

A First Look at the Head Start CARES Demonstration

Large-Scale Implementation of Programs to Improve Children's Social-Emotional Competence

Low-income preschool children face many risks to their social-emotional development that can affect their school experience and social outcomes for years to come. Although there are some promising approaches to improving young children's social-emotional competence, the evidence base is limited, particularly on the effectiveness of these approaches when operating at large scale.

To help address this gap, the Head Start CARES demonstration evaluated the implementation and impacts of three interventions that included classroom-based social-emotional strategies, along with professional development (teacher training and coaching) and related supports for scaling up the program, in Head Start classrooms

across the country. "The Incredible Years Teacher Training Program" trains teachers to create an organized classroom climate that supports children's behavior regulation (by both the teacher and by the children themselves) and promotes positive teacher-child relationships. "Preschool PATHS" focuses on improving children's social-emotional problem-solving skills, including defining problems and anticipating the consequences of different solutions. "Tools of the Mind—Play" focuses on training teachers to strengthen children's ability to regulate their behavior by using adult-supported, "make believe" play and other activities.

The demonstration was conducted with 17 Head Start grantees that varied by geographic location, or-

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ganizational setting, and size, and generally represented the diversity of Head Start settings nationally. Centers within these 17 grantees were randomly assigned to one of the three interventions or to a “business as usual” control group. This report describes the extent to which each strategy and the professional development supports were implemented as intended, and the degree to which teachers’ practices changed as a result.

KEY FINDINGS

Taken together, the following findings confirm that the Head Start CARES demonstration provided a fair test of large-scale implementation of the three interventions, thereby providing a sound basis for evaluating their impact on children and classrooms.

- Teacher attendance at training sessions and the quality of training were generally strong across all grantees and interventions. The dosage (frequency and duration) and quality of coaching for teachers in the classroom were also generally high.
- Despite challenges, teachers reported that they understood the interventions and were able to implement them. The

Incredible Years and Preschool PATHS were easier for teachers to implement than was Tools of the Mind.

- Classroom implementation varied somewhat across the three interventions in terms of fidelity to the original model, but each intervention was implemented with fidelity at or above a pre-determined threshold rating of 3 on a 5-point scale. Fidelity of classroom implementation improved over the course of the school year.
- Compared with the control classrooms, each intervention improved the specific teacher practice that it was hypothesized to affect. The Incredible Years improved teachers’ classroom management, PATHS bolstered teachers’ social-emotional instruction, and Tools of the Mind increased teachers’ scaffolding of peer interactions and play, in which the teacher supports the children in their attempts to push beyond their current skill level.

A separate report examines the impacts of the three interventions on teacher-child interactions, children’s preschool outcomes, and children’s kindergarten outcomes.

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Authors: Shira Kolnik Mattera (MDRC),
Chrishana M. Lloyd (MDRC), Mike Fishman (MEF Associates),
Michael Bangser (MDRC)

Ann Rivera,
Project Officer
Office of Planning,
Research and
Evaluation,
Administration for
Children and Families,
U.S. Department of Health
and Human
Services

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Pamela Morris,
Project Director
MDRC

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MDRC
16 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016

