A large scale random assignment study followed the first cohorts of children and families over several years, documenting a broad array of positive impacts on a range of developmental outcomes for children and on families.^[2] As a national laboratory for quality infant and toddler services, the program performance standards and the outcomes framework that guide Early Head Start helped define what we should expect from programs and policies for infant and toddler services.^[3]

The Early Head Start programs responded to the needs of the community, not only in providing flexibility of services delivery, but in launching innovation: from creating partnerships with child care to expanding services for very young children with disabilities, from promoting family engagement to defining services for pregnant women within an early childhood program. Today, all across the country you can find Early Head Start programs that include centers, family child care, home visiting, or a combination of these options.

A new agenda for a new era of equity, mobility, and achievement

Despite these accomplishments, it seems like the Early Head Start program is just getting started. Last year, Early Head Start was funded to serve over 180,000 children under age three. Yet this is only about 9 percent of the income eligible children in this age group.^[4] If the United States is going to seriously address equity right from the start, and promote economic and social mobility, Early Head Start should be a core part of our economic, education, and social policy. Moreover, Early Head Start is not only an essential federal program; it is a concept that can guide our understanding of what constitutes quality infant and toddler services that should be promoted at the state and local level.

To fulfill the promise of Early Head Start, it should be expanded, compensation and credentialing should be improved, and additional innovation and partnerships encouraged.

Expansion. The recommendation to expand services to younger children has been included in almost every major Head Start report dating back to the 60s. With one in five children under the age of three in poverty and with poverty rates for infants and toddlers significantly higher for Black, Native, and Latinx families, we need a bold new agenda for expansion that sets a goal of serving all eligible children and includes:

- New federal investments to at least triple the number of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers served over the next few years, prioritizing communities with persistent poverty.

- More flexibility and capacity building for Head Start programs to convert to serving younger children.
- Incentives for states and communities to invest in Early Head Start programs or programs based on the Early Head Start model, including the use of child care and education funding for grants to programs that meet the Early Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Compensation and credentials. Early Head Start staff, from teachers to health coordinators to family advocates to disability specialists, as well as those in other key roles, are all essential workers. Early Head Start must be funded in a way that recognizes the importance of a living wage and an adequate compensation package for all staff and that ensures the quality of services. We must reverse the trend that the youngest children have the lowest paid teachers by investing in this important segment of the caring economy.

By requiring a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or equivalent, Early Head Start helped promote competences specific to a younger age group which historically have been neglected in teacher education. Now it is time to go further, building the capacity of higher education institutions to address the needs of families with infants and toddlers and establishing policies to promote pathways from CDA to college degrees. In addition, special steps should be taken to ensure qualified coaches are available to support the ongoing training needs of Early Head Starts programs.

Innovation and Partnerships. While innovation has been the hallmark of Head Start and Early Head Start, their successes are too often not recognized. There needs to be more focus on disseminating best practices, not only within the Head Start community but at the state and local level. Moreover, we need a new era of innovation and partnerships which should include:

- Promoting Early Head Start as a hub for comprehensive services for home-based child care providers.
- Developing linkages with community and state efforts to reform child welfare and create more prevention services with increased family supports.
- Establishing Early Head Start Partnerships with two- and four-year colleges to promote the continuing education and economic and social mobility of families.

Someone once said to me, Head Start represents the very best in America. Let's take this vision forward and renew the commitment to give all eligible children and families an Early Head Start and a better chance for a more equitable future.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: social policies and programs ^[4]

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