



Policy Brief: Even Start's Impact on Families

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Even Start Family Literacy Programs provide high quality education services that produce positive results for our nation's poorest and most undereducated families. Through Even Start more than 50,000 at-risk families are receiving the services and support they need to be successful in school and at work.

The Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, Penn State, has reviewed the impact of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program on families and offers the following policy assessment.

FACT: Even Start has a significant impact on children. Research from the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State shows that preschool children who are enrolled in family literacy programs for at least three months scored significantly better on developmental tests than comparable children newly enrolled in family literacy programs. In addition, children whose parents participated more in adult education and parenting education scored significantly better on developmental tests than children whose parents did not participate as much. The impact on developmental test scores was greatest for children birth to 3 years old when the most rapid language learning is occurring. Parents are learning how to be their children's first teachers!

FACT: Even Start prepares children for success in school. Research including that of the National Center for Family Literacy shows that kindergarten teachers rate Even Start children as more prepared for school than comparable children. Children are also more successful in school. Even Start programs are mandated to provide services based on scientifically based reading research, thereby preparing at-risk children for success in school.

Even Start is supporting our nation's goals for education in family literacy programs. The guidelines provided in *Good Start, Grow Smart*, a current early childhood initiative, are similar to the guidance provided in the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program. *No Child Left Behind*, furthermore, mandates that parents be involved in their children's education. However, low-literate parents tend to be threatened by the school system since they may have failed in their own education or been entirely unfamiliar with the system if they are non-English speaking. Even Start coordinates the child's entry to school, resulting in greater parent involvement in the schools.

FACT: Even Start serves those families who are most in need. In 2004 the U.S. Department of Education states that, "No Other Education Program Serves a Comparable Population." For example, Even Start families are significantly poorer than Head Start families. In 1997, 41% of Even Start families had an annual household income under \$6,000, compared to 13% of Head Start families. In the 2000-2001 program year 84% of Even Start participants were at or below the federal poverty level.

Not surprising, the adults in Even Start programs have lower educational attainment levels than those in stand-alone adult basic education programs. In fact, Even Start parents are far more educationally disadvantaged than Head Start parents. In 1997, only 15% of Even Start parents had a high school diploma or GED, compared with 72% of Head Start parents. The problem is that those with the least amount of education participate the least in adult education. In 1999, 14.7% of adults with an 8th grade or less education participated in some type of adult education program while 25.6% of those with some education between 9th and 12th grades (without a diploma) and 34.8% of those with a diploma participated in an adult education program.

FACT: Children whose parents lack a high school diploma are much less likely to be read to as preschoolers. Reading to a preschool child promotes language acquisition and correlates with literacy development and later success in school. In 1999, only 39% of 3-5 year-old children whose mothers lack a high school diploma were read to daily. In contrast, 71% of children of college-graduate mothers were read to daily. Furthermore, only 38% of the 3-5 year-old children living below the poverty line were read to daily compared to 58% of children at or above the poverty line. Children of more highly educated mothers (74%) are more likely to attend preschool programs than children of women without a high school diploma (40%).

FACT: Even Start intervenes with the entire family in contrast to other programs. Even Start programs are unique in offering a comprehensive one-stop family literacy intervention that includes adult literacy, adult basic education, GED preparation, and English-as-a-Second Language; early childhood education for the children; and training for parents in how to be the primary teachers for their children and full partners in the education of their children. In addition, teachers supervise and support parents as they work with their children in literacy activities so that parents will continue to foster their children's literacy at home. Even Start programs are also mandated to integrate the services offered in each component of family literacy so that parents not only improve their own educational levels but also learn how to encourage their children's literacy development.

FACT: Even Start links with community resources to provide social services to most-in-need families. Research has shown that poor families have the least access to community social support services perhaps due to parental low educational levels. Even Start programs ensure that families receive the community social services that they need. Research has shown that families must first be able to meet their basic needs before they are ready to achieve educational goals. In order to receive Even Start funding, programs must demonstrate linkages between a local educational agency and a community-based organization to ensure that a family literacy program is well grounded in the community.

FACT: Even Start breaks the cycle of intergenerational low literacy. State and local evaluations reveal that Even Start is successful in increasing parents' and children's educational levels. For example, the 2001-2002 *Statewide Evaluation of Family Literacy in Pennsylvania* revealed that native English-speaking adults made significant gains on the standardized pre- and posttests in reading, math, and GED subtests, while the non-native English speakers made significant gains in oral language and total literacy on the Basic English Skills Test (BEST).

Most of the adults set goals related to increasing their involvement with their children's literacy activities, and the majority of adults were successful in meeting these goals. Parents reported on a pre- posttest checklist engaging in significantly more literacy-related reading activities, such as reading to their children, encouraging their children to read, and taking their children to libraries. They also reported significantly more involvement in their children's schooling after participating in family literacy programs. Furthermore, children entered school ready to learn. At the end of first grade their teachers rated over half of the children as proficient or advanced in reading, writing, and math. Teachers also reported that 89% of these at-risk children were promoted to the next grade level.

Summaries of research that support these facts can be found on the websites of the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State <www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute> and the National Center for Family Literacy <www.familit.org> and elsewhere (available upon request from the Goodling Institute). The most vulnerable families in our society need the most intense intervention. Rather than separate interventions for adults and children, Even Start is a holistic program that targets the family. In family literacy, the adage is true that the "sum is greater than the parts!" The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program offers access to a better future to low-literate families who live in poverty.

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