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Head Start Found More Beneficial for Children Whose Parents Provide Less Early Academic Stimulation

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PRESS RELEASE

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Do the Effects of Head Start Vary by Parental Preacademic Stimulation?

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One year of Head Start can make a bigger difference for children from homes where parents provide less early academic stimulation, such as reading to children, helping them recognize and pronounce letters and words, and helping them count. Showing parents how they can help their children with reading and counting may help, too.

Those are the conclusions of a new study by researchers at the University of California, Irvine. The study appears in the journal *Child Development*.

Head Start is a comprehensive program that provides low-income children with preschool education; medical, dental, and mental health care; and nutrition services. Head Start programs currently serve more than a million children a year.

The program was found to be beneficial in the areas of early math, early literacy, and receptive vocabulary for all children at the end of the Head Start year. Children whose mothers said they provided low and moderate amounts of preacademic stimulation scored lower in absolute terms on all three outcomes than children whose mothers said they provided more preacademic stimulation, but they gained more from being in a Head Start program than the children who got more stimulation.

“These results suggest that it’s particularly important that Head Start be offered to those children whose parents did not report providing a lot of preacademic stimulation,” according to Elizabeth B. Miller, a Ph.D. student in the school of education at the University of California, Irvine, the study’s lead author. “It’s vital that Head Start continue to serve children at the highest and moderate levels of risk because the program is particularly helpful to their development.”

“Moreover, our study also suggests that children’s academic achievement may benefit from programs targeted to help parents boost preacademic stimulation in the home,” Miller adds. “Working with parents to

increase what they do at home may be an important way Head Start can improve children's readiness for school."

The study analyzed data from the Head Start Impact Study, a nationally representative sample of nearly 5,000 newly entering eligible 3- and 4-year-olds. About a third of the children were Black, a third were Hispanic, and a third were White or of other races and ethnicities.

Children were randomly assigned to be eligible for enrollment in a particular Head Start program. Children in the control group could not enroll in that particular program but were eligible for placement in other Head Start centers and other early care and education programs in the community.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Do the Effects of Head Start Vary by Parental Preacademic Stimulation? by Miller, EB, Farkas, G, Vandell, DL, and Duncan, GJ (University of California, Irvine). Copyright 2014 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.