



In Parents Own Words: Recent Trends from Parent Gauge

Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. Parents are one of Head Start's most valuable resources and play a key role in providing safe and effective early childhood education. Each year Head Start programs nationwide spend more than ten thousand hours using Parent Gauge to talk to parents about their experience with Head Start. NHSA conducted a detailed analysis of the data from these conversations to understand how parents are doing, where they could use more support, and the extent to which Head Start is successfully engaging with them.

What is Parent Gauge?

Parent Gauge is a family engagement assessment tool designed specifically for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. It measures the parent experience and the impact of engagement efforts across the seven family outcomes in the Office of Head Start's [PFCE Framework](#).

To use Parent Gauge, a staff member sits down with a family member of an enrolled child for a twenty-minute conversation made up of both open- and closed-ended questions. The staff member goes through the questions in the tool, entering responses into the web-based platform.

Parent Gauge is the only family engagement tool that brings this level of conversation and connection between Head Start staff and parents, allowing programs to hear from parents in their own voice.

Learn more: nhsa.org/parent-gauge

Report Highlights

- Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Head Start programs were still strongly committed to building relationships with and supporting parents and guardians of enrolled children.
- While trust in the American education system is fading, trust in Head Start remains high.
- Parents feel somewhat connected to other parents. Strengthening these relationships could lessen absenteeism and promote at-home engagement
- Head Start parents enter the program committed to their children's learning. This commitment—as well as their knowledge and skills—grow throughout the year.

By The Numbers

Head Start and Early Head Start staff actively seek out and respond to community voices, strengths, and needs. They collaborate with families, community members, and other local agencies to identify common goals, align resources, and share data for continuous improvement and effective partnerships.

Throughout the 2021-2022 program year, staff at 69 Head Start programs conducted more than 40,000 interviews.

Parent Gauge was developed at the request of programs who were seeking a way to measure one of the most difficult components of their program practice: Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

The programs that use Parent Gauge today demonstrate a strong commitment to data-informed decisionmaking, as the tool is a heavy lift, requiring staff to speak with families individually, rather than filling out a questionnaire or similar tool.



Program Year

2021-2022

11,947

Beginning-of-Year
Interviews

+

15,416

Middle-of-Year
Interviews

+

16,681

End-of-Year
Interviews

=

44,044

Interviews
and...

14,681

Hours of conversation
between Parents and Staff
using Parent Gauge

Parents Trust Head Start



While the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant uncertainty, parents maintained a high degree of trust in their Head Start program to help their child grow and develop.

High and consistent levels of trust have a profound impact on education quality, evidenced by a [2003 longitudinal study of Chicago elementary schools](#), which determined that mutual respect between parents and teachers and schools' competence in performing core duties, such as ensuring child welfare and learning, led to substantially better outcomes.

In 2022, over 90% of Head Start parents reported that they very much felt the program provided their child with the opportunity to learn and grow. Despite the turbulent conditions, 90% of parents also very much trusted the program to keep their child safe.

"My child's teacher made us feel important, invited, and formed a great teacher-child-parent relationship. She asked about my child's strengths, weaknesses and if there was anything that I was concerned about. I love this program and all that Head Start has offered."

- Head Start Parent

This level of trust in Head Start is consistent across the last several years. This is a great sign that program staff and administration are leveraging their professionalism and relationship-building skills, especially when you consider public trust in teachers [dipped by six percentage points](#) over the course of the pandemic. Overall, parents agreed with resounding unanimity that they trust programs to be competent, safe, and a good place for their children to be.

Parents Need More Connection to Other Parents & Adults



Involvement with other parents was one of the areas where parents self-reported the lowest scores across all questions. There are real benefits to creating opportunities for parent-to-parent relationships to develop. A 2007 study found [Head Start parents with stronger social networks are more likely to be involved in home educational activities](#), and that social networks were especially important for the well being of single parents. Developing social capital can also have a [positive impact on attendance](#).

While the relationships between parents and programs remained strong throughout the pandemic, parents struggled to find opportunities to connect with fellow parents and caregivers. During the 2018-2019 program year, 57% of parents reported that they very much or mostly felt connected to other parents and adults. At the end of the 2021-2022 program year, 57% of parents reported that they very much or mostly felt connected. In other words, 43% reported lower levels of connectedness (responses of somewhat, not very much, or not at all).

Head Start programs are one possible source of connection for families. Of course, there are many reasons why Head Start programs had to eliminate or severely reduce opportunities for parents to engage during the 2021-2022 program year.

This restriction has been felt by parents. While 77% reported they felt their programs offered opportunities to connect pre-pandemic, that number has decreased to 68% post-pandemic. If programs work to find ways to connect parents and build social capital, their efforts could have important benefits for mitigating barriers to parental participation and improving outcomes for children.

Parent Mostly Set Aside Time to Read to their Children



Literacy is the foundation for all learning. Reading is a key way that children participate in the world and is the foundation of formal education.

Over the course of a child's lifetime, [reading is correlated](#) with higher earning potential, better job prospects, and even [better mental health](#). As their children's first and most important teachers, many Head Start parents begin the program year already knowing the importance of setting aside time to read to their child. In fact, 44% of parents started off the program year reporting they very much do so already. This number continued to climb throughout the year, rising to 47% mid-year. By the end of the program year, 52% of parents reported they very much set aside time to read to their child.

Head Start encourages parents to actively engage in their child's educational and personal development and builds their confidence as their child's advocate. When asked how much the Head Start program encouraged them to make time to read, parents overwhelmingly reported that the program had a positive impact. At the end of the year, 68% of parents reported the program very much encouraged them in this area. Head Start encourages parents to actively engage in their child's educational and personal development and builds their confidence as their child's advocate.

"The program helped me to understand my daughter's interest in music. My Family Advocate (FA) also has encouraged me to use her interest in music as transition times as well as to learn. My daughter now knows a lot for her age through music and I would have never have thought of using music in that way until my FA noticed how my daughter would react to music."

- Head Start Parent

Working in tandem, these statistics above indicate that Head Start programs have a substantial and positive impact on emphasizing the importance of reading—and other areas of development—to parents. As children move on from Head Start to thirteen years in the public school system and beyond, parents remain their most consistent presence, emphasizing and actively supporting their children's growth throughout their lifetime.

Methods

In order to write this report, NHSA looked at all Parent Gauge interviews recorded by users for the 2021-2022 program year. The data was pulled from the system on July 1 and then cleaned. We removed any interviews that were empty (or close to it) before moving on to our analysis.

We analyzed the data at the aggregate level and in certain subgroups, as it has been presented in this report. NHSA staff and interns reviewed open-ended responses anonymously, in order to protect the privacy of individual programs and families.

Among end-of-year interviews, parents and children exhibited the following traits:

- 72% enrolled in Head Start and 28% enrolled in Early Head Start.
- 83% enrolled in center-based care and 17% enrolled in the home visiting program.
- 58% of conversations were conducted in person and 42% were over the phone.
- 88% of conversations were conducted in English, 11% in Spanish, and 1% in other languages.
- Responses from Region 5 were highest. (Parent Gauge use is particularly heavy among programs in [Region 5](#), as this region was instrumental in the original development of the tool alongside NHSA.)



Turning Conversations into Numbers

The close-ended questions in Parent Gauge consist of a five-point Likert scale for responses. Staff read a statement to the parent, such as “I set aside time to read to my child,” and the parents answer whether they agree with that statement very much, mostly, somewhat, not very much, or not at all. These responses are assigned values between five (very much) and one (not at all), which allows the tool to provide programs with average scores for each question.

Conclusions

The pandemic has been a challenge for parents, teachers, and children alike. While opportunities for parental connection were more limited than usual during the past year, Head Start programs retained deep levels of trust and continued to foster parent-teacher relationships.

These relationships are the critical mechanism by which programs empower parents to educate and advocate for their children long after their time in Head Start.

Parents are eager to read to their children; in so doing, they engage with their kids and become active participants in their children's academic and social-emotional development. Head Start programs have done an excellent job providing physical reading materials and the support and encouragement that parents need to see themselves as active participants in their children's education.

Building trust and social capital promotes at-home engagement and can mitigate some of the challenges and barriers that Head Start parents face, setting students on an upward trajectory.



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NHSA's mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education. NHSA is committed to the belief that every child, regardless of circumstances at birth, has the ability to succeed in life. We are the voice for more than 1 million children, 275,000 staff, and 1,600 grant recipients in the U.S. Since 1974, NHSA has worked for policy changes that ensure all income-eligible children have access to the Head Start model.

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For further information about this publication, contact NHSA's media team, media@nhsa.org, or visit nhsa.org.

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