



July 2025

So Much More Than ABCs

Families' Experiences with Head Start

ELISA MINOFF

Jasmine, a mother in North Carolina, describes her six-year-old as charming, independent, and “very intelligent—and I’m not just saying that because she’s my kid.” She credits Early Head Start for setting her daughter up for success. Jasmine had been caring for her daughter full time at home when she began attending the program at one and a half. As Jasmine remembers it, soon after her daughter started, she was playing with a little rubber duck during bathtime, “and all of a sudden, she was just like, “Quack.” I said, “I didn’t teach you that.” I said “Oh, you’re learning at school.” Over time, Jasmineⁱ realized that her daughter was learning more fundamental life skills—how to follow directions, care for herself, and socialize and relate to others. Reflecting on her daughter’s time in Head Start, Jasmine observed, “I don’t think I ever could have taught her what she knows myself.” After all, “there’s so much more” that one- and two-year-olds need to learn than just “your colors, your numbers, your ABCs.”

Head Start has been there for families like Jasmine’s for sixty years, nurturing early learning and supporting parents and caregivers of young children in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the country. Mamie Phipps Clark and the other child development experts who conceived of Head Start in 1965 envisioned a comprehensive program that functioned as a counterforce to structural inequality and discrimination, supporting children’s physical health, facilitating their social and emotional development, establishing high expectations—and involving parents at every step along the way.¹ That approach has stuck, and shaped the lives of millions of children and families in the decades since.

Today, approximately 800,000 children are served by Head Start every year, primarily through preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds, but also through Early Head Start programs for infants, toddlers and expecting families.² Most Head Start funding supports center-based programs like the one that Jasmine’s daughter attended, but Head Start funding can also support family child care providers who work out of their own homes, as well as parents caring for their own children at home. Increasingly, local communities are using Head Start funding along with other federal, state, and local investments to deliver pre-K to all three- and four-year-olds—blending and braiding funding to ensure universal access and provide home visiting and other wrap around services that are standard features of Head Start to more families.³

In 2024, we conducted qualitative research with parents, caregivers, and child care providers that highlights the critical role that Head Start continues to play in families’ lives. For our research, we interviewed more than 75 people, including 62 parents, grandparents, and other informal caregivers of young children, alongside staff or owners of 13 licensed child care centers (8) and family child care homes (5). These parents, caregivers, and child care providers lived in large metropolitan areas, smaller cities, and rural communities in states that have diverse approaches to early learning and care: Massachusetts, New Mexico, and North Carolina. Families used a wide range of care arrangements for their young children. In total, 12 parents and caregivers we interviewed across these three states sent their children to Head Start.

This brief synthesizes the experiences of the 12 families whose children attended Head Start, from

ⁱ The names in this brief are pseudonyms, to protect the privacy of the individuals we interviewed.

the perspective of the parents and caregivers we interviewed. Head Start has faced many of the same challenges as the broader sector of early learning and care, but recent political developments raise even more fundamental questions about whether it will continue to be there for families with young children in the decades to come. The conservative policy agenda Project 2025, which has served as a blueprint for the Trump administration, explicitly called for the program's elimination. In the first few months of 2025, the federal government sent \$1 billion less in Head Start funding to states as the administration laid off federal employees and froze funding, and it recently issued a notice that could limit access to Head Start for children in immigrant families.⁴ Families, teachers, and program directors alike are worried about the future of Head Start, and the gaping hole that any cuts to Head Start or restrictions on access would leave in the continuum of early learning and care in this country—especially for young children in families with the fewest resources.⁵

Our research underscores how Head Start not only nurtures the growth and development of the children who attend its programs, but is deeply embedded in communities and a critical connector in the larger network of supports for families with young children, especially for the predominantly Black, Indigenous, and immigrant families with low incomes who we interviewed.

Head Start is Deeply Embedded in Communities

Head Start is a primary provider of early learning and care in the United States. For families with low incomes, the free services and programming that Head Start provides may be the only affordable early learning options, and in some rural and tribal communities Head Start is the only licensed child care full stop—if families want center-based care, Head Start is it.⁶

When we interviewed parents and caregivers, we heard about the important role that Head Start plays in communities with limited resources. Across the three states where we conducted this research, 12 families had sent one or more of their children to a Head Start program when they were young. We talked to Brenda, a mother in North Carolina whose oldest child attended Head Start when Brenda was



finishing up her education; Brenda is now a Head Start teacher herself. We talked to Marissa, a mother in New Mexico who learned about Head Start from her own mother and now sends her three-year-old to the program. We talked to Anna, a mother of three in Massachusetts whose two youngest children attended Head Start, and who described it as a critical community resource: “it is the only program that exists, honestly, for young children.”⁷

Parents were overwhelmingly positive about their children's experiences with Head Start. In our interviews, we asked parents about both the strengths and weaknesses of their child care arrangements—what worked well for their children and families, and what did not. Parents' reviews of Head Start were glowing. Anna in Massachusetts described Head Start as “a blessing.” Tiffany, a mother of three in North Carolina told us, “Head Start was an amazing place.”

Meeting communities' needs has been central to Head Start's mission since its founding, and parents and caregivers specifically highlighted how helpful Head Start has been connecting their families to community resources and bringing people together to build community. Tiffany in North Carolina shared that Head Start introduced her to organizations and resources “that can help my kids, [such as] the dentist. [Head Start] will tell you a lot of things.” Lisa, a mother of three in Massachusetts who has worked in child care herself, also highlighted how the Head Start program that her youngest attends connected her to supports while making her child

feel a sense of belonging in their diverse community. As she put it, they have “so much resources and they are always involving the parents, having different vendors come and teach the parents, and it’s so many different languages and children from all races. And I just really like that program for my son.” Anna in Massachusetts shared how she and her daughter remain connected to her Head Start teachers, even now that her daughter is in elementary school, and they see the teachers at community meetings, strengthening her sense of community, and belonging. Anna explained: “they always ask me about [my daughter]... [My daughter] still remembers her teachers, so it’s nice because despite [the fact that my daughter no longer attends the program] we still create bonds, and that gives us piece of mind.”⁸

For families with young children who have limited resources, Head Start is often one of the first community organizations they encounter. Their connection to Head Start can have a snowballing effect, as Head Start connects them to other community resources and brings them together with other parents and community leaders, promoting social connection and community engagement that can help buffer them from harm and promote well-being.⁹

Head Start Nurtures Early Learning

Head Start programs are community institutions with one overriding concern: promoting early learning. When parents and caregivers described their children’s experiences with Head Start, they focused first and foremost on how the programs nurtured their children’s growth and development.

Like Jasmine, the mother in North Carolina whose experience we shared at the beginning of this brief, many parents noted how Head Start taught their children not only the basic academic skills they needed to be ready for elementary school—their ABCs and 123s—but also practical skills so they can be more independent and social skills so they can interact with other children and adults.

Marissa, the mother of a three-year-old in New Mexico, told us how her daughter has learned how to serve herself food from her teachers at Head Start, along with the days of the week, and how

to count through 20. Kim, a mother of three in Massachusetts, emphasized how Head Start helped her children develop their early social emotional skills, “while they can make friends and improve their social connection.”

In our interviews, parents and caregivers highlighted the features of their children’s Head Start programs that they felt made them most successful at supporting their children’s growth and development. The basic characteristics they named—dedicated teachers, inclusive classrooms, strong communication, and healthy routines—are critical for any effective early learning program, but as parents shared, there are specific steps Head Start educators and programs take to make these a reality in the day-to-day lives of children and families they serve.

1. Dedicated Teachers

Parents praised Head Start teachers for being attentive and dedicated to their children, providing individualized instruction and adapting their curriculum to effectively engage the children and families with whom they worked.

Stephanie, a mother in North Carolina whose older daughter and younger son both attended Head Start and had the same teacher, described how they thrived in the classroom, and she saw their teacher “always go above and beyond and individualize learning for all the kids.” As Stephanie explained it, “even though they’re in preschool, she would always challenge them. Wherever they were, she



would make sure, if he already knew how to do a four-piece puzzle, then she's going to give him something that's going to challenge him. That's what she would always do. She wouldn't just make him still do that four-piece puzzle. She would give him something else."

Crystal, a mother of three in North Carolina whose children attended both Early Head Start and Head Start, described how her middle child's teachers incorporated what her daughter was learning at home in the classroom. Crystal told us that she had started teaching her daughter sign language from a video she had found on YouTube, and when the teachers found out: "they started incorporating it with other kids... and it's just everybody learned something new every day. So I loved that."

Katie, a mother of two in New Mexico who sent both of her children to the center-based Head Start in her community, and also participated in the home-based program when her children were younger, said she loved the weekly home visits and the materials the teacher would bring: "they'll send you packets and the teacher comes out once a week and sees how you're doing I did not every single, but damn near every homework assignment that they sent I taught my kids the shapes and oh man, we used to have fun. It was cool."

Parents spoke about the passion and drive of their children's teachers. Lisa in Massachusetts noted how "the teachers are so dedicated, and I mean passionate about what they do." Jasmine in North Carolina used the words to describe her child's teacher: "I just think that her teacher, especially her lead teacher for Early Head Start, I don't know, she just has such a passion for teaching, for teaching and working with the kids"

2. Inclusive Classrooms

Parents also highlighted how Head Start programs supported their children's developmental needs and brought additional services and supports into the classroom. Lisa in Massachusetts described how her youngest son, whose speech was delayed, made rapid progress once he started Head Start at age four. He had been attending another child care program that was not providing him adequate services, but he now receives speech therapy at school. As Lisa explained, right when he started "they had all the services that was needed and the



teacher was so much into it, invested into making sure that the child was able to receive what... [he] needed in order to be successful, and also giving me tips on how help him improve and support him." She told us, "I wish he would've started earlier."

Carla, a mother of two in Massachusetts, shared how helpful Head Start was for her three-year-old who has selective mutism. Her son had been home with her before he began Head Start, but he was not speaking to others outside the family. Since beginning Head Start, she said, "I've seen him improve since school.... I think it ends up helping him outside. School has helped him socialize better with people outside.... I ask him if he likes going, and he says he really likes it, that he has five friends."

Head Start places a priority on serving children with disabilities, requiring developmental screenings of all children within 45 days of enrollment,¹⁰ and supporting inclusive classrooms.¹¹ In some communities Head Start may be the only inclusive early learning available, as other child care programs often turn children with disabilities away.¹² As Brenda, the North Carolina mother whose oldest attended Head Start and who has worked in both Head Start and private child care programs, explained, at Head Start "we do not turn any children away. In private childcare... If a child's needs were too extreme, we could deny service in the sense of it prohibited us from being able to care for the other children equally. But in Head Start, no, we do not deny children at all, no matter what their disability or need be."

The importance of early intervention and services such as speech and occupational therapy for children with developmental delays or disabilities is well established, as early intervention can improve development, reduce the need for special education when children reach school age, and improve health over the long run.¹³ For the parents we spoke with, Head Start provided the early intervention their children needed, connecting them to services and creating an inclusive environment so their children could meet their milestones and thrive.¹⁴

3. Strong Communication

Many parents highlighted how frequent and open communication with Head Start teachers benefited their children, noting the particular benefits of home visits—which are a required feature of Head Start programs—but also the day-to-day conversations with teachers at pick up and drop off. This open communication both made parents more comfortable sending their children to school, and made their children more comfortable going to school for the first time.

Parents shared that the home visits helped their children forge relationships with their teachers as they prepared for pre-school. Stephanie in North Carolina explained how the home visit helped her daughter: “For my daughter going to another place with somebody all day, every day, that was huge. That was a big transition. And initially she didn’t really want to go every day because she was used to being with me mostly. So the teacher, she just took it a step above. She came to our ... she brought her



a book one day and read to my daughter, just so my daughter could see her in her setting. And she took the time out to let her warm up to her. And so that helped a lot.”

Parents also shared how their daily conversations and communications with their children’s teachers helped ensure they were up-to-date on how their children were doing and build trust. Marissa, the mother in New Mexico with a three-year-old in Head Start, explained, “I like that the teacher, when I come in, she has a brief talk with me, what [my daughter] did and how she did and [what] was something she did and what she ate. I feel like that’s good that they talk to us right away instead, just not knowing or just guessing or asking. The kids don’t know yet to tell us what they did.” At the end of the day, she explained, “I like how the teachers treat her and me... I feel comfortable with them.”

Open and frequent communication between parents and teachers is essential for young children and families, as it helps ensure all of the caregivers in children’s lives have the information they need to nurture children’s growth and development. Parents’ experiences with Head Start indicate that their teachers’ daily classroom practices as well as the family engagement activities that Head Start prioritizes allow for effective communication.

4. Healthy Routines

Parents also noted how Head Start created healthy routines for their children and families. Structure and routines are critical for young children, providing predictability and creating a sense of safety so children can feel comfortable and confident trying new things.¹⁵ Most early learning programs are structured around schedules and routines, and Head Start builds activities into their daily routines beyond what typical child care programs offer, such as brushing teeth to promote oral health.¹⁶

Parents told us how much they valued the structure that Head Start provided. As Anna, the mother of three in Massachusetts whose two youngest children attended Head Start, explained, “That was what I liked most, the routine, because I believe that to be stable and healthy, a child needs a routine, a stability. There, he did exactly the same thing every day. Obviously each day had a different activity, but that was it, the routine.”



For children and families whose finances are precarious, and whose lives may be disrupted by a parents' job loss, housing instability, or a health crisis, Head Start can really be a lifeline, providing that consistent support to families and the daily routine for their children that can be a source of comfort and security so they can grow and thrive.

Head Start Fosters Healthy and Happy Children

For many parents and caregivers, the best indication of the strength of a child care program is whether their children are excited to go to school in the morning. Several parents noted how happy Head Start made their children. Lisa in Massachusetts described how her son loved going to school every day: "When he goes there he's smiling, he wants to go to school, he's upset when it's not school, and I'm like, "Wow, this is a great program." Katie in New Mexico echoed the sentiment " [My son] loved going to school, and that's what I liked about it. He was happy. He didn't give me no fuss, nothing. I liked how they made [him] feel. He was Superman. They made him feel great."

Head Start is a critical—and for many families beloved—part of the continuum of early learning and care for young children. Created sixty years ago to serve young children and families who otherwise would not have access to quality early learning and care—because they could not afford it, because they faced discrimination and prejudice, or because their communities simply did not have it—Head Start continues to play a vital role in the lives of families

with limited resources. As our research suggests, Head Start not only prepares children for school, but also connects families to services and supports, builds connection and community, and promotes the health and well-being of young children and their caregivers.

All young children should be able to access early learning and care and benefit from dedicated teachers, inclusive classrooms, clear communication, and consistent routines. Providing these opportunities not only fosters happy and healthy children who are meeting their developmental milestones, but it also sets children up for full and productive lives, stable relationships, success in school and work, and a sense of connection to and responsibility for their neighbors and community. A program like Head Start, in other words, not only benefits the children who go through it, but the communities that they live in and contribute to.

We should not be cutting programs that strengthen communities and offer children and families the support they need. Instead, we should be increasing investments in early learning and care, to make programs like Head Start and the universal early learning systems that Head Start funding increasingly supports available to more children in more communities.

Appendix

Our Research with Parents and Caregivers

This brief draws on a subset of interviews from a larger project in which we talked to parents and caregivers about their experiences with different child care arrangements, and the supports they would need to access care for their young children in the setting and with the early educator or caregiver who best meets their needs.

The parents and caregivers we interviewed were equally divided across three states—Massachusetts, North Carolina, and New Mexico—and the vast majority had household incomes under \$60,000, which is approximately twice the federal poverty level for a family of four. Overall, of the 62 parents and caregivers we interviewed, just over 30 percent had incomes under \$20,000, another 40 percent had incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000, just over 20 percent had incomes between \$40,000 and \$60,000, and a few had incomes over \$60,000. The parents and caregivers we interviewed were racially and ethnically diverse: 32 identified as Black or African American, 12 as Hispanic or Latinx/e, 9 as Indigenous, 6 as Asian American, 2 as Brazilian, and 1 as White. Approximately one-third were immigrants. Most were women, with 53 identifying as female, 8 as male, and 1 as non-binary.

Twelve of the 62 parents and caregivers we interviewed shared that one or more of their children had attended Head Start, and discussed their experiences with the program. It is possible and even probable that other parents we interviewed sent their children to a Head Start program or to a program that received Head Start funding, but did not name it as Head Start. This brief draws on the 12 interviews with parents who named Head Start as their child care provider.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the parents, caregivers, and child care providers who spoke to us for this project and made this brief possible. The research was conducted Elisa Minoff, Esi Hutchful, and Alex Coccia of CSSP. The project benefited tremendously from the input of parents serving on CSSP's research advisory board—Huong Vu, Lupe Mendoza, and Eboni Brown— who offered their

insights and feedback at multiple stages. Thanks also to Megan Martin and Esi Hutchful at CSSP for their thoughts and reflections on an earlier draft of this brief.

Suggested Citation

Minoff, Elisa. "So Much More Than ABCs: Families' Experiences with Head Start." Center for the Study of Social Policy, July 2025. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/families-experiences-with-head-start/>.

Endnotes

- 1 Sanders, Crystal. *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle*, p. 38. University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Clark was a trailblazing psychologist, most famous for conceiving the "doll tests" with her research partner and husband, Kenneth Clark, that demonstrated the harm of segregation and were used in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). See Rothberg, Emma. "Mamie Phipps Clark" National Women's History Museum, 2022. Available at: www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mamie-hipps-clark.
- 2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. "Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2023." Available at: <https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2023>.
- 3 Liss, Emily and Sarah Gilliland. "Local Early Childhood Initiatives Need Head Start." *New America*, May 19, 2025.
- 4 See Press Release, U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations. "NEW: Trump Admin Withholding Nearly \$1 Billion in Funding for Head Start—Crunching Centers Nationwide and Forcing Devastating Closures." April 16, 2025. Available at: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/minority/new-trump-admin-withholding-nearly-1-billion-in-funding-for-head-startcrunching-centers-nationwide-and-forcing-devastating-closures>. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA); Interpretation of "Federal Public Benefit"" *Federal Register* / Vol. 90, No. 132 (Monday, July 14, 2025). Available at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/07/14/2025-13118/personal-responsibility-and-work-opportunity-reconciliation-act-of-1996-prwora-interpretation-of>.
- 5 For the impact of these actions and concerns raised, see: Mader, Jackie. "As federal dollars for Head Start slow, rural parents left without other options." *The Hechinger Report*, April 30, 2025. Available at: <https://thehechingerreport.org/as-federal-dollars-for-head-start-slow-rural-parents-left-without-other-options/>. Winter, Jessica. "Can Head Start Survive the MAGA Era?" *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2025. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/can-head-start-survive-the-maga-small-era>. See for example, Wilson, Richelle. "Half of Wisconsin Head Start programs can't access needed funds after federal funding freeze." *Wisconsin Public Radio*, February 3, 2025. Available at: <https://www.wpr.org/news/half-wisconsin-head-start-programs-cant-access-funds-federal-freeze-trump>. Geduld, Amanda. "Parents, Head Start Providers Challenge New Rule Barring Undocumented Families." *The74*, July 16, 2025. Available at: <https://www.the74million.org/zero2eight/parents-head-start-providers-challenge-new-rule-barring-undocumented-families/>.
- 6 According to analysis by the Center for American Progress, Head Start has centers in 86 percent of America's 1,760 rural counties. In a 10 state sample, 1 out of every 3 rural child care centers is a Head Start program, and 48 counties would have no child care centers if not for Head Start. Mailik, Rasheed and Leila Schochet. "A Compass for Families: Head Start in Rural America." Center for American Progress, April 10, 2018.
- 7 A translation from the original Spanish. In the original she states: "El Head Start... siento yo que fue bastante útil y es el único programa que hay, sinceramente, para niños pequeños."

- 8 A translation from the original Spanish. In the original she states: “.. entonces es bonito porque a pesar de eso todavía creamos vínculos, y eso da tranquilidad.”
- 9 Browne, Charlyn Harper. “Expanding the Perspectives and Research Foundation for the Strengthening Families & Youth Thrive Frameworks.” Center for the Study of Social Policy, February 2024. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/expanding-the-perspectives-and-research-foundation-for-the-strengthening-families-youth-thrive-frameworks/>.
- 10 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. Head Start Policy and Regulations. 1302.22 child screenings and assessments. Available at : <https://headstart.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-33-child-screenings-assessments>
- 11 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. “Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs.” Updated November 2023. Available at : <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/policy-statement-on-inclusion.pdf>
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Georgetown Center for Children and Families. “Medicaid Provides Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Developmental Delays.” Available at: <https://ccf.georgetown.edu/2025/03/07/medicaid-provides-early-intervention-for-infants-and-toddlers-with-disabilities-and-developmental-delays/>
- 14 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. “Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs.” Updated November 2023. Available at : <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/policy-statement-on-inclusion.pdf>.
- 15 On the benefits of routines see Selman, Saliha B. and Janean E. Dilworth-Bart. “Routines and child development: A systematic review.” Journal of Family Theory & Review, December 13, 2023. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jftr.12549> and <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/creating-routines-for-love-and-learning/>
- 16 See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. Head Start Program Performance Standards, 1302.43 Oral Health Practices. Available at: <https://headstart.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-43-oral-health-practices>.