



# Evaluation of the Jumpstart Foster Grandparent Program

## Executive Summary

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December 2019

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This report is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), Grant No. 16SFPCA001. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, CNCS or other MDRC funders.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

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# Overview

Children’s school readiness as they enter kindergarten is an important predictor of their academic success and ultimately their long-term health and economic outcomes. Research shows that participation in high-quality early childhood education helps preschoolers gain the foundational language and literacy skills as well as the social-emotional competencies they need to be ready for kindergarten. Even so, free or affordable high-quality preschool options remain limited for families in many underserved communities, and children growing up in poverty often have less access to the kinds of early learning opportunities that contribute to school readiness.

Jumpstart is a nonprofit organization that aims to address the school readiness gap. It partners with early childhood education centers across the country to increase their capacity to provide high-quality language and literacy instruction to children in underserved communities. Jumpstart’s program model, delivered by volunteers, includes weekly curriculum-based sessions focused on children’s language and literacy development, as well as increased opportunities for volunteers to interact with children one-on-one and contribute to their language and social-emotional development in a less-structured format called child-centered time (CCT).

With support from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), MDRC evaluated Jumpstart’s Foster Grandparent Program (JFG) in Los Angeles and Compton, California, where Jumpstart’s services were delivered by older adults from the community (Community Corps members or “Foster Grandparents”). The evaluation examines whether the JFG program, which operated from fall 2011 to summer 2019, was implemented as intended and in what ways the volunteers enhanced children’s educational and developmental experience in the classroom. Using a child-level, random assignment research design, this evaluation also explores whether the JFG program model shows promise for improving children’s language and literacy and social-emotional development.

## Key Findings

This evaluation found that:

- The Foster Grandparents had consistently high attendance at training sessions and reported feeling adequately prepared to provide services to children.
- The Foster Grandparents demonstrated a strong commitment to the program, and children experienced an increased number of adults in the classroom.
- The Foster Grandparents implemented the curriculum-based sessions regularly and as intended. While implementing the sessions, volunteers used various instructional practices aimed at improving children’s language and literacy development, but the frequency with which these practices were used in the classroom varied across centers.
- The Foster Grandparents devoted a high number of hours to CCT. However, it is not possible to determine how much of that time was spent one-on-one with partner children versus providing general classroom support.
- Children who received services from volunteers made gains in language and literacy development, but the gains were not greater than those made by children who did not receive services from volunteers.



## Acknowledgments

This report and the study upon which it is based are funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The authors would like to thank the Senior Corps and Office of Research and Evaluation teams at CNCS, including Robin Corindo, Robert Cox, Deborah Cox Roush, Mary Greusel, Jill Sears, Colin White, Mary Hyde, Anthony Nerino, and Lily Zandniapour; and Fred Doolittle, Barbara Condliffe, and Michelle Maier from MDRC for their guidance and feedback on this work.

The study benefited greatly from the support and cooperation from key members of the Jumpstart organization: Abby Weiss, Christine Patton, Ashley Bushell, Hillary Roselund, Keuna Cho, and Truyen Tran, who provided helpful feedback on the report. A special thank you to Christine Patton and Christine Manley Martinez, who met with the MDRC team members regularly and responded to requests for data promptly, and to the former Los Angeles Community Corps site managers Ayleen Dimailig, Deisy Barajas, and Kayla Weems, who supported the work.

Finally, this study would not have been possible without the help of our MDRC colleagues. Kate Gualtieri and Emma Alterman provided fiscal oversight. Margaret Bald, Ali Tufel, and Joshua Malbin reviewed earlier drafts of the report and provided valuable comments, and Jill Kirschenbaum edited the report. Ann Kottner prepared it for publication.

The Authors



## Executive Summary

Children’s school readiness as they enter kindergarten is an important predictor of their academic success and ultimately their long-term health and economic outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that participation in high-quality early childhood education helps preschoolers gain the foundational language and literacy skills as well as the social-emotional competencies they need to be ready for kindergarten.<sup>2</sup> Even so, free or affordable high-quality preschool options remain limited for families in many underserved communities, and children growing up in poverty often have less access to the kinds of early learning opportunities that contribute to school readiness.<sup>3</sup> Gaps in language and literacy skills begin early and widen over time.<sup>4</sup>

Jumpstart is a nonprofit organization that aims to address the school readiness gap. It partners with early childhood education centers across the country to increase their capacity to provide high-quality language and literacy instruction to children in underserved communities.<sup>5</sup> Jumpstart’s program model, delivered by volunteers, includes weekly curriculum-based sessions focused on children’s language and literacy development (“Jumpstart sessions”), as well as one-on-one time outside of those sessions (“child-centered time” or CCT). Most of Jumpstart’s volunteers are college-age students (“College Corps”), but some volunteers are older adults from the community (Community Corps members or “Foster Grandparents”).<sup>6</sup>

This report presents the findings from an evaluation of Jumpstart’s Foster Grandparent Program (JFG) in Los Angeles and Compton, California, which operated from fall 2011 to summer 2019, where Jumpstart’s services were delivered by older adults. The evaluation, which focuses on the 2017-2018 academic year, examines whether the JFG program was implemented as intended and to what extent the presence of volunteers enhanced children’s educational and developmental experience in the classroom. The evaluation also explores whether the JFG program

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Blodgett and Myah Houghten, *Every Child School Ready: Community, School, and Student Predictors of Kindergarten Readiness and Academic Progress* (Olympia, Washington: Education Research & Data Center, 2018); Amy Pace, Rufan Luo, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, and Roberta Golinkoff, “Identifying Pathways Between Socioeconomic Status and Language Development,” *Annual Review of Linguistics* 3 (2017): 285-308.

<sup>2</sup>Amie Bettencourt, Deborah Gross, and Grace Ho, *The Costly Consequences of Not Being Socially and Behaviorally Ready by Kindergarten: Associations with Grade Retention, Receipt of Academic Support Services, and Suspensions/Expulsions* (Baltimore: Baltimore Education Research Consortium, 2016); Carmen Shery Brown, “Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years: Foundational Skills that Support Emergent Readers,” *Language and Literacy Spectrum* 24 (2014): 35-49; Pre-Kindergarten Task Force, *The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Education, *A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Anne Fernald, Virginia A. Marchman, and Adriana Weisleder, “SES Differences in Language Processing Skill and Vocabulary are Evident at 18 Months.” *Developmental Science* 16, 2 (2013): 234-248.

<sup>5</sup>Jumpstart partners with higher education institutions, community organizations, Head Start programs, community-based preschools, and school districts.

<sup>6</sup> According to Jumpstart yearly reports, 4,054 Jumpstart volunteers served a total of 13,035 preschool children across the country in 2017-2018 (Jumpstart, *National Evaluation of Jumpstart: 2017-2018 Program Year* [Boston: Jumpstart, 2019]).



model shows promise for improving children’s language and literacy and social-emotional development, which includes children’s expression and management of emotions, as well as the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others (that is, interpersonal skills). The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) funded the evaluation.

## **Jumpstart Foster Grandparent Program Overview**

Jumpstart is a national organization that works with early childhood education centers across the country. Jumpstart’s national office is in Boston and the organization’s national staff provides support and broad oversight related to curriculum design, volunteer recruitment, and evaluation and monitoring. Jumpstart also has offices nationwide (including in Los Angeles), where staff members support the implementation of the programs. This includes site managers who are responsible for overseeing the implementation of the model in several preschool classrooms at one or more centers.

Jumpstart offered Foster Grandparents several types of pre-service and in-service training to prepare and support them as they delivered the Jumpstart model. Volunteers were expected to participate in eight weeks of pre-service training (three days a week, six hours a day, totaling more than 138 hours). The pre-service training included an orientation about the Jumpstart curriculum, early childhood education, classroom management, and other relevant topics. The volunteers were also expected to attend monthly in-service trainings (four hours each), which were facilitated by site managers.

Each early childhood education center was assigned a team of four to seven Foster Grandparents who supported it for the entire school year.<sup>7</sup> Each volunteer team was overseen and supported by the Jumpstart site manager for that center, who observed and provided regular feedback to the volunteers. On days when volunteers were on-site, they were expected to meet after lunch for 1 to 1.5 hours to prepare and practice their delivery of the Jumpstart session plan for that week. On Fridays, the site managers also led a Team Leadership Meeting at a central location, where they reviewed and demonstrated the following week’s session plan to the volunteer teams.

The overall goal of the JFG program was to place more trained adults in early childhood education classrooms so the children could receive more individualized attention, with a focus on their language, literacy, and social-emotional development. The Foster Grandparents provided this attention in two ways: Jumpstart sessions and child-centered time (CCT):

- **Jumpstart sessions** are based on a language and literacy curriculum designed to supplement existing preschool curricula.<sup>8</sup> The sessions are intended to create opportunities for the volunteers to interact with children in a more structured format. At the time of the study, the Jumpstart sessions targeted the development of three areas of foundational language and literacy skills in

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<sup>7</sup>The number of volunteers in each center was based on the goal of having one volunteer for every three children during the Jumpstart session.

<sup>8</sup>Jumpstart’s curriculum was adapted from the Opening the World of Learning (OWL, v. 2005) curriculum.

children: oral language (vocabulary, comprehension); book and print awareness (alphabet knowledge and use of print); and phonological awareness (phonemic and rhyme). The content of the curriculum, as well as the supportive interactions between children and the Foster Grandparents as they engaged in curriculum-based activities, were also intended to support children’s social-emotional development. As part of the JFG program, the Jumpstart sessions were offered in one designated classroom in each early childhood education center. (This classroom will be referred to as the “Jumpstart classroom.”) Two mornings a week, the volunteers led a structured two-hour session with the children in that classroom. The Jumpstart sessions took place during regularly scheduled classroom time and were led by the volunteers.

- While Jumpstart sessions were intended to provide a structured format for volunteer-child interactions, the second component of the JFG model — **child-centered time (CCT)** — consisted of time outside of the formal sessions, where volunteers interacted with children one-on-one in a less-structured format. As an integral part of service, CCT gave volunteers opportunities to interact with their partner children and contribute to their language and social-emotional development within the setting of teacher-led instructional time. Foster Grandparents in the JFG program played important roles in the classroom by building strong relationships with children; by increasing the number of adults and thereby increasing opportunities for children to receive individualized attention (from both volunteers and teaching staff); and by supporting children’s participation and learning during activities planned by classroom teachers. Foster Grandparents were also expected to build collaborative relationships with teachers and supported teachers in the classroom.

The implementation of the JFG program components (and the resulting increase in the adult-to-child ratio) was intended to increase the amount of one-on-one attention that children received and, in turn, to lead to improvements in their language and literacy development and their social-emotional development.

## **Overview of the Evaluation**

The purpose of this evaluation is to expand the body of research on the Jumpstart model, focusing on how the model was delivered by Foster Grandparents. Many interventions rely on volunteers to provide services to children and youth; this study also aims to build broader knowledge about the implementation and potential effects of educational interventions that mobilize volunteers, especially programs like JFG, which required a relatively large time commitment. The findings from this study can also inform policy and practice about the potential benefits of intergenerational programs.

The evaluation of Jumpstart includes an implementation study and an impact study. The goal of the implementation study is to describe the content, quantity, quality, and structure of

services that the Foster Grandparents provided to children in the study centers. The goal of the impact study is to explore whether the full Jumpstart model and its components, as delivered by the Foster Grandparents, show promise for improving children’s outcomes. Eleven early childhood centers in Los Angeles were included in the implementation study. The effect of the Jumpstart model was examined using a child-level random assignment research design in five of the eleven centers that were a part of the implementation study. In each of the five centers, children were randomly assigned to one of three types of classroom: (1) a *Jumpstart classroom* that received the full JFG model, and where all children received the Jumpstart sessions *and* child-centered time outside of the Jumpstart sessions; (2) a *CCT-only classroom*, where children did not receive the Jumpstart sessions but where some children received child-centered time; or (3) a “*business as usual*” classroom that did not receive services from the volunteers. The impact of the Jumpstart model can be estimated by comparing the spring outcomes of children in the classrooms served by the volunteers to the spring outcomes of children in the business as usual classrooms.

The implementation and impact studies in this evaluation are based on several data sources. For the impact study, children’s outcomes were measured using a teacher-reported assessment called the Desired Results Developmental Profile – Preschool. The DRDP-PS is an observational tool that can be used to rate children’s development in several domains. Early childhood education centers in California that receive state funding (including all 11 study centers) must use the DRDP-PS to assess each child’s development in the fall and spring. For the implementation study, the study team used data collected by Jumpstart to internally monitor the program, including data on child attendance during the Jumpstart session; training attendance records and volunteer timesheets; a pre-service and a post-service volunteer survey; and an observation checklist used by Jumpstart site managers when they observed volunteers in the Jumpstart sessions. The study team also conducted interviews with volunteers and administered a survey to all lead teachers in the study centers. Because teachers were present while volunteers worked with children, the survey asked teachers to report on volunteers’ use of different instructional practices aimed at promoting children’s language and literacy development, as well as their own use of these strategies.<sup>9</sup>

## **Implementation and Service Contrast**

To better understand the context in which the JFG program was executed, the implementation study examined the content, quantity, quality, and structure of services that the Foster Grandparents provided to children in the study centers. It also examined the extent to which the presence of the volunteers changed children’s learning environment relative to what they would have experienced otherwise (the service contrast created by the Jumpstart model).

Although the study was able to examine whether certain features of the model were implemented as intended, there were three key data limitations to consider. First, while it was

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<sup>9</sup>The items in the survey were adapted from the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre-K Tool.

possible to measure the amount of time that volunteers spent serving classrooms outside of Jumpstart session time, it was not possible to measure how much of the volunteers' time was spent engaging with their partner children one-on-one during CCT (as opposed to providing support to all children in the class). Second, volunteers' use of teaching strategies focused on language and literacy development, as reported by teachers, may be biased. For example, given the nature of self-reporting, teachers may have overreported the extent to which they used these teaching strategies and underreported how often volunteers used them. Finally, the response rate for the Jumpstart post-service survey — which was used to measure volunteers' impressions of the program — was only 45 percent, which is below the 70 to 80 percent range that is recommended for generalizing results to a broad population.

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that the components of the Jumpstart model were generally implemented as intended, although limitations in the data make it challenging to assess whether that was accomplished with the expected level of quality:

- **Preparation and Training:** The Foster Grandparents had consistently high attendance at both the pre-service and in-service trainings and reported feeling adequately prepared for providing services to children.
- **Center-Based Volunteer Teams:** Teams of four to seven Foster Grandparents were successfully assigned to each center as expected, and the volunteers demonstrated a strong commitment to the program. Foster Grandparents had consistently high attendance rates and most remained in the program for the entire year. Not all site managers offered regular feedback meetings as intended by the model; nonetheless, volunteers consistently said that their teams were effectively supported by the site managers and center staff.
- **Jumpstart Sessions:** The Foster Grandparents implemented the Jumpstart sessions regularly and structured their delivery of the lesson plans as intended. The volunteers were also observed using various instructional practices aimed at improving children's language and literacy development. The frequency with which these practices were used in the classroom varied across centers, with some practices used more consistently than others.
- **Child-Centered Time (CCT):** The Foster Grandparents devoted a high number of hours to CCT, more than the four to five hours a week expected in the Jumpstart model. However, it is not possible to determine how much of that time was spent one-on-one with partner children. More generally, the volunteers were observed using recommended language and literacy strategies during one-on-one CCT, but strategies were not used consistently in all classrooms.
- **Service Contrast:** Because the Foster Grandparents dedicated a large amount of time to the Jumpstart program, children experienced an increased number of adults in these classrooms for a substantial portion of the week. During the

sessions, teachers reported that the volunteers used language and literacy practices almost as often as they did. This suggests that the teachers positively viewed the volunteers' contributions, though it is not possible to determine whether this translated into more individualized adult-child interactions. During CCT, while language and literacy instructional strategies were not used consistently across classrooms, teachers did report that volunteers engaged in a variety of one-on-one activities with children, providing individualized attention the children might not have received otherwise.

## **Effects on Children's Development**

Given the goals of the Jumpstart model, the impact study focused on two children's outcomes: English Language and Literacy Development, and Social-Emotional Development. These outcomes were measured in the fall and in the spring, based on composite scores created from teachers' ratings using the DRDP-PS.

Even though a random assignment research design was used, the study has three important limitations that make its findings challenging to interpret. First, teachers were not randomly assigned to classrooms, which means that the effect of Jumpstart could be confounded with differences in teacher characteristics or the instruction provided by teachers across classrooms. Second, the number of children included in the analysis is small (105). Given this sample size, the estimated effect of the JFG model would have to be much larger than effects found in prior studies of the Jumpstart model — and larger than the effect of most educational interventions — to be statistically significant. Thus, the impact study is not powered to statistically detect effects of a reasonable magnitude. Third, because the DRDP-PS is used for purposes other than evaluation, child ratings from this tool may not accurately measure children's true level of development. Given these limitations, the study's findings should be considered exploratory and not used to make definitive conclusions about the Jumpstart model's effect.

Nonetheless, the potential for effects can still be explored by examining whether the findings are in the right direction and their magnitude. In this regard, the findings suggest that children in classrooms served by the Foster Grandparents did make gains during the year in their language and literacy skills and their social-emotional competencies. However, they did not make greater gains than children in the business as usual classrooms.

Table ES.1 presents the average spring DRDP-PS scores of children in the Jumpstart classrooms and the business as usual classrooms. As shown in this table, children in the Jumpstart classroom had a spring DRDP score of about 6 points on their English language and literacy development, while children in the business as usual classroom had a score of 6.5 points. Thus, the estimated effect of the full Jumpstart model on children's English language and literacy scores is numerically negative but small in magnitude and not statistically significant (effect size = -0.24,

**Table ES-1**  
**Estimated Effect of the Full Jumpstart Model on**  
**Children's Outcomes, Impact Sample**

Outcome	Jumpstart Group	Business as Usual Group	Estimated Difference	Effect Size	P-Value for Estimated Difference
English Language and Literacy Development (IRT scale) <sup>a</sup>					
Developmental scale (9-point)	-0.11 6.0	0.10 6.5	-0.21	-0.24	0.133
Social-Emotional Development (IRT scale) <sup>b</sup>					
Developmental scale (9-point)	0.08 7.7	0.07 7.7	0.01	0.01	0.951
Self-Regulation Subscale (IRT scale)					
Developmental scale (9-point)	-0.06 7.5	0.01 7.6	-0.07	-0.08	0.706
Interpersonal Skills Subscale (IRT scale)					
Developmental scale (9-point)	0.20 7.9	0.08 7.8	0.12	0.15	0.503
Number of children	30	33			

SOURCE: Teacher ratings based on the Desired Results Developmental Profile – Preschool (DRDP-PS) in spring 2018.

NOTES: The analyses reported in this table are based on children whose parents consented to their participation in the study and who were assessed by their teachers using the DRDP-PS in fall 2017 and spring 2018. The sample includes children who were randomly assigned to classrooms that received the full Jumpstart model from the volunteers (Jumpstart group) or to classrooms that were not supported by the volunteers (business as usual group).

Estimated effects are regression-adjusted using ordinary least squares, controlling for random assignment or matching blocks, as well as any remaining differences between the Jumpstart and comparison group with respect to children's fall 2017 scores on the DRDP-PS assessments, whether the child was a dual language learner (DLL), whether the child had an individualized education plan, their gender, their age, language spoken at home, parent education, family size, whether a child's family received food stamps, and the number of times the family had moved in the last five years. The values in the column labeled "Jumpstart Group" are the observed means for children who were randomly assigned to a classroom that received the full Jumpstart model. The "Business as Usual Group" values in the next column are the regression-adjusted means children who were randomly assigned to a classroom that did not receive services from the Jumpstart volunteers.

<sup>a</sup>For English language learners, this scale is based on four items measuring children's English-language development. For children whose primary language was English, this scale is based on 10 items measuring children's language and literacy development. A partial credit IRT model was used to create a composite scale based on these items.

<sup>b</sup>The Social-Emotional Development scale includes nine items (four items measuring self-regulation and five items measuring interpersonal skills). A partial credit IRT model was used to create a composite scale based on these items.

Because IRT scores do not have a meaningful interpretation, group means for children's simple average score across the relevant items are also shown, based on the original nine-point developmental scale.

p-value = 0.133). For social-emotional development, the average spring score of both groups of children was 7.7. Thus, the estimated effect on social-emotional scores is numerically positive but small in size and not statistically significant (effect size = 0.01, p-value of 0.951).

## Lessons About Implementing Volunteer-Based Intergenerational Programs

The findings from this study of the Jumpstart Foster Grandparent model highlight several lessons about the implementation of volunteer-based educational interventions:

- **It is possible to build a corps of senior volunteers who will commit significant amounts of time and energy to providing services to children.** Even though the volunteers were older adults — many of whom faced transportation, health, and social barriers — the Foster Grandparents attended many hours of pre-service and in-service training and they also met, and sometimes exceeded, their service hour requirement of 15 hours a week.
- **Some instructional practices and strategies are more challenging for volunteers to implement than others.** The findings from this study suggest that although the JFG volunteers implemented the language and literacy strategies that they learned in training, the frequency with which they were used varied across strategies and across centers.
- **High child mobility and sporadic attendance in early childhood education settings can make it challenging for staff to build relationships with children, which highlights the programmatic importance of child-centered strategies.** In this study, many children left the centers part-way through the academic year and were not assessed in the spring. Children with inconsistent or unstable school attendance in preschool miss out on instruction and supports that will prepare them for kindergarten. Child mobility also makes it more challenging for adults in early childhood education centers to build relationships with children. Thus, organizations like Jumpstart that focus on relationships need to work especially hard to make sure that one-on-one time with children (like CCT) is maximized during the short time that children might be enrolled at the center.

## Looking Forward

In summer 2019, Jumpstart decided to discontinue its Foster Grandparent program, which represented about 4 percent of its total volunteer corps. This shift will allow Jumpstart to refocus its resources on the College Corps, a group that is better aligned with Jumpstart's goal of training volunteers who will later become educators and teachers in the country's educational workforce.

Jumpstart has made several enhancements to CCT and to the Jumpstart sessions, which its College Corps implemented in fall 2019. The goal of these enhancements is to help the

volunteers provide more intentional and focused language and literacy and social-emotional supports to children. Volunteers are now trained on a modified version of CCT called Individual Classroom Service (ICS), to help them provide their partner children with higher-quality individualized classroom time. ICS focuses on more intentional activities to promote language and literacy development. Volunteers receive training and support in the use of specific strategies for engaging children in conversations during one-on-one time, as well as activities for building vocabulary and comprehension skills. During ICS, volunteers continue supporting the general classroom by providing assistance to children during teacher-led activities, but there are guidelines that emphasize how much time to dedicate to partner children. With respect to the Jumpstart sessions, the curriculum has been adapted to more strongly emphasize oral language and social-emotional skill-building. The sessions previously focused on phonological awareness, books and print knowledge, and oral language. Now the main focus is on oral language skills of vocabulary and comprehension, and the curriculum incorporates a new emphasis on supporting children's ability to recognize, label, and understand emotions in themselves and others. These modifications, which are intended to help the volunteers provide children with a substantially different instructional and supportive experience, have the potential to further strengthen the Jumpstart model and lead to better outcomes for children in the communities served by the program.



