

The Effect of Home Based Head Start on the
Language Development of Homeless Children

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Abstract

Homelessness in the United States is a growing problem. One of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population is young children. This study examined the effect of a weekly home visiting program (Head Start or Early Head Start) using the Parents as Teachers Curriculum on children's language development. Children and families participated in 19 weeks of this home visiting program conducted by CAP Services, Inc. After 11 and 19 weeks of receiving home visits, the home visitors rated the children using widely held expectations in four developmental objectives from the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment tool. These areas include: language comprehension, following directions, engaging in conversation, and using social rules of language. Widely held expectations are defined as a range of scores based on research that are typical for most children within an age group. The hypothesis was: homeless children, with the use of the Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program, implementing the Parents as Teachers Curriculum, will perform as well as their housed peers on the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment system in the four language developmental objectives. No statistical significance was found between the group of homeless and non-homeless children in any of the objectives during the designated time periods which is consistent with the hypothesis. There was statistical significance in the performance of homeless children from fall to winter in the areas of language comprehension, following directions, and engaging in conversations. The percentage of children meeting the widely held expectations increased in all of the objectives, which indicates program effectiveness. More research is needed to determine if a program included rating periods more than eight weeks apart would make more of an impact on the children's development. This would allow the family to be provided with additional home visits, which would increase the exposure the children have to the curriculum. This would be difficult, however, due to the transient nature of the homeless population. Another research approach would be to examine developmental objectives other than language for homeless children, or a population of children that is not low income or homeless to determine if the children are making gains due to the program or as a result of natural maturation and to compare the gains made by children with higher socioeconomic status.

Introduction

The number of homeless families in the United States is increasing. Nationally, in the 2008-2009 school year, over 950,000 homeless children were enrolled in school (Kim, 2013). In the 2010-2011 school year, 1,065,794 homeless children were enrolled (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2013). Very young children account for one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population (Swick, 2008). The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) defines homeless children and youths as individuals who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This includes individuals who are sharing housing due to economic hardship, children living in cars or public places, or children in foster care placement.

Homeless children experience many negative life experiences as a result of these living situations. One of these negative experiences is lower educational achievement. Many homeless children achieve lower scores in all developmental areas, including language development, than their housed peers. Less than one-quarter of homeless children will graduate from high school.

The gap in research exists on low-income homeless children enrolled in a home visiting program and the potential impact this may have on a child's language development. There is also a lack of research comparing homeless children with other low-income children. Much of the research that exists compares children to peers of different levels of socio-economic status.

The purpose of this study is to examine low-income children, including homeless and non-homeless, ages 0-5 years of age enrolled in a Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program. Homeless children in home visiting programs have visits where they are currently staying. This can include hotels, campgrounds, or a relative or friend's home. Further, it will

examine homeless children within this population and measure the language related educational outcomes of these children in relation to their peers over a defined period of time.

Hypothesis

Homeless children, enrolled in a Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program implementing the Parents as Teachers Curriculum will perform as well as their housed peers on the widely held expectations of the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment system in four language developmental objectives: language comprehension, following directions, engaging in conversation, and using social rules of language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is evident that children who are experiencing homelessness are faced with many challenges. Of these, educational outcomes are one of the most staggering. The literature review will examine past research on homeless children and demonstrate the gap in research that exists for a study on the effects of a home based education program on the language outcomes for homeless children.

Homelessness appears in many forms. For example, individuals may live in a shelter, with a friend or relative, or out of a car (Rog et al. 2007). This can happen for a variety of reasons or a combination of many factors such as financial difficulties, eviction, or escaping from domestic violence (Swick, 2004). The most common reasons for homelessness according to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (2013) are: inability to find stable housing, loss of a job, or work does not pay enough for a person to afford housing. Additional situations that factor into homelessness include: health crises, domestic violence, having children at a young age, and a person not having a strong enough support system.

Homelessness is prevalent in the United States. Washington D.C. has the highest number of homeless people, 1,156 per 100,000 people. In Wisconsin 106 people per 100,00 in the population experience homelessness. On any given night in Wisconsin, anywhere from 5,001 to 10,000 individual people are homeless. Homelessness can last for one night, many months, or even years. There are 2,994 families in Wisconsin that are homeless (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2013).

A family experiencing homelessness is most commonly a mother and two children. Of families who are homeless, 77.9% consist of female head of household, while 22.1% are male head of household. Also, 59.3% of the families that are homeless are under the age of 18. Over 92% of mothers who are homeless have experienced severe sexual and/or physical abuse at some point in their lifetime. Among the homeless children, 97% move to different locations up to three times a year (Homeless Resource Center, 2013).

Homelessness is the most harmful for children (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). See figure 1 for a demonstration of the impacts of homelessness on children. Of these effects, one of the most crucial is the educational deficit of children who are homeless. This is typically due to multiple transitions these children experience in multiple moves, and the time it takes a child to acclimatize to their new school (Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009). There are potential reasons for the educational deficits in homeless children such as lack of parental support and emotional disturbances which make it difficult for a child to meet grade level expectations in their school setting.

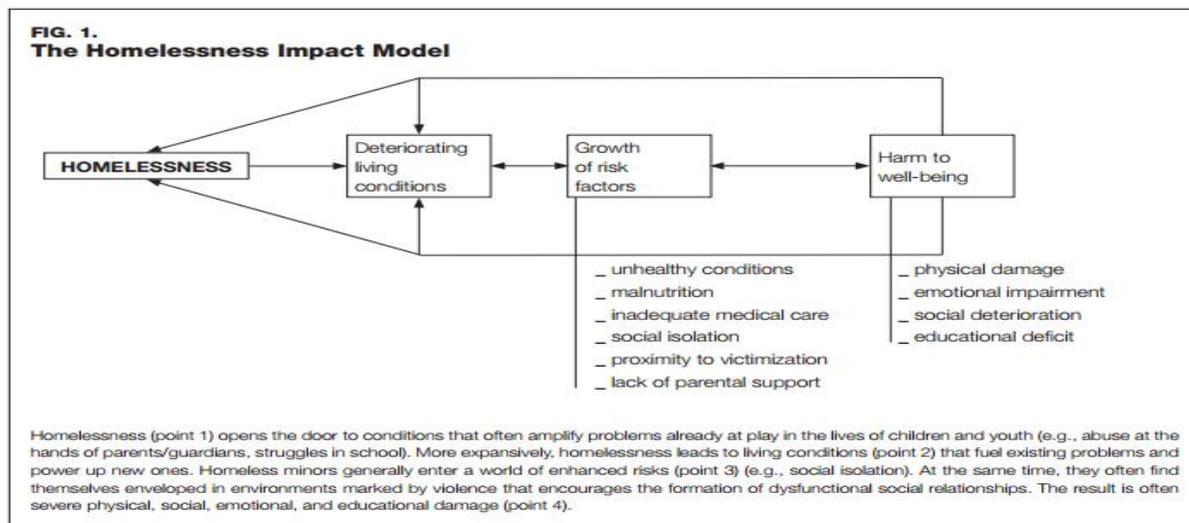


Figure 1-Homelessness Impact Model (Murphy & Tobin, 2011)

According to the State Report Card on Child Homelessness (2011), homeless children are eight times more likely to repeat a grade, twice as likely to score lower than their peers on standardized tests, and three times more likely to be identified as special education students.

Multiple studies reiterate that homeless children do not perform as well as housed students on measures of academic performance. Duffield & Lovell (2008), stated that children who are homeless perform below grade level at a much higher rate than their housed peers. Also associated with homeless children is the correlation between being homeless and being held behind a grade level (Masten Et al., 1997). The bleakest of these statistics from The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009) indicates that in the United States less than a quarter of homeless children complete high school.

According to Noll and Watkins (2003), homeless children's literacy skills are particularly impacted by their homelessness. More specifically these children struggle with comprehension and background knowledge. The Teaching Strategies Gold assessment system was founded on the increasing importance of early childhood education (Teaching Strategies, 2010). Each of the

objectives is aligned with developmental research specific to the importance of that skill in future school success.

Preschool children experiencing homelessness do not have access to quality experiences in early education (Swick, 2006). Early education programs could have more favorable outcomes for children experiencing homelessness. In a study by O'Neil-Pirozzi (2009), homeless children living in shelters benefited linguistically from an intervention that included parent participation. Children in high risk situations, such as homelessness, had favorable education outcomes when home visitation programs were implemented early on in the child's life (Lagerberg, 2000). Home visitation programs involve a trained professional visiting the home on a consistent basis and implementing education activities with the children and setting goals with the families. In another study by Peacock et al. (2013) home visitation programs were shown to have a promising impact for children who were socially high risk, including the homeless population.

The number of home visitation programs has been increasing throughout the country as a pivotal way to increase educational outcomes for children (Jones Harden et al., 2012). Another study identified slightly higher developmental scores for children enrolled in home visitation programs (Caldera et al., 2007).

The curriculum used in this study is Parents as Teachers. Parents as Teachers is a research based curriculum designed for weekly in-home education that reinforces parents as their child's primary teacher. The curriculum is designed for parents to become active leaders in their child's development and give them the skills to use developmentally appropriate activities with their children even after the home visitor has left the home. The curriculum utilizes materials that can be found in the parent's home and relates each activity to a different developmental learning domain. The developmental learning domains utilized in the Parents as Teachers

Curriculum lesson plans directly correlates with the developmental objectives of the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment tool.

In previous studies conducted using the Parents as Teachers curriculum, parents have shown an increase in knowledge of child development which positively impacts the child's behavior outcomes (Drotar, et al., 2008). In another study conducted, the Parents as Teachers Curriculum was found to be the most effective when using the curriculum with the lowest income parents and children (Wagner, Spiker, & Lin, 2002).

It is evident that homeless children face many challenges as a result of their living situation, including language development. Working with the entire family results in more favorable outcomes for the child. The Head Start and Early Head Start Home Based programs work with the whole family in the home or temporary shelter. Head Start and Early Head Start are United States federally funded programs that serve children and families 100% below the federal poverty guidelines. The goal of the Head Start and Early Head Start programs is to ensure that low-income children begin elementary school at the same developmental level as their peers. Few studies exist regarding the effectiveness of Early Head Start Home Based programs. In studies that were conducted on these programs, many positive effects were found two years after program completion in young children. The area that found the most growth for children was social emotional development (Jones Harden, B., 2012). This study examined whether or not the Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program would positively affect homeless children's language outcomes in comparison to the housed peers.

METHODS

Participants

CAP Services, Inc. recruited families for this study in conjunction with their voluntary participation in Head Start (ages 3-5 years) or Early Head Start (0-3 years). It is possible that more than one child from each family participated, but each child enrolled had an individualized lesson plan that targeted their developmental level according to the widely held expectations for their specific age.

All of the participants met the enrollment requirements for these programs. To be eligible for participation in Head Start or Early Head Start 90% of the participants were 100% below the federal poverty guidelines. For the 2012 program year, a family of four needed to make less than \$23,050 in the previous year to be eligible (Federal Register, 2012). All homeless children automatically qualify for these programs based on their living situation, and were given priority for enrollment.

Research Design

All of the families enrolled received weekly home visits, 1.5 hours in length with a home visitor implementing the Parents as Teachers Curriculum for 19 weeks from September 2012 through January 2013. Families consisted of at least one "target" child who received the services, and at least one parent or legal guardian.

All home visitors attended a seven day training on the Parents as Teacher to become a certified user in this curriculum. The home visitors varied in age from 25 years old to 60 years old and years of experience in Head Start or Early Head Start. See table 1 for home visitor demographics. During the home visits, home visitors used the curriculum to reinforce the

parents as their child's primary teachers by facilitating parent-child educational activities laid out by the Parents as Teachers curriculum and other individual activities planned by the parent.

Table 1 Home Visitor Demographics

	Range	Mean
Age of Home Visitors	25-60	41 (SD-13.7)
Years of Experience Using Parents as Teachers Curriculum	1-3	2.3 (SD-.89)
Education Background	Associate's Degree-1 Early Childhood Bachelor Degree-3 Other Bachelor Degree-3	

In November 2012 and again in January of 2013, the home visitors used the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment system to indicate if each child had met the "widely held expectations" in four of the language development objectives. Throughout the time home visits were taking place with the family, the home visitors document observations that coincide with the developmental objectives on the Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment tool. When the home visitors finalized the ratings in November and January they asked parents questions if they were unsure of where a child fits on the developmental continuum. Widely held expectations are the range of behaviors for each objective which is based on research as to what is developmentally appropriate for each age. The language objectives observed were: language comprehension, following directions, engaging in conversation, and using social rules of language.

Prior to the start of the program, all home visitors completed the Inter-rater Reliability test developed by Teaching Strategies Gold as part of their job requirements. This test involved home visitors achieving 80% agreement with the master rater. Attached in the appendices are the

four objectives that the home visitors rated for each child for language development. Each color band indicates a range of widely held expectations for a specific age range. The red indicates children ages 0-12 months; orange indicates children 12-24 months, yellow indicates children 24-36 months; green indicates children 36-48 months, blue indicates children 48-60 months, and purple indicates children 60-72 months. Above the color bands are indicators that guide home visitors in assessing these children.

Analysis was completed after home visitors completed their finalized ratings on each child using Teaching Strategies Gold. Children were numbered based on whether they were homeless or not, and de-identified from their name to ensure anonymity. Assessment data was then coded into a 0 or 1 nominal system. For each rating period if a child met the widely held expectation for that area they received a 1. If the child did not meet the widely held expectation they received a 0. A Chi Square test was conducted to see if statistical significance was present between homeless and non-homeless children and their performance on the language objectives throughout the program. A McNemar test was also conducted to compare the progress of the homeless children from the November to January ratings.

RESULTS

Demographics of Sample

The sample consisted of 90 children ranging from 0 months to 55 months (as of September 1, 2012). The average age of the sample was 29 months old. Thirty five of these children were identified as homeless and 65 were not. Table 2 illustrates sample demographics.

Total Sample	Sample	Homeless	N-Homeless
#of participants	90	25	65
Female	45	13	32
Male	45	12	33
Age Range(in Months)	0-55	1-47	0-55
Average Age (months)	29	25	30

Table 2 Sample Demographics

Results

Based on the information from the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment tool the participants were compared for their progress from the fall to the winter rating with relation to the four language objectives. Table 3 illustrates the percentage of children who met the widely held expectations for each rating period based on language comprehension. In November 2012 84% of homeless children and 89% of non-homeless children met the widely held expectations for the language comprehension objective. In January 2013, 100% of the homeless children and 92% of the non-homeless children met these same expectations.

		November 2012	January 2013
Language Comprehends	Homeless	84% (21)	100% (25)
	Non-Homeless	89% (58)	92% (60)

Table 3-Language Comprehension

Table 4 illustrates the percentage of children who met the widely held expectations for each rating period based on the objective of following directions. In November 2012 96% of homeless children and 94% of non-homeless children met the widely held expectations. In January 2013, 100% of homeless children and 98% of non-homeless children met these same expectations.

		November 2012	January 2013
Following Directions	Homeless	96% (24)	100% (25)
	Non-Homeless	94% (61)	98% (64)

Table 4-Following Directions

Table 5 illustrates the percentage of children who met the widely held expectations for each rating period based on the objective of engaging in conversations. In November 2012 68% of homeless children and 71% of non-homeless children met the widely held expectations. In

January 2013, 80% of homeless children and 85% of non-homeless children met these same expectations.

		November 2012	January 2013
Engaging in Conversations	Homeless	68% (17)	80% (20)
	Non-Homeless	71% (46)	85% (55)

Table 5 Percentage of children meeting widely held expectations for engaging in conversations

Table 6 illustrates the percentage of children who met the widely held expectations for each rating period based on the objective using social rules of language. In November 2012 60% of homeless children and 65% of non-homeless children met the widely held expectations. In January 2013, 80% of homeless children and 75% of non-homeless children met these same expectations.

		November 2012	January 2013
Using Social Rules of Language	Homeless	60% (15)	80% (20)
	Non-Homeless	65% (42)	75% (49)

Table 6 Percentage of children meeting widely held expectations when using social rules of language

After the percentages were compared, a Chi Square test was conducted to test for statistical significance in the differences between the homeless and non-homeless children. Table 7 illustrates the ϕ^2 value for the comparison. In order to be statistically significant the ϕ^2 value must be $<.05$. None of these results were statistically significant.

	November 2012	January 2013
Comprehends Language	0.4974	0.1536
Follows Directions	0.6895	0.5329
Engages in Conversations	0.1619	0.5987
Uses Social Rules of Conversation	0.6840	0.6429

Table 7-P Values

To determine statistical significance within the homeless population from the November to January rating, a McNemar test was run. Table 8 illustrates the ϕ^2 value between the rating periods. To be statistically significant, ϕ^2 values must be less than .05. All the areas were statistically significant except for using social rules of conversation.

McNemar Test of Homeless Population	November to January
Comprehends Language	.0001
Follows Directions	.0001
Engages in Conversations	.0233
Uses Social Rules of Conversation	.0679

Table 8 P Values for homeless children from fall to winter using McNemar's Test

DISCUSSION

This study examined the effectiveness of a home visitation program on the language development of homeless children. Homelessness is a growing problem in the United States, and children within this population are at risk for many negative life events, including low academic achievement. The study involved 90 children (25 homeless, 65 non-homeless) enrolled in a Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program through CAP Services, Inc. They received 19 weeks of 1.5 hour home visits from a trained home visitor using the Parents as Teachers curriculum. In November 2012 and again in January 2013, home visitors rated the children on their developmental level using the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment tool. Data was then coded and analyzed.

The hypothesis stated that no difference would exist between the outcomes of homeless and non-homeless children on their widely held expectation scores on the Teaching Strategies

Gold assessment tool. Therefore, the hypothesis was not rejected because there was no significant difference between the homeless and non-homeless children.

In addition to the proven thesis, the homeless children made statistically significant gains from one rating period to the next in three of the language developmental domains. The domains were language comprehension, following rules, and engaging in conversations.

Progress in these three areas could have happened for a variety of reasons. One is that when the program began the child may not have been part of a language rich environment. With the home visiting program, the home visitor implemented language activities from the Parents as Teachers curriculum. The home visitor also gave parents child development information that included the benefits of conversations with children and other important language milestone information. This could have aided parents in having more meaningful conversations in the home and working with their child on language development. The Parents as Teacher curriculum empowers parents to be their child's first and most important teacher. This home to school connection reinforces education while a home visitor is not in the home.

The results of this study were also consistent with the literature. Homeless children, with the use of a parent participation home visiting program scored better on each objective that was measured using the Teaching Strategies Gold assessment tool. This could be because without this program, their educational experiences are limited. It could also reflect the importance of parent involvement in a child's education. When a parent has the skills to reinforce their child's education at home there is a powerful impact in how children learn. The literature also states the earlier a program begins in a child's life, the better the outcomes (Lagerberg, 2000). This study was consistent with those findings, as the population was children ages 0-55 months.

One limitation of this study is the time frame between the rating periods was only eight weeks. If a longer period of time existed between the ratings, there may be a more significant difference in positive outcomes for the homeless population. However, the homeless population is transient, so it would be difficult to do a longer study without the challenge of attrition.

An additional limitation is the variance between home visitors. Although they were all formally trained on the curriculum and the assessment system, individual differences still exist. Some have associate's degrees, while others have bachelor's degrees. Of the home visitors that have bachelor's degrees, some were in early childhood education while others were in social work or family life. Some of the home visitors are older, and some are younger in age. Another difference is that some of the home visitors have children of their own and some do not. This may affect how the material is presented to the parents and the children in the program.

One strength of this study is comparing two samples of low-income children, because this ensured income was not a factor in children's achievement on the developmental objectives in Teaching Strategies Gold. More research is needed to identify how homeless and low-income children receiving the Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program would perform on widely held expectations versus a sample of low income children who are not enrolled in a Head Start or Early Head Start Home Based program. This could identify whether the growth of the children in this study was demonstrated due to enrollment in the program or natural child development.

Further research is also needed to determine if socio-economic status would factor in to the achievement in the developmental domains. In the literature, low income children are scoring below their wealthier peers in academic achievement (Masten Et al., 1997). If a homeless and low-income sample and a second sample with wealthier children both received the Head Start

and Early Head Start programs, we can determine if wealthier children may have a higher success rate in achievement of the developmental domains in the Teaching Strategies Gold Assessment tool because they may be growing up in an environment that has provided them with more opportunities or if children's scores are improving due to the program itself.

These findings are useful to future researchers who work with the homeless population. With the number of homeless children rising, effective strategies are needed to ensure this fragile population does not fall further behind in educational achievement and graduation rates. Areas other than language also need to be examined to see if educational home visiting programs can improve the outcomes of these children.

One implication of this study for the future of working with homeless children is that school staff need to be trained on how to best work with children of this population. A connection should be made with the child and their home environment to ensure that parents play an active role in their child's education. Earlier is better for high risk children and parent involvement can produce better outcomes which could benefit a child throughout their educational years.

Homelessness has become an increasing problem in the United States. The fastest growing segment of this population is children. Children are the future, and early educational interventions in conjunction with parent involvement are vital in ensuring children's successful completion of school. This could mean a brighter future for children who are currently facing dismal circumstances such as homelessness.

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Level	Not Yet	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9
Indicators	Not Yet		Shows an interest in the speech of others		Identifies familiar people, animals, and objects when prompted		Responds appropriately to specific vocabulary and simple statements, questions, and stories		Responds appropriately to complex statements, questions, vocabulary, and stories	
Examples (+)										
Colored Bands (-)		Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Blue	Blue	Purple

Appendix 1-Comprehends Language www.teachingstrategies.com

Level	Not Yet	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9
Indicators	Not Yet		Responds to simple verbal requests accompanied by gestures or tone of voice		Follows simple requests not accompanied by gestures		Follows directions of two or more steps that relate to familiar objects and experiences		Follows detailed, instructional, multistep directions	
Examples (+)										
Colored Bands (-)	Orange	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Blue	Blue	Purple

Appendix 2-Follows Directions www.teachingstrategies.com

Level	Not Yet	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9
Indicators	Not Yet		Engages in simple back-and-forth exchanges with others		Initiates and attends to brief conversations		Engages in conversations of at least three exchanges		Engages in complex, lengthy conversations (five or more exchanges)	
Examples (+)										
Colored Bands (-)		Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Blue	Purple	Purple

Appendix 3 Engages in Conversation www.teachingstrategies.com

Level	Not Yet	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9
Indicators	Not Yet		Responds to speech by looking at the speaker; watches for signs of being understood when communicating		Uses appropriate eye contact, pauses, and simple verbal prompts when communicating		Uses acceptable language and social rules while communicating with others; may need reminders		Uses acceptable language and social rules during communication with others	
Examples (+)										
Colored Bands (-)		Orange	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Green	Blue	Purple	Purple

Appendix 4 Social Rules of Language www.teachingstrategies.com