

The Head Start debates ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Available in print for order only.

Ordering information ^[2]

Press release ^[3]

Excerpts from the book:

Head Start is the nation's [U.S.] largest and oldest early intervention program for young children and families in poverty. For most of its nearly 40 years, Head Start has enjoyed strong—but far from universal—popularity. It has weathered its share of criticism—some targeted and deserved, some arising from ideology or a hostile political agenda. Yet, the program remains alive and well, counting among its strongest supporters the approximately 20 million children it has graduated and sent on their way to elementary school. Their families, too, have been consistent and forceful advocates for a program they see as their own.

Head Start was conceptualized before there was an established knowledge base on the potential of intervention to promote young children's development. In fact, practical experience with the project was an important force in the accrual of this knowledge. As a path-breaking program, mistakes were understandably made. Head Start's original goal statement was vague, allowing multiple interpretations of what the effort was supposed to accomplish. There were some errors in program design and operations. Quality control was an afterthought. Evaluations of program effectiveness were often misguided. Policy makers expected too much and appropriated too little. All of these circumstances ignited controversies that continue to this day.

New arguments are being raised over the direction of Head Start's future. These go far beyond President George W. Bush's criticism of the program as not doing enough to promote language and pre-literacy skills and his desire to devolve Head Start to the states. The fact is that times have changed since the program began. A lot has been learned about intervention, but some of this knowledge has been slow to work into daily practice. The children and families who attend Head Start today are different in significant ways from that first cohort in 1965: Their cultural and language backgrounds are more diverse; the children's parents are younger and more likely to be single and employed; and the poverty they experience has grown uglier, with welfare reform adding new stresses. The political and social landscapes have also evolved since Head Start began. The War on Poverty is over, as are prolonged welfare and the custom for most mothers to stay at home with their children. The public education establishment is beginning to welcome preschoolers, and group care for even younger children has grown in acceptance and by necessity. While most agree that Head Start must change in response to these developments, debates rage over what course of action is wisest.

Fortunately, decisions concerning the future of Head Start can be based on a broad knowledge base. Because Head Start is a comprehensive service program, it is rightfully the province of many disciplines. Thus, scholars in a host of fields have devoted a great deal of energy and thought to modifications in the Head Start approach. Unfortunately, these ideas often do not travel over academic fences. Generally, educators, administrators, developmental psychologists, medical and mental health professionals, social workers, and others talk more among themselves than with one another. Their work—and Head Start itself—would surely be enriched by more integration and collaboration, or at least recognition of what is going on in different domains.

The tragedy of this situation is that policy makers get at best an incomplete and at worst a narrow view of the evidence and expert opinions surrounding Head Start. While policy makers need and want to weigh the merits of the various positions to make sound legislative decisions, they have more than once been swayed by one side or the other because they did not know much about alternative choices. The fragmentation of the literature thus stymies the formation of social policies based on the best available knowledge.

We assembled this book in an effort to pull together the competing views on many contentious issues surrounding Head Start. Yes, one purpose is to enable policy makers to have a balanced perspective before they mandate change. Another is to give professionals in various fields access to the thinking in other areas. Our ultimate hope is to encourage all of those who care about Head Start and may carry strong opinions about its proper course to stop and listen to what the other side is saying. Whether this strengthens or moderates each individual's resolve, the positions formed in the future will at least be more enlightened.

The flavor of the controversies we chose to cover will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the history of early intervention: Does Head Start work? Do its ascribed benefits fade away or are they lasting? Should we expect them to last? What exactly is the program supposed to do? Should it make children smarter or improve their social competence and school readiness, or is child development really secondary to the "original" implied goal of empowering poor adults to rise out of poverty? And what about the future? Should Head Start offer or in fact become a child care service where children eligible for the program are tended so their parents can go to work? Who should be eligible for Head Start? At what age should Head Start begin, and how long should it last? And what should we do about those nagging problems with service quality? Finally, is Head Start's unique federal-to-local structure worth revitalizing, or should the program be bequeathed to the states to run in the best interests of their own residents?

We asked noted spokespersons on various sides of these issues to contribute their opinions. Although the book is titled *The Head Start Debates*, the format is not a one-to-one confrontation. Rather, we grouped the points that are under debate, and each author prepared a chapter to state his or her case. Most topics have several respondents, although in a few cases, invitees became unable to participate. In these and a few other instances, we reprinted or excerpted already published works to balance the discussion.

Actually, even those authors we originally expected to pen "friendly" analyses surprised us with some harsh criticisms of Head Start as it is currently delivered. We hope that means we succeeded in achieving the point of this collaborative effort. We want this book to challenge the status quo and to influence Head Start services, quality, and administration during a future of rapid change. We hope the opinions presented here will be useful to decision makers who, for some time, have been wrangling with such issues as Head Start expansion, program accountability, what the new interests in early brain development and early literacy mean for Head Start's preschool and birth to 3 versions, the demise of welfare and rise in demand for child care, and the gathering call to devolve Head Start to the states. And, because Head Start is a national laboratory for developing effective means of intervention, the ideas our contributors present about its future also have valuable implications for theory and practice in a wide range of child and family services.

Note: Book available from the CRRU's resource room. Contact CRRU ^[4] for more information.

Region: United States ^[5]

Tags: poverty ^[6]

child development ^[7]

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