

# Evidence of Strengths and Resilience within Head Start Families



**Michael Vaden-Kiernan, Ph.D.  
Mary Ann D'Elio, M.S.**

**The CDM Group, Inc.**



# Goals of the FACES Case Study

- Provide a more complete profile of Head Start families, their neighborhoods and the nature of their interactions with Head Start.
- Support and expand on the findings from the larger FACES study, pursue research questions independent of the larger study, and generate hypotheses for future research.



# The FACES Case Study Design: Sample

- 120 Head Start families randomly selected from larger FACES sample (3 per site).
- There were no statistically significant differences between the case study sample and the larger FACES sample of families on basic demographic information.
- Overall case study attrition rate of 12% over 16 months (September, 1997 - December, 1998).



# The FACES Case Study Design: Measures

## ■ Home Visit Parent Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions regarding parents' perceptions of themselves and their families, their experiences with Head Start, and their neighborhoods.

## ■ Home/Neighborhood Observations:

Checklists completed by the interviewers and by the families during home visits.

## ■ Monthly Telephone Interviews:

Monthly updates on changes in families' household compositions, child care arrangements, employment status, health status, and Head Start participation.

---

# The FACES Case Study Design: Analytic Strategies

---



- Content Coding Analysis of Home Visit Interviews :
    - Content code open-ended responses given by parent during the home visit parent interview.
    - Responses were systematically organized into a coding scheme which categorized information to allow for inferences to be made across families.
  
  - Descriptive Analysis of Monthly Telephone Interviews
-



# The FACES Case Study Design: Analytic Strategies

## ■ Family Narratives:

- Integrate qualitative and quantitative descriptive data from the case study measures and main FACES study.
- Organized around four themes, describing: 1) the Head Start child; 2) the Head Start family; 3) the family's interactions with Head Start; and 4) the family's home and neighborhood.
- The narrative serves as a useful vehicle for beginning to identify emergent themes within and across families.



# Parents Have Optimistic Expectations for their Children and Value Education

- 75% of parents reported hopes and goals related to their children's education, such as doing well in school, completing appropriate tasks for their age, and having a positive attitude toward school.
- 65% of parents had specific long-term educational attainment goals for their children, such as graduating from high school and attending college.



# Comments from Head Start Families

“For her to learn how to enjoy learning so that when she’s in school she enjoys it and she can build her dreams.”

“...Education means a lot to me. I really want them to go to college.”

Regarding her daughter’s future, the mother wanted her to become an “engineer” and hoped she “gets a good job.” But she clarified that the “most important thing is her learning and increasing her abilities.” She wanted to instill in her daughter “the desire to be somebody...who does not have to struggle like we do.”





# Family Relationships Are Seen as a Primary Strength and Challenge

- 58% of parents reported their family's positive relationships, most often characterized as family closeness or togetherness, including the ability to rely on one another and the ability to take care of each other, as a family strength.
- Improving relationships in the family, including marital, sibling, parent-child, and overall family relationships, was the most cited area in need of improvement for Head Start families.



# Comments from Head Start Families

“We stick together. We just love each other and try to keep each other happy.”

“We have a willingness to keep it all together. We work together as a family. All of us are here for each other.”

“I need to work on my child-parent communication skills. I need to be able to talk without screaming. I tend to get angry at my daughter, I have worked hard on fixing this.”



# Head Start Families Face Challenges and Demonstrate Resilience

## Findings Across Cases Indicate....

- While most of the families described in the narratives were relatively stable, they faced multiple challenges in the areas of employment status, health, child care, household changes and relationships with significant others.
- Across the family narratives there is a persistent effort to develop or maintain a practical and feasible balance between the often-competing demands of school and/or work and taking care of their children.



# Comments from Head Start Families

“I hope I don’t get really stressed out with five kids. I’m doing really good but I have a feeling I’ll get burnt out. Luckily they are pretty good... I need organizational skills. I think having lots of kids you need to get organized – so you can keep the kids’ appointments and things straight... I’d like to improve the fact that we work too much (and need to) spend more time together. I think we’ll be able to do that when they are in school (and) maybe their dad will get another shift. I’d like to be a normal family.”



# Head Start Families Face Challenges and Demonstrate Resilience

## Findings Within Cases Indicate....

- Perhaps the most striking theme from the narratives was that each family seemed to face their own set of unique challenges and demonstrated resilience in the face of their adversity.



# Comments from Head Start Families

Perhaps the strongest example of resilience is the mother's belief system: she says her family is "poor but honorable" and that "our surroundings make it hard to show her how to be good, but we try. I love my children and want to see them grow... we are poor, but we try to keep her on the right path." While voicing concerns about her low wages, the mother also focused on working to better her family, saying "there is only one thing and that is work and to work for them."



# The FACES Case Study Findings: Head Start Families Interactions with Head Start

- Despite facing various barriers to participation, Head Start families demonstrated a strong desire to be involved in their children's Head Start education and valued their involvement in the program.
- Analyses using case study data indicated that participation in Head Start activities positively moderated the relationship between neighborhood factors, such as neighborhood violence, and child behavior indicating that parent involvement may play a significant role in reducing the negative effects of neighborhood factors on children's behavior.



# The FACES Case Study Findings: Summary and Conclusions

- Head Start families are diverse but hold hopes and goals similar to other families.
- Head Start families find the relationships with their families to be an important resource – a source of strength as well as a source of challenge.
- Despite the challenges faced by Head Start families, they also possess strengths and resilience both unique and shared among other families.
- Despite barriers, Head Start families value their involvement in their children's Head Start education and their participation in Head Start may play an important role in protecting their children from negative outcomes.