



The Relationship Between Early Head Start Participation and Maltreatment: Implications for Early Intervention and Prevention

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Infants and toddlers living in poverty are at increased risk for child maltreatment (DHHS, 2010), an experience that poses direct threats to development of healthy socio-emotional functioning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The likelihood of maltreatment is influenced by a diverse set of factors that are interrelated and interact to increase risk (Belsky, 1993). Given the accumulative and complex nature of risk for maltreatment, effective preventative interventions must start early and be comprehensive (Daro & Donnelly, 2002). As articulated by Kazdin and Blase (2011) in a widely publicized paper on the changing role of mental health professionals, it is clear that future success in reducing the burden of mental illness will depend on a diverse portfolio of interventions that avoid onset and reduce the future need for treatment. Early Head Start (EHS), a national, federally funded, home visitation program that serves families with children under the age of three, is an example of an intervention capable of reaching those in need of preventative services. The EHS approach targets not only multiple domains of child competence but also the broader contexts in which development occurs, through promotion of family well-being and community involvement (Yoshikawa & Zigler, 2000). Given the ability of EHS to access a vulnerable population and its integrated delivery of diverse services, it has been identified as having the potential to reduce maltreatment and related disruptions in development of children's healthy functioning (Fantuzzo et al., 2003). While the goals of EHS present promise for preventing child abuse and neglect, the relationship between program participation and occurrence of maltreatment has not been examined.

Method

- **Setting:** A Midwest EHS program serving a mid-sized city and a rural county.
- **Participants:** 377 families who enrolled in EHS home-based services when the eligible child was under 3 years of age.
- **Measurement of EHS Participation and Occurrence of Maltreatment:** This study relies on secondary analyses of archival data gathered by the local EHS program. In addition to archived data, Juvenile Court records from the Nebraska JUSTICE system were used to identify occurrences of child maltreatment.

Data Analyses

Data analyses consisted of a series of binary logistic regression models with variables describing EHS components and services received by families predicting the dichotomous (yes/no) variable for instances of maltreatment. Regression coefficients and their levels of significance, along with each coefficient's odds ratio, are presented in order to determine the change in odds of a child having no occurrences of maltreatment associated with a one-unit increase in each predictor variable.

Results

Occurrence of maltreatment

Of the 377 EHS child participants in the current study, **10% (37) experienced court substantiated child maltreatment**. However, **4% (16) of child participants experienced maltreatment before entering the EHS program** and, therefore, were not included in this examination of the ability of the program to prevent maltreatment.

Binary Logistic Regression Analyses

Using a binary logistic regression, the relationship between families' participation in broad EHS components (i.e., number of visits from a Family Service Worker, number of sessions with a Mental Health Consultant, number of other services received through EHS) and reduced likelihood of occurrences of court-substantiated instances of maltreatment was examined. No significant findings emerged from this analysis. Further analyses of the relationship between program participation and instances of maltreatment revealed a significant relationship between three variables representative of families' participation in specific EHS services likelihood of maltreatment occurrence. Table 1 provides regression coefficients, standard error, significance levels, and odds ratios for the predictors in the second logistic regression. As can be seen in Table 1, receiving domestic violence or child abuse prevention services was related to an increased likelihood of maltreatment occurrence and receiving emergency crisis assistance was related to a decreased likelihood of maltreatment occurrence.

Table 1.

Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Maltreatment.

Service Received	B	SE B	P ≤	EXP(B)
Emergency Crisis Assistance	-1.970	0.836	0.018	0.139
Child Abuse Prevention	3.306	0.923	0.001	27.268
Domestic Violence Assistance	3.368	0.968	0.001	29.020
Months Enrolled in the Program	-0.034	0.029		0.966
Constant	-2.266			
χ^2			30.728	
df			4	
% maltreatment			6.2	

Note: Months enrolled in the program is used as a control variable. EXP(B) = exponentiated B. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

- This is the first study that we are aware of that examines the occurrence of substantiated instances of child maltreatment within the EHS population.
- Juvenile Court records of maltreatment provide a conservative estimate of the frequency of maltreatment. Many instances of maltreatment are never reported to authorities or are not referred to Juvenile Court because voluntary services are deemed appropriate for meeting the needs of the family.
- The conservative estimate employed in this study of the percentage of children enrolled in EHS who have experienced maltreatment indicates that approximately 10% of children served by the program will experience maltreatment before entering the program or while enrolled.
- Based on results and knowledge of the local program's operations, there appears to be evidence of a surveillance effect.
- Receiving domestic violence or child abuse prevention services likely also meant that Family Service Workers or other EHS staff members were concerned enough about the family to call Child Protective Services.
- Families who received emergency crisis assistance from EHS (e.g., help with food, clothing or housing when lacking these basic needs) were significantly less likely to experience maltreatment.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- In future program planning, it will be important to consider the unique needs of caregivers and children in families experiencing the problematic risk factors and consequences of child maltreatment.
- When considering the impact of program components on the likelihood of maltreatment, it is important to remember that when parents invite a Family Service Worker into their home they may make it more likely that they are identified early as at-risk-for maltreatment.
- Finally, it appears that providing appropriate services to families who are having trouble with basic needs may reduce the likelihood of maltreatment.

