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 (Daroz & 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, 2006). 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. This is the first study that we are aware of that examines the occurrence of substantiated instances of child maltreatment within the EHS population.

**Discussion**

- **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.
  - Given the 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 facing basic needs) were significantly less likely to experience maltreatment.