Promoting Parent Social Capital to Increase Child Head Start Center Attendance: Evidence from an Experimental Intervention

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Improving children’s attendance is a high priority for Head Start and other early childhood education programs serving low-income children. The current mixed-method study explores the impact of a low-cost parent social capital intervention on parent social networks and children’s attendance in a Head Start program serving high-poverty neighborhoods in a major metropolitan city. We find that parents who were offered the opportunity to form parent partnerships and whose children were assigned to classrooms where children lived in the same neighborhood had a greater gain in their social networks and were more willing to ask other parents for help compared to parents whose children were assigned to classrooms based on a business-as-usual approach. The intervention also led to an increase in child attendance during the winter months when child center attendance was lowest. There was no intervention effect on fall or spring attendance. Follow-up exploratory analysis based on focus groups with parents and staff suggests that closer connections, supportive strategies, and higher levels of trust may be key mechanisms by which parent social capital increases and child attendance in turn improves.

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