

 **Research Brief**

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Head Start Families' Program and Selection Experiences

Key Findings

- When deciding on a child care arrangement or early childhood program, parents' top reason for choosing their Head Start program is to help their child get ready for kindergarten (cited by 91 percent of parents).
- Parents are very satisfied with an array of aspects related to their Head Start program. Importantly, more than 90 percent of Head Start parents report being satisfied with how their Head Start program has prepared their child to enter kindergarten, made them feel welcomed, and supported and respected their family's culture and background.
- Head Start parents are also engaged in many program activities and report positive program experiences, with most parents agreeing that staff at their program are culturally responsive.
- Half of all Head Start parents (54 percent) expect their child to attend kindergarten next year. Thirty-nine percent plan to return to their Head Start program for a second year, and 6 percent plan to send their child to another preschool. Most of those who do not plan to return to Head Start are trying to find an early care and education setting closer to home.

* All estimates in this brief are at the child level, and should be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents and not children's parents, throughout the brief. Weighted estimates from parent-reported data are nationally representative of children in Head Start.

Many factors are at play when parents choose early care and education (ECE) settings: the demands of their job, including working hours; their child's educational and social needs; preferences about whether child care is provided by family or friends; program hours and costs; eligibility; location; and how easy it is to enroll (Bassok et al. 2018; Gennetian et al. 2019; Harding and Paulsell 2018; Hill et al. 2021; NSECE 2014). For example, having unpredictable work schedules, working evening hours, and working weekends are strong predictors of why parents with low incomes choose particular ECE settings (Weber et al. 2018).

Quality, as reflected in certain program features, is also important to parents. For example, at least half of parents in a recent study say warm and caring teachers, clean and safe environments, and forms of support that build children's academic and social skills are "extremely important" when they choose an ECE environment (Bassok et al. 2018).

Although parents consider many factors when selecting an ECE setting, their experiences with their Head Start program and whether it meets their needs may determine if families continue with the program and if their children thrive.

What is Head Start?

Head Start is a national program that helps young children from families with low incomes get ready to succeed in school. It does this by working to promote their early learning and health and their families' well-being. Head Start connects families with medical, dental, and mental health services to be sure that children get the services they need to develop well. Head Start also involves parents in their children's learning and development, and helps parents make progress on their own goals, such as housing stability, continuing education, and financial security (Administration for Children and Families 2020). Head Start operates by providing grants to local public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies. The agencies in turn deliver comprehensive children's development services to economically disadvantaged children and families.

Head Start services are aimed at preschool-age children from families with low incomes. Families qualify for services primarily based on their income and eligibility for social services. In keeping with Head Start's mission, the program also prioritizes children who face adversities intertwined with poverty, such as children experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and with disabilities. In fact, the 2015 final rule on Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment, and Attendance (ERSEA; OHS, ECLKC 2021) includes specific language about these populations. The Head Start Program Performance Standards ([45 C.F.R. 1302.18](#)) also require that programs not charge eligible families a fee to participate in Head Start. Fees must only be accepted for services that are in addition to services funded by Head Start (for example, child care before or after Head Start).

This brief refers to parent experiences with specific Head Start programs or centers as "their Head Start program" and to the overarching, national program that also provides services as "Head Start."

The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework assumes that positive, ongoing interactions between families and staff will ultimately lead to positive family and child outcomes, including family engagement in and connection to programs and children's readiness for school (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement 2018). Understanding why families choose their Head Start program and whether they plan to return can promote understanding of the factors that shape their participation in programs and help programs focus their recruitment and retention efforts. Findings in this brief could be useful for providing a better understanding of family engagement and experiences in Head Start.

Using data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES 2019), this brief describes (1) why Head Start families choose their child's Head Start program, (2) what their experiences are like in their Head Start program, and (3) whether they plan to return to their Head Start program for a second year.¹

Research questions

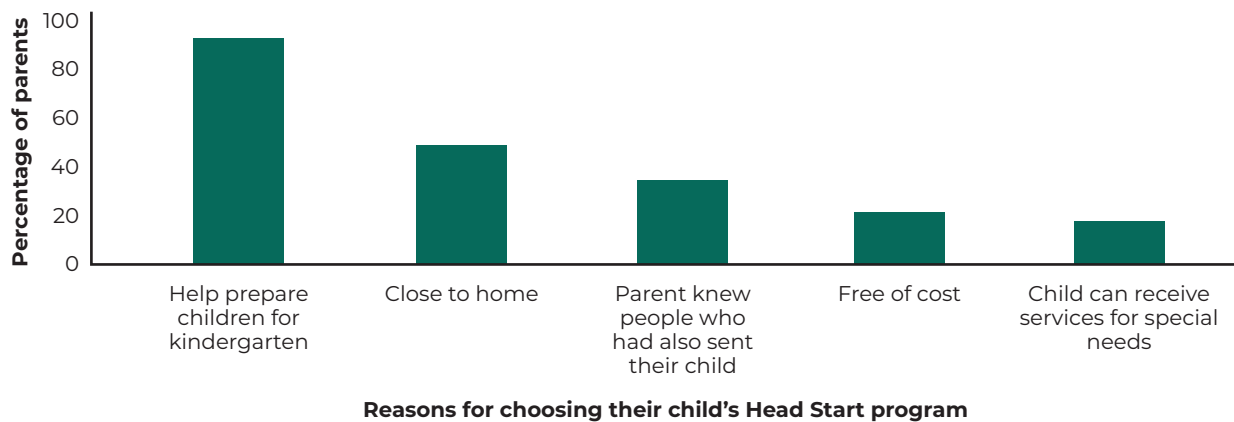
1. Why do Head Start families choose their child's Head Start program?
2. What are families' experiences like in their Head Start program?
 - a. Do families receive culturally responsive services?
 - b. In what program activities do families participate, and how often do they participate in these activities?
 - c. How satisfied are Head Start families with their program experiences?
3. Do families plan to return for a second year at their Head Start program? If not, what are the reasons they do not plan to return? ▲

Why do Head Start families choose their child’s Head Start program?

Head Start parents most commonly choose their Head Start program to help prepare their child for kindergarten (Exhibit 1).

In addition to kindergarten preparation, parents report choosing their child’s Head Start program because the location was close to home (48 percent), they knew other people who sent their child to the same program (34 percent), it was free of cost² (22 percent), and their child could receive services for special needs (18 percent).

Exhibit 1. Almost all Head Start parents choose their child’s Head Start program to help prepare them for kindergarten



Source: Fall 2019 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020.

All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children’s parents, when describing findings.

Surveys asked parents to select up to three reasons for choosing Head Start for their child care arrangement or early childhood program.

Data are drawn from Table A.1 in the accompanying technical appendix.

Less than 15 percent of parents report other reasons for choosing the program. These reasons include small classroom or group size (14 percent), the teacher providing flexible hours to fit the parents’ schedule (9 percent), parents already knowing the teacher (8 percent), shared beliefs between the teacher and parent about raising children (8 percent), and the teacher and child having a shared racial or ethnic background (1 percent). Among families who speak a language other than English in their home, 12 percent of parents report choosing their Head Start program because the teacher speaks English with the child, and 9 percent report choosing their Head Start program because the teacher can speak the child’s home language (Appendix Table A.1).

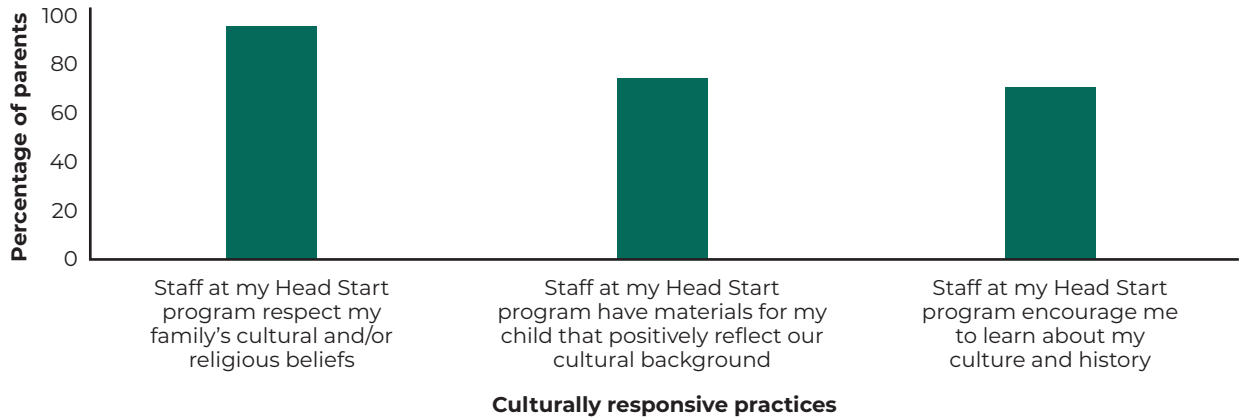
What are families’ experiences like in their Head Start program?

The experiences that families have in their Head Start program—such as if parents are satisfied, if they participate in program activities, and if services are culturally responsive—may contribute to whether they choose to return.

Do families receive culturally responsive services?

Parents report receiving culturally responsive services from staff at their Head Start program (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2. Most Head Start parents agree that staff at their program are culturally responsive



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020.

All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

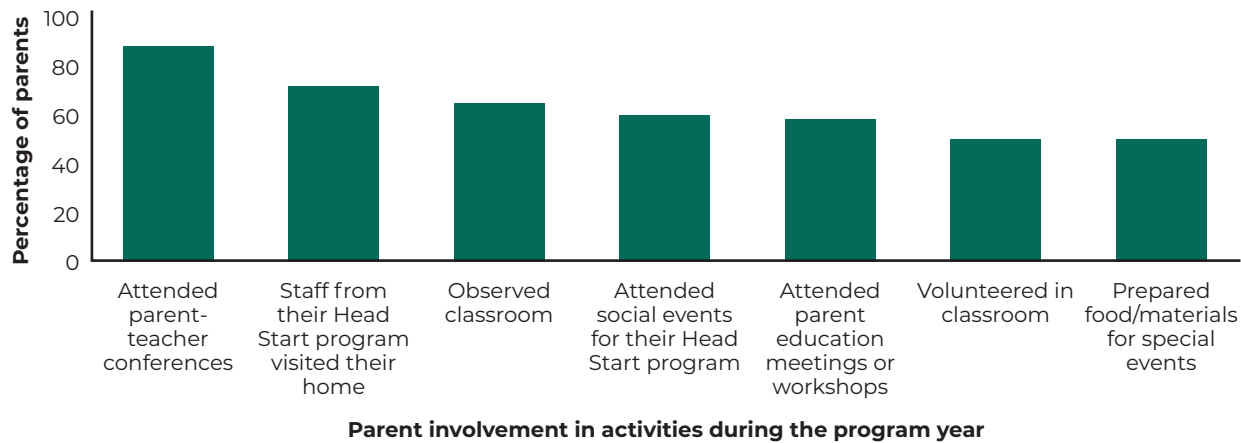
Data are drawn from Table A.3 in the accompanying technical appendix.

Most parents strongly or somewhat agree that staff at their Head Start program respect their family's cultural and religious beliefs (96 percent), have materials for their child that positively reflect their cultural background (75 percent), and encourage them to learn about their culture and history (71 percent).

In what program activities do families participate, and how often do they participate in these activities?

Parents are engaged in an array of program activities throughout the program year (Exhibit 3).³

Exhibit 3. Head Start parents most commonly attend parent-teacher conferences and have staff from their program visit their homes



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020.

All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.4 in the accompanying technical appendix.

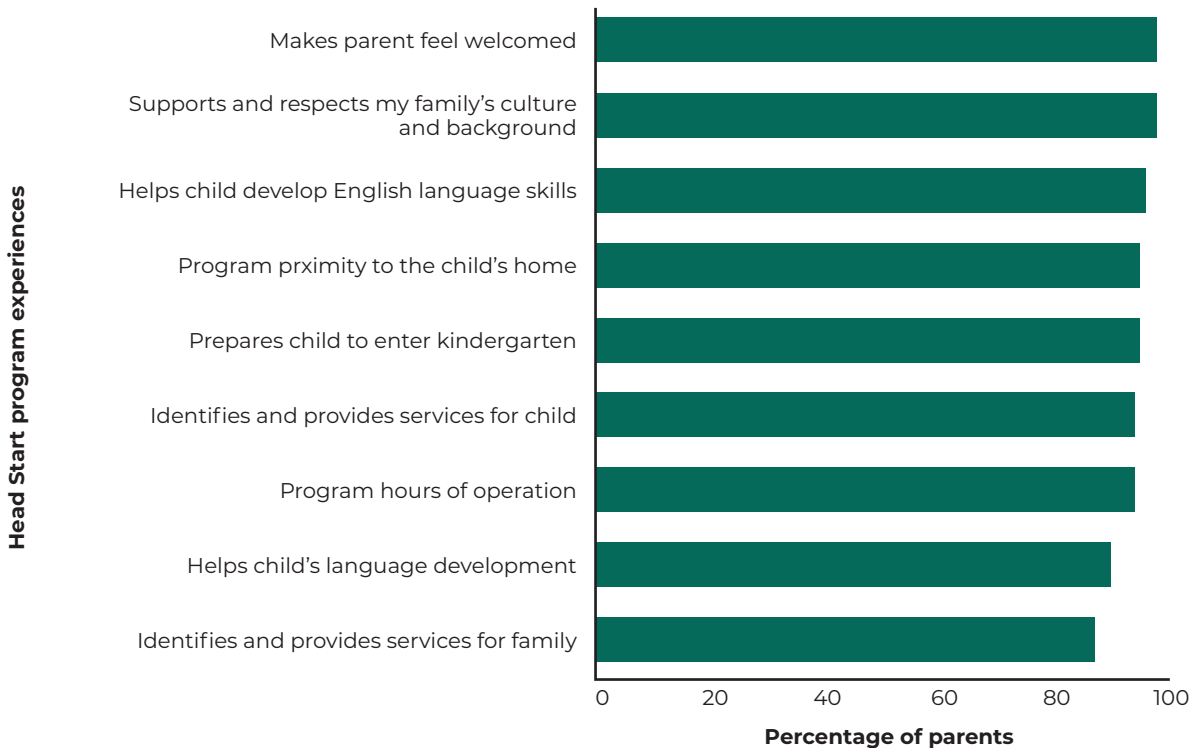
On average, parents report participating in almost 6 out of 13 types of program activities at least once during the program year (Appendix Table A.4). Parents most commonly attend parent-teacher conferences (89 percent) and have staff from their Head Start program visit their home (73 percent). Fewer parents (but still more than half) participate in other program activities, including observing the classroom (66 percent), attending Head Start social events (61 percent), attending parent education meetings or workshops (59 percent), volunteering in the classroom (51 percent), and preparing food or materials for events (51 percent). Fewer parents also report helping with field trips or special events (36 percent),

participating in parent committees or other planning groups (27 percent), participating in fundraising activities (22 percent), participating in the Head Start Policy Council (17 percent), preparing or distributing Head Start newsletters or materials (16 percent), and participating in any other Head Start activities, such as planning new parent orientation or organizing food donations (6 percent) (Appendix Table A.4).

How satisfied are Head Start families with their program experiences?

Parents give their Head Start program high marks on a variety of experiences (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Almost all Head Start parents are satisfied with their program experiences



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020.

All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children's parents, when describing findings.

Data are drawn from Table A.5 in the accompanying technical appendix.

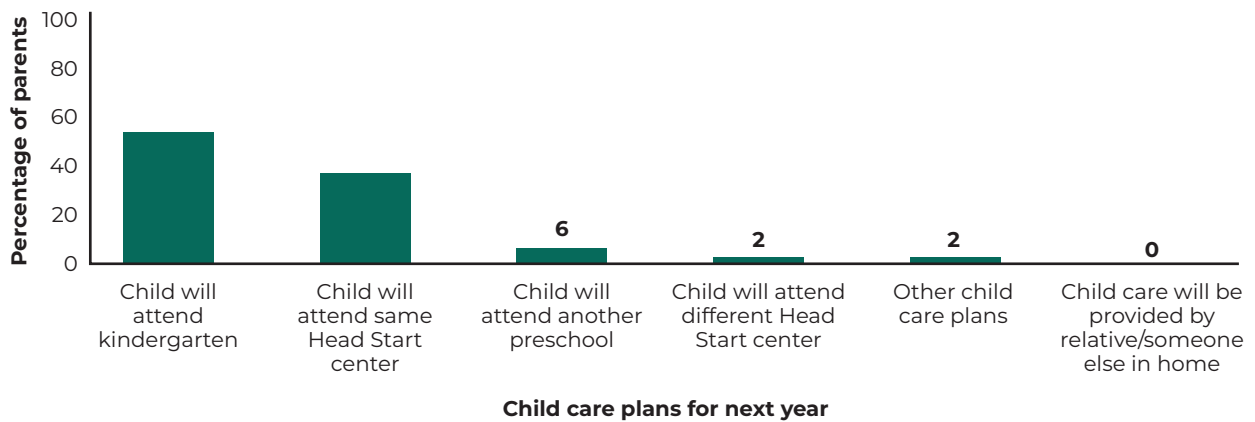
Almost all parents report being satisfied with their Head Start program for making them feel welcomed (98 percent), supporting and respecting their family’s culture and background (98 percent), helping their child develop English language skills (96 percent), the program’s proximity to their home (95 percent), and preparing their child to enter kindergarten (95 percent). Similarly, most parents are satisfied with their program’s ability to identify and provide services for their child (94 percent), hours of operation (94 percent), helping with their child’s language development

(90 percent), and ability to identify and provide services for the family (87 percent).

Do families plan to return for a second year at their Head Start program? If not, what are the reasons they do not plan to return?

In spring of the program year, most Head Start parents report that their child will either continue attending their Head Start program or will attend kindergarten next year (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. More than half of Head Start parents plan to send their child to kindergarten next year



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Parent Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020.

All estimates from the parent-reported instruments are at the child level and are to be interpreted as the percentage of children. For simplicity, we use the term parents instead of children’s parents, when describing findings.

Examples of “other” child care plans include enrolling the child in a pre-K program and homeschooling the child.

Data are drawn from Table A.2 in the accompanying technical appendix.

In the spring of the program year, 54 percent of parents expect their child will attend kindergarten. Given that just over half of Head Start children (51 percent) are 4-year-olds (Kopack Klein et al. 2021), the percentage of parents who plan to send their children to kindergarten is predictable. Among the Head Start parents who are not planning to send their child to kindergarten, the next most common plan is to send their child back to their Head Start program—either to the same center (37 percent) or to a different center (2 percent).

Nearly one-quarter of Head Start parents who do not plan to return plan to send their child someplace new because the new location is close to home (Appendix Table A.2). Head Start parents planning to send their child to a new ECE setting also suggested other reasons, including sending their child to the same school as their siblings, homeschooling them, or the child becoming eligible for pre-K (Appendix Table A.2).

Conclusions

In this brief, we explore why participating Head Start families choose their child's Head Start program, what their experiences are like in their program, whether they report being satisfied with their program experiences, and if they plan to return to their Head Start program next year.

Head Start parents most frequently report choosing their Head Start program to support their child's kindergarten readiness. The next most common reasons parents report choosing their Head Start program are because the location is close to home and because they knew other parents who had also sent their child there. Other factors may come into play when parents are making ECE selection decisions (for example, individual family circumstances and preferences) that we did not capture in the data we gathered.

Most parents are satisfied with how well their Head Start program has prepared their child for kindergarten, suggesting that most parents are satisfied with one of the top reasons they selected Head Start. Head Start parents also report other positive program experiences, such as feeling welcomed by the program and the presence of culturally responsive staff. Finally, although more than half of Head Start parents plan to send their child to kindergarten next year, most children who are not going to kindergarten will be returning to Head Start, either to their same Head Start center or a different Head Start center.

Although we are not able to determine all the factors and family characteristics driving selection decisions and reasons for staying, Head Start families are satisfied with their choice overall and most who are still eligible plan to return. The current findings offer a glimpse of program characteristics that parents value and report as positive (such as cultural responsiveness), which point to aspects of their services that programs can continue to emphasize to best serve families who participate.

Endnotes

¹This brief draws on data from fall 2019 and spring 2020, with spring 2020 data collection taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. In spring 2020, the majority of parents completed surveys in March and April, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In early April, we added special instructions directing parents to consider a typical time period, and not the COVID-19 pandemic period, when answering questions. The survey asked parents about their reasons for choosing Head Start (in fall 2019); child care plans for next year (in fall 2019 and spring 2020); and culturally responsive staff, involvement in activities at their Head Start program, and satisfaction with programs (in spring 2020). In the technical appendix, we describe the pandemic's impact on Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) spring 2020 data collection and discuss how we analyzed its influence on survey responses.

²The Head Start Program Performance Standards (1302.18) require that programs not charge eligible families a fee to participate in Head Start. Fees must only be accepted for services that are in addition to services funded by Head Start (for example, wraparound child care before or after Head Start).

³In the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2014, more parents reported participating in program activities than in FACES 2019 (Aikens et al. 2017). For example, in spring 2015, 95 percent of parents reported participating in parent-teacher conferences, whereas 89 percent of parents report participating in these conferences in spring 2020. This trend continues with the other activity items. A variety of factors could be at work here, including differences between the spring 2015 population and the spring 2020 population and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on spring 2020 data collection, for example. More details on spring 2020 data collection are available in the technical appendix.

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Methods

For FACES 2019, we selected a sample of Head Start programs from the 2017–2018 Head Start Program Information Report. The sample included two centers per program and two classrooms per center. Within each classroom, we randomly selected 12 children for the study. In total, 126 programs, 191 centers, 365 classrooms, and 2,132 children were still study participants in spring 2020. More information on the study methodology and measurement in FACES 2019 is available in "Understanding Head Start Children and Families in Spring 2020: FACES 2019 Descriptive Data Tables and Study Design" (Doran et al. 2022).

Findings draw on data from fall 2019 and spring 2020 and are weighted to represent the population of Head Start children who were enrolled in Head Start in fall 2019 and were still enrolled in spring 2020. The spring 2020 data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. See the technical appendix for a description of the pandemic's impact on the spring 2020 data collection and the analyses we conducted to assess its influence on parent survey responses. Tables with descriptive data are included in the technical appendix. See the technical appendix for more details about the sample, the weights applied to the data for analysis, the analyses, and the assessments used.

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