



Because You Care... ...Learn More

Research Spotlight on Success: *Healthy Families America Prevents Child Maltreatment**

Preventing child abuse and neglect is complex, because of many different risk factors that interact with family and community strengths. Healthy Families America (HFA) prevents child abuse and neglect by helping families build protective factors that reduce risks by:

- Promoting healthy parent-child interaction and attachment;
- Increasing knowledge of child development and appropriate expectations of children;
- Improving use of preventive health care;
- Reducing social isolation; and,
- Providing access to community resources for families.

Measuring a program's impact on child maltreatment is also complex. The most useful evaluations include multiple measures that provide a more meaningful context for understanding child maltreatment. Official child maltreatment rates are also complicated by biased detection rates, differences in legal definitions of child abuse and neglect and Child Protective Services (CPS) practices that vary from one community to another. Parent self-report measures detect more cases of child maltreatment than official reports and measure a broader range of potentially harmful parenting behaviors.¹ Therefore, using multiple measures of child maltreatment offers a more accurate assessment of program impacts on maltreatment prevention.

Research Highlights**

Reduced Self-Reported Child Maltreatment

A large, recent randomized control trial (RCT) (NY2) found less physical and psychological abuse for HFA parents than control parents at one year. Results at two years showed the greatest impacts for first-time moms and psychologically vulnerable moms. A smaller RCT also found some evidence of less child maltreatment for HFA parents than control parents (AK).

Reduced Substantiated Cases of Child Maltreatment

Evidence of the challenges with this measure of child maltreatment comes from a large, recent RCT (NY2) that documents a bias in detecting child maltreatment. This bias means that comparison families experience more child maltreatment than is reflected in official reports, while in comparison, the presence of a home visitor increases early detection in enrolled families. Even so, one RCT (HI1) found a statistical trend for fewer incidents of confirmed maltreatment (3.3% v. 6.8%, $p < .10$) among HFA families. Also in this study, substantiated cases for home-visited families were for less serious offenses (e.g., potential harm rather than actual harm to the child) than the cases with control families.

"I was 14 years old when I had my baby. If it had not been for Healthy Families America, I would not have known what to do. Thanks to them, now I have a healthy, intelligent and smart baby who is also very mischievous. I don't hit my baby, I don't yell at him, nor do I shake him because I learned from Healthy Families that it is bad for my son and also for me."

— HFA Participant



www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org

What is Healthy Families America?

Prevent Child Abuse America implemented Healthy Families America (HFA) in 1992, building on two decades of research in the field of home visitation.

- HFA is a nationally-recognized, voluntary service that connects overburdened expectant parents and parents of newborns with free child development assistance in their homes.
- Well-respected, extensively-trained assessment workers and home visitors provide valuable guidance, information and support to help parents be the best parents they can be.
- Based upon our years of experience and evidence-base, we know that home visiting promotes optimal long-term mental and physical health of parents and their children.

Additional evidence from community-wide and state-wide studies shows dramatic impacts on rates of child abuse and neglect:

- A community comparison study (VA5) compared rates of child maltreatment in Hampton, Virginia — where HFA services are city-wide — to multiple comparison communities over several years spanning the program's implementation. Hampton's decrease in child maltreatment outpaced the comparison communities, including those with greater resources.
- Another community comparison study (HI3) used hospitalization data for over 3000 families eligible for Hawaii Healthy Start services. Fewer children were hospitalized for child maltreatment

among the enrolled families compared to eligible families who could not be served due to program capacity (2.7 per 1000 vs. 17.0 per 1000).

- A carefully-designed independent comparison study (FL4) found significantly lower rates of maltreatment among families who completed the program or received "high-fidelity" services than for eligible families who could not be served due to program capacity.
- Six studies found lower rates of maltreatment for HFA (statewide) families compared to the county or community as a whole:
 - FL1: 1.6% vs. 4.9% county-wide.
 - FL2: 4% of all families enrolled 1995-2000 vs. 5.9% in program zip code.
 - FL4(statewide): 4% vs. 5% for non-served families in the same communities.
 - MA: 8.6% vs. 33% reported by teen parent study.
 - OR: 1.3% of home-visited children ages 0-2 vs. 2.5% non-served children aged 0-2 in same counties.
 - VA4: 1.1% for home-visited children compared to 4.7% estimated for children in comparable low-income families nation-wide.
- The vast majority of studies have found rates of maltreatment for HFA families to be much lower than the national average of 4.7% for families with incomes below \$15,000². Eight cross-sectional studies reported maltreatment rates ranging from 0% to 5% (AZ, IA, MD, MN, Multi1, NJ, VA1, VA3, and VT). Five of the studies reported maltreatment rates of 2% or less.

Other Outcomes: Improved parent-child interaction, healthy child development, and other family strengths contribute to reduced child maltreatment down the line; information on these outcomes can be found in other briefs in the HFA Research Spotlight Series.

¹ English, D. J. (1998). The extent and consequences of child maltreatment. *The Future of Children*, 8(1), 39-53.

² Sedlak, Andrea J., & Broadhurst, Diane D. (1996). *The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3)*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC.

The Bottom Line

There is growing evidence that HFA prevents child abuse and neglect. In addition to numerous studies showing lower-than-expected rates, three RCTs and three comparison group studies provide more rigorous evidence of program impact. An RCT documenting biases in the detection of child maltreatment attests to the challenges of measuring child maltreatment outcomes.



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* State abbreviations and numbers refer to site or state-level evaluation studies; more information on the studies can be found in the HFA Table of Evaluations at www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/research/index.shtml

** This report highlights findings from 34 studies in 25 states. Study designs include 8 randomized control trials and 8 comparison group studies. Over 230 HFA programs were involved in these studies.