

third national



# even start

evaluation

Description of Projects and Participants



earlychildhoodparent  
childliteracyinteractionadult  
literacyparentingearlychildhood  
parentchildliteracyinteraction  
adultliteracyparentingearly  
childhoodparentchildliteracy  
interactionadultliteracyparenting



**THIRD NATIONAL  
EVEN START  
EVALUATION:  
DESCRIPTION OF  
PROJECTS AND  
PARTICIPANTS**

**Executive Summary**

**2001**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The third national Even Start evaluation continues the Department of Education's decade-long series of studies of the Even Start Program. Two complementary sets of information are being collected in the third national Even Start evaluation<sup>1</sup> through (1) the Even Start Performance Information Reporting System (ESPIRS) and (2) the Experimental Design Study (EDS). The ESPIRS provides annual data on the universe of Even Start projects. The EDS is an experimental study of Even Start's effectiveness in 18 projects.

This interim report draws on data from two years (1997-1998 and 1998-1999) of the ESPIRS. No data from the EDS were available in time to be included in this report; hence, the report describes Even Start participants and projects but does not contain information on program outcomes or effects.

A second interim report will be submitted to the Department of Education in June 2002. That document will present analyses of the first year of pretest and posttest data from 18 EDS projects, and will update descriptive information on Even Start projects and participants using ESPIRS data from 1999-2000 and 2000-2001.

The final report from this evaluation will be based on four years of ESPIRS data (1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, and 2000-2001), as well as on pretest, posttest, and follow-up data from 18 EDS projects. It will update the descriptions of Even Start participants and projects, and will contain an assessment of the effects that Even Start has had on participating families, children, and adults. It also will present an analysis of the cost of Even Start and the cost-effectiveness of providing Even Start services. The final report is scheduled to be completed in July 2003. Some of the major findings documented in this interim report are summarized below.

### **EVEN START CONTINUES TO GROW (CHAPTER 1)**

One of the evaluation themes for the past decade has been the continued growth of Even Start Program, both in terms of total federal funding as well as the number of projects that are supported with those funds. From a small demonstration program in which \$14.8 million was used to fund 76 projects in the 1989-1990 program year, Even Start has grown ten-fold. In 1999-2000, \$135 million in funding was distributed to about 800 projects in all 50 states.

The number of families served by Even Start grew steadily from 1989-1990 when 2,460 families participated to 1996-1997 when the program served a high of 34,400 families. During the past two years, the total enrollment in Even Start has dropped—to 30,500 in 1997-1998 and

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<sup>1</sup> The first national evaluation spanned the years 1990-1993; the second national evaluation covered 1994-1997. The third evaluation provides information about Even Start during 1998-2001.

32,200 in 1998-1999. This is a consequence of a gradual reduction in the number of families served by the average project, from a high of 62 families per project in 1991-1992 to a low of 44 families per project in 1998-1999.

Over the past few years the Department has been consistent in its guidance to Even Start state coordinators and to local projects—the best way to help families achieve progress is to provide intensive levels of service to the most needy families, rather than spreading services more thinly over a larger number of families. The long-term drop in number of families served per project and the more recent drop in total number of families served by Even Start may well result from this approach, a strategy intended to maximize Even Start’s benefits.

## **PARENTS IN NEWLY ENROLLED EVEN START FAMILIES REPORTED ON THE LITERACY STATUS OF THEIR FAMILIES WHEN THEY ENTERED THE PROGRAM (CHAPTER 2)**

A parent in each newly enrolled Even Start family was asked to report on several literacy-related progress indicators at the time the family entered the program. About one-quarter of new Even Start parents reported that they **read stories to their child daily**, and another quarter read stories to their child about three times a week. Even Start projects appear to have done a good job of recruiting needy families, because these are lower rates of reading to children than reported by national samples of parents from the National Household Education Study and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, as well as parents of Chapter 1 (now Title I) and Head Start children.

Parents were asked whether their child knows all, most, some, or no letters of the **alphabet**. Few parents (only 17 percent) reported that children under age 3 know any letters of the alphabet. Preschoolers are much more likely to know some letters (75 percent). Finally, parents reported that 55 percent of the school age children who are joining Even Start know all of the letters of the alphabet. This is reasonable given national estimates from the NHES in which 24 percent of all mothers of 3 to 5 year old children, 10 percent of mothers living below poverty, and 7 percent of mothers who do not have a high school diploma reported that their child knows all of the letters of the alphabet (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 1999, p. 7).

Parents were asked whether their child can **count** up to 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, or not at all. In response, similar to the alphabet question, parents reported age-related development with respect to counting. Three-quarters of children under age 3 cannot count at all, while only 9 percent of preschoolers cannot count at all. By the time they are in school, more than half of the children can count to 50. Parents also reported that 19 percent of Even Start preschoolers can count to 20 or higher, substantially less than reports from the NHES where 57 percent of mothers of 3 to 5 year olds, 39 percent of mothers living below poverty, and 36 percent of mothers who do not have a high school diploma reported that their child can count to 20 or higher (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 1999, p. 7).

Parents were asked whether their child likes to **write or pretend to write** (either in English or in the child’s primary language). Fifty percent reported that their child under age 3

never writes or pretends to write; 84 percent of the parents of preschoolers and 90 percent of the parents of school-age children reported that their child writes.

Parents were asked whether their child can identify the **colors** red, yellow, blue, and green by name. Only four percent of infants or toddlers could identify all these colors, compared with 40 percent of preschoolers and 76 percent of school-age children.

Parents were asked whether their child **reads or pretends to read**. About half (53 percent) of the infants or toddlers were reported as reading or pretending to read, compared with almost all of the preschoolers (92 percent) and school-age children (95 percent). The percentage for preschoolers is higher than what was seen in the NHES, where 74 percent of all mothers of 3 to 5 year old children, 63 percent of mothers below the poverty level, and 53 percent of mothers without a high school diploma reported that their child reads or pretends to read storybooks (Nord, Lennon, Liu, & Chandler, 1999, p. 7). This difference may be due to the fact that Even Start parents were asked about reading in general, while NHES mothers were asked about reading storybooks.

### **ALMOST ALL FAMILIES PARTICIPATE IN ALL CORE SERVICES (CHAPTER 3)**

One of Even Start's underlying hypotheses is that it is important for families to participate in all three core services, not just one or two. We would worry about the viability of the model if only a small percentage of the Even Start families were willing to participate in all core services. But, data from this evaluation show that 91 percent of enrolled families met the requirement to participate in all three core services. This percentage has been stable during the past decade, indicating that the tri-service model is acceptable to Even Start families.

Knowing that almost all enrolled families participated in each core service is only part of the story. We also want to know **how much** they participated. The data (see Exhibit E.1) show that during 1998-1999 the average Even Start parent participated in adult education about 25 hours a month for a total of 156 hours.<sup>2</sup> This is equivalent to six hours a week, or three two-hour classes; and is about double the average amount of participation in adult education programs nationally (Development Associates, 1994). The data also show that the average Even Start parent took part in parenting education eight hours a month for a total of 53 hours. This is equivalent to a two-hour parenting class once a week. Finally, the average Even Start child participated in early childhood education about 43 hours a month for a total of 325 hours. These statistics are calculated across Even Start children of all ages. This is roughly equivalent to three half-days of preschool or school per week, somewhat less than a Head Start program. Of course, infants and toddlers participate for fewer hours (average of 175) while children age 5 and older participate for about 500 hours.

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<sup>2</sup> Some families participate in Even Start by virtue of "continuing eligibility" whereby a child continues to receive Even Start services after his or her parent has completed the adult education requirements. In these families, adults are not expected to continue participation in adult education.

**EXHIBIT E.1**  
**SUMMARY OF EVEN START PARTICIPATION DATA (1998-1999)**

CORE SERVICE AREA	TOTAL HOURS	HOURS/ MONTH	HOURS/ WEEK	WEEKLY CLASS EQUIVALENTS
Adult Education	156	25	6	Three 2-hour classes
Parenting Education	53	8	2	One 2-hour class
Early Childhood Education	325	43	11	Three half-days

### **SOME FACTORS ARE RELATED TO INCREASED AMOUNTS OF PARTICIPATION (CHAPTER 3)**

Previous Even Start research (Tao, Gamse, & Tarr, 1998) found three factors that related to amount of participation: (1) service intensity, defined as the number of service hours that a project offers in each of the three core educational components, (2) the number of support services that a family receives, and (3) the extent to which core instructional services are integrated. The same relationships were found to exist in the data collected for the third national evaluation, suggesting that:

- ❑ Projects should increase and maintain high levels of hours offered in each core service area. Even though most Even Start families participate in fewer hours of instruction than the amount offered, families participate more in projects that offer more hours.
- ❑ Projects should provide the support services that are needed by families, either directly or through referrals to collaborating agencies, to enable families to participate fully in Even Start educational services.
- ❑ Projects should integrate, as much as possible, the instructional context, contents or activities across adult, parenting, and early childhood education.

### **FAMILIES PARTICIPATE IN EVEN START FOR WIDELY VARYING LENGTHS OF TIME (CHAPTER 3)**

Many Even Start projects operate under a rolling admission policy whereby families can enroll throughout the year. Further, participation in Even Start is open-ended, with no set length of expected participation. Therefore, families can enter Even Start at any time of the year, and they can leave at any time of the year. This means that at the beginning of each program year, some families are continuing participants from the prior year. Then, throughout the year, new families enroll in the program. Also throughout the year, some of the newly enrolled families and some of the families that continued from the previous year leave the program.

Data from this evaluation confirm reports from Even Start project directors that they recruit and enroll families on a rolling basis during the entire year.

The data also show that 71 percent of the families that enrolled in Even Start during the 1997-1998 program year left the program, having participated for 12 or fewer months.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, 29 percent of all families that enrolled in Even Start during the 1997-1998 program year participated for more than 12 months. Of these families, 9.7 percent left Even Start with between 13 and 24 months of participation, while 19.3 percent remained in the program for 24 or more months. Data from the 1999-2000 ESPIRS will give us more information about exactly how long this latter group of families participated in Even Start.

### **EVEN START FAMILIES LEFT THE PROGRAM FOR VARIOUS REASONS (CHAPTER 3)**

Even Start project directors reported that 31 percent of the families that participated in Even Start during 1998-1999 left the program sometime during the year and gave one or more reasons for leaving (additional families left the program but did not give a reason for leaving). Seven percent of all families participating in 1998-1999 left Even Start after completing their planned educational goals; 8 percent left Even Start because parents found employment that conflicted with continued participation; 7 percent moved out of Even Start service areas; and 5 percent left because they switched to other educational or job-training programs or to look for employment. Twenty percent left because of various motivational problems (for example, poor attendance, family problems and crises preventing participation, or lack of interest).<sup>4</sup>

### **EVEN START IS FOCUSING SERVICES MORE INTENSIVELY ON A SMALLER NUMBER OF FAMILIES (CHAPTER 4)**

Compared with prior years, Even Start projects in the late 1990s spent more dollars per family, served a smaller number of families per project, and offered more intensive services to those families. The long-term reduction in number of families per project and the shorter-term drop in the total number of families served by Even Start likely result from a conscious technical assistance strategy by the Department of Education to focus resources intensively on the most needy families in order to achieve the best outcomes. This strategy was formed, in part, on the basis of findings from the first national Even Start evaluation (St.Pierre, et al., 1995) which showed that (1) families in projects that offered more hours of core instructional services participated more than families in projects that offered fewer service hours, and (2) families that participated more intensively in core instructional services had better learning gains than families that participated less intensively.

Over the past few years the Department has been consistent in its guidance to Even Start state coordinators and to local projects—the best way to help families achieve progress and hence to maximize Even Start’s benefits is to provide high levels of service to a smaller number of families, rather than spreading services more thinly over a larger number of families.

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<sup>3</sup> This includes 21 percent of families who enrolled in Even Start during 1997-1998, and then left the program during 1997-1998, with no exit date. To calculate a length of participation, we assumed that each of these families participated from their enrollment dates until the end of the program year (6/30/1998).

<sup>4</sup> Percentages add to more than 31 percent because families were allowed to report up to three reasons for leaving Even Start.

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## THE AMOUNT OF CORE INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES OFFERED TO EVEN START FAMILIES CONTINUES TO RISE (CHAPTER 4)

The amount of service offered in each type of adult education during 1998-1999 increased by between 13 and 17 percent when compared with data from two years earlier, and by much larger amounts when compared with data from 1993-1994. The amount of parenting education offered to families was stable for several years before increasing by almost 10 percent in 1998-1999. Finally, the amount of early childhood education offered to Even Start children has increased substantially during the past two years. The hours of educational activities offered to infants and toddlers under age 3 rose by roughly 17 percent in the past two years, and by 70 percent since 1993-1994. Smaller, but still substantial, increases occurred for preschool children ages 3 and 4, who saw increases of 7 percent in the past two years, and 50 percent since 1993-1994.

## ALMOST ALL PROJECTS COMPLY WITH LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS (CHAPTER 4)

An analysis of the Even Start legislation showed that projects are expected to comply with 11 different programmatic requirements. Data from the national evaluation show that only 7 percent of all Even Start projects reported that they were not able to comply with all of the legislative requirements (another 10 percent did not supply data sufficient to allow a determination of the extent to which they met each of the legislative requirements). None of the program requirements appeared to pose special problems for Even Start projects. The requirement to provide year-round services was the most difficult to meet, with 3 percent of the projects unable to comply with this mandate during 1998-1999.

For the special legislative requirement that projects offer intensive services, we defined high, moderate, and low levels of service intensity based on the performance indicators that the Department of Education developed for Even Start and on standards for high quality programs (definitions are shown in Exhibits 4.39, 4.40 and 4.41).<sup>5</sup> Applying these definitions, we found that Even Start projects are most often able to offer high-intensity services in parenting education and in early childhood education for preschoolers; they are least able to offer high-intensity services in adult education, with the exception of adult secondary education (ASE). In particular:

- ❑ **Parenting education:** 46 percent of all Even Start projects offered high-intensity parenting education services, 47 percent offered moderate-intensity services, and the remaining 7 percent offered low-intensity services.
- ❑ **Early childhood education:** 47 percent of all Even Start projects offered high-intensity early childhood services to preschoolers (3 to 5 year-olds), 45 percent offered moderate-intensity services, and 9 percent offered low-intensity services. For infants and toddlers (0 to 3 year-olds), 36 percent of all projects offered high-intensity services, 58 percent offered moderate-intensity services, and 6 percent offered low-intensity services.

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<sup>5</sup> The Even Start statute does not define what is meant by “intensive” services.

- **Adult education:** High-intensity programs were most common for adult secondary education (43 percent of all Even Start projects), less frequent for Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Education Development (GED) (32 percent and 33 percent), and least common for English as a Second Language (ESL) (22 percent of all projects). Low-intensity programs occurred with roughly the same frequency across types of adult education (ranging from 7 percent to 11 percent).

## **EVEN START CONTINUES TO SERVE A NEEDY POPULATION (CHAPTER 5)**

Even Start families are drawn from the most educationally and economically disadvantaged segment of the population. The percentage of undereducated parents entering Even Start has increased since 1992-1993 when 79 percent of participating adults did not have a high school diploma or GED when they entered the program with their children. In 1998-1999, 85 percent of adults had neither completed high school nor earned a GED at the time they enrolled in Even Start.

More than 80 percent of the families enrolling in Even Start in the last two program years (1997-1998 and 1998-1999) reported annual incomes below \$20,000; more than 46 percent of families earned and/or received annual incomes of less than \$9,000. On average, these families had five to six household members. Wages from employment represented the primary source of income for 61 percent of Even Start families who enrolled in 1998-1999. However, only 26 percent of the parents who enrolled in Even Start were employed full- or part-time when they entered the program. This apparent contradiction is explained by the fact that about half of Even Start families are headed by couples; and in most families one parent (usually the mother) participates in Even Start while the other parent often is a wage earner.

## **EVEN START IS SERVING GROWING PROPORTIONS OF TEEN PARENTS AND HISPANIC FAMILIES (CHAPTER 5)**

While many characteristics of Even Start participants have remained consistent since the program's inception, some changes have taken place. One notable change is that the percentage of teen parents in Even Start almost doubled during the past five years, from 9 percent in 1994-1995 to 17 percent in 1998-1999.

A second important change has occurred in the racial or ethnic mix of families served by Even Start. The proportion of Hispanic families in Even Start has almost doubled during the 1990s, from 22 percent in 1992-1993 to 41 percent in 1998-1999. This rate of increase far surpasses the increase of Hispanics in the national population from 10 percent in 1992 to 11 percent in 1998.

Offsetting the increase in Hispanic families, the representation of Caucasian families has declined from 40 percent to 30 percent; African American families have declined from 26 percent to 20 percent; and Asian families declined from 8 percent to 3 percent. The percentage

of American Indian families in Even Start has remained between 2 and 4 percent since 1992-1993.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACHIEVING POSITIVE EFFECTS ON FAMILIES**

The data from this evaluation have implications for the ability of Even Start to produce positive effects on families. On the whole, Even Start projects are meeting their legislative mandate. They recruit and serve needy families. And, a high percentage of families take part in all three core services and receive an amount of service that compares favorably with other existing programs.

Future reports from this evaluation will investigate whether the amount of service received by Even Start families (in 1998-1999, an average of 156 hours of adult education, 53 hours of parenting education, and 325 hours of early childhood education) is sufficient to lead to important and lasting changes in families. We know from previous research that low-intensity social programs are not sufficient to ameliorate the effects of poverty and low-literacy (St. Pierre & Layzer, 1998). But what amount of service is sufficient to help low-income families? And what size impacts do we hope to see from Even Start? Do we really expect Even Start to make large and long-lasting changes in the lives of participating families (for example, moving families out of poverty, helping mothers get through college, making children into high achievers), or will we be satisfied with small, incremental, but nonetheless statistically significant (hence, real) improvements? The history of social programs tells us that we should be satisfied if we are able to achieve the latter.

That story will be told in the final report from this evaluation where we will investigate whether Even Start participation is sufficient to make a difference to families, over and above the amount of services that they would have received had they not been in this particular program. On the basis of past research we expect that Even Start children will grow, develop, and benefit from receiving high-quality early childhood services (for example, Barnett, 1995). Similarly, we expect that Even Start parents will benefit from participating in adult education programs (for example, Development Associates, 1994). And, we hope that the parenting education services provided through Even Start will enhance parenting skills and subsequently will positively affect child development, although the research evidence on this point is mixed at best (for example, Clarke-Stewart, 1988). Therefore, we expect that future data from this evaluation will show that families who participate in Even Start change and develop in positive ways.

The key question to be addressed in future reports is whether families who are not in Even Start (a “control group”) also change and develop in similar positive ways, perhaps by availing themselves of similar services on their own, without the help of Even Start funding. We need to know the percentage of control group children that enroll in Head Start or other preschool programs, the percentage of control group adults that enroll in adult education programs, and the percentage of control group families that take part in parenting education programs. And subsequently, we need to know the extent to which the hoped-for benefits obtained by Even Start families are more substantial (larger) than any benefits gained through the services obtained by

control group families. This is information that will be provided by the Experimental Design Study of 18 projects as well as by the ESPIRS through the collection of data on parent-reported changes in literacy status.