



Children's Aid Society

ZERO TO FIVE PROGRAM

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The Children's Aid Society (CAS) early childhood initiative is located in two of our New York City Community Schools, Primary School (PS) 5 and PS 8, in the Washington Heights section of northern Manhattan. This initiative was conceived as a partnership between the New York City Board of Education and CAS. The collaboration brought newborns and their families into the schools in which the children would complete fifth grade. The initiative began in 1994 and has been in full operation since 1996. Since then, the need for such a project has been confirmed and experience has provided insights into how a program for pregnant women and children through age five (often called a Zero to Five Program) can be effectively implemented within a public school. The CAS Zero to Five model connects two federally funded programs – Early Head Start (birth to age three) and Head Start (ages three to five) – to provide comprehensive educational and social services to low income families and their children.

The population attending the Zero to Five Program confronts the obstacles facing all new immigrant families living in poverty in an urban setting. In both schools, 50% of the families are from Dominican Republic, 35% from Mexico, 10% come from other Central and South American countries and another 5% as other. The parent's language is Spanish, and language barriers and acculturation issues result in social isolation. In addition, because many residents lack legal documentation, they are reluctant to access health and social services.

The few early childhood programs in the neighborhood all have long waiting lists. A majority of the families share overcrowded apartments with other families or extended family; whole families often live in one bedroom where books and age-appropriate toys are scarce and there may be little child-centered language interaction. However, in spite of the difficulties, these parents have a drive to succeed and they understand the importance of education.

Program Model

By combining and linking Early Head Start and Head Start programs and integrating them into a Community School, the CAS Zero to Five Program provides children and families with quality educational, health, and social services, after which the children transition into public school classes within the same building. Although both programs are funded by the federal government and are required to follow comprehensive performance standards, CAS has considerable flexibility in strengthening and enhancing the basic Early Head Start and Head Start models. Our work to link the two programs into one comprehensive model, and our work to help children transition from these early childhood experiences into regular kindergarten within the same building, are examples of such enhancements.

Parents entering Early Head Start during pregnancy know they must make a five-year commitment. In fact, children who maintain consistent attendance in Early Head Start are guaranteed placement in Head Start. Considering the waiting lists for both programs and the limited number of other early childhood programs in the community, admission to Early Head Start serves as motivation to maintain attendance and participation for the five year duration of the program.



Early Head Start – Zero to Three

The CAS Early Head Start program is the entry point for the family. The home-based model provides intensive intervention with the entire family. Ninety minute home visits are conducted throughout the year, and families attend weekly small age-specific groups lasting two hours each week. The same teachers conduct the home visits and lead the parent/child groups. This continuity of care provides a high level of interaction with each family and develops a sense of community and trust. There are a minimum of 32 home visits and 45 interactions within a year; thus, over the three years of Early Head Start, families participate in a minimum of 96 home visits and 135 parent/child group interactions.

The home visit is a time for the family to focus on the child through age-appropriate, educationally stimulating activities. Music, language, early literacy activities, and parent/child games encourage the child's development and strengthen the parent/child bond. Through activities and role modeling, the teachers provide parents with an understanding of child development. During the home visits, parents learn songs with their children, read books, play with toys created from household items, and learn games that use their imagination. Home-based teachers and parents discuss how to make use of mealtime, bathtime, and bedtime routines to create parent-child interactions. The home visit also allows the parent to focus on interacting with the child without the distraction and stresses of everyday life.

The parent/child groups (eight children to a group) are held in a classroom in the Community School. A playful, stimulating educational experience includes room exploration, songs, parent/child play, and snacks. Set up like an infant-toddler classroom, the space offers safe and inviting environments, such as a block area, early literacy area, make-believe kitchen, and a climbing area, for parents and children to try out activities together. There is room to explore and be comfortable. Parents learn the connection between play and learning while they create a closer bond with their children. In addition, parents find support from one another and from the staff; this social support creates a sense of community within the program.

The Early Head Start Health Coordinator ensures that all health care needs are met. The Health coordinator accompanies parents and children on medical appointments as an advocate and, often, an interpreter and reviews children's physicals to see that health-related problems are being managed. She makes sure that children receive dental exams and checks to see that children and families are covered through health insurance; for undocumented families she finds low-cost medical care. The health coordinator also conducts CPR and first aid classes.

Services to pregnant women comprise a major component within Early Head Start. Pregnant women enrolled in the program immediately receive home visits from home based teachers and they participate in parent child interactions. As well, pregnant women participate in an eight week pregnancy group that includes such topics as: a healthy pregnancy, prenatal care, handling stress during pregnancy, nurturing relationships and drugs, alcohol, and tobacco use. The group creates a place for pregnant women to support each other and to make healthy decisions during their pregnancy.



During the eighth month of pregnancy the woman is assigned a Doula. A birth Doula is professionally trained to provide continuous emotional support to the woman during labor and childbirth. The Doula conducts a prenatal visit in the home during the eighth month. At that point she begins to devise a birth plan that includes who will take care of siblings, how to get to the hospital and identifying support people. The Doula also accompanies the mother on her medical visits if it is so desired. The Doula provides support throughout labor at home and at the hospital or birth center. As well, the Doula makes a postpartum visit. Ongoing support and referral services are also offered.

Postpartum support is also immediately provided to the child and family. The family continues to receive their scheduled home visits and they maintain their participation in Early Head Start. An overall postpartum assessment is made within two weeks of the mother returning to their home from the hospital. The mother's attachment to the baby and her overall mood is assessed. As well, there is an assessment of any material needs within the home. A referral is made based on the postpartum visit.

Interventions such as obtaining necessities like furniture or food, ensuring proper medical care, advocating for legal services, and consistently responding to families in crisis are examples of what the CAS Zero to Five program does; such interventions are especially frequent in Early Head Start because of the intimate level of contact provided by the home-based program.

Head Start – Three to Five

At the age of three, children move from the home-based Early Head Start program to the center-based Head Start classes. Their transition is facilitated by their previous educational experience in Early Head Start and by parent knowledge of child development learned in Early Head Start. Another plus is that the parents are familiar with the school environment; through the weekly parent/child interaction groups, they have developed a sense of belonging in the school. (Because the Head Start program is larger than the Early Head Start program at both sites, a number of Head Start spaces are available to other low-income families from the community; the criteria for entering Head Start includes low income and greatest need.)

The three-year-old classes are the children's first experience in a center-based classroom in which parents are not present. In each Community School, there is one classroom for three-year-olds, who attend half-days, either mornings or afternoons. The four-year-olds attend school from 8 A.M. to 3 P.M. At each school some of the children attend an extended-day program until 5:30 P.M. because of their parents' work schedule or a particular need for extended child care.

While there are differences in the curriculum and expectations for the three- and four-year-old classes, there are also many similarities. Each child is viewed individually with an emphasis on social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development. The educational component is organized around the Creative Curriculum. The classroom learning environment combines structured areas with freedom of movement. Individual interest areas include such activities as blocks, dramatic play, writing, and sand and water. Children choose their activities within the classroom that has established schedules, routines, and codes of conduct. Content areas such as literacy, math, science, the arts, and technology are integrated through the daily life of the classroom. The



emphasis on school readiness includes academics, self-regulation, motivation to learn, and building and sustaining healthy relationships.

Every child in the program receives breakfast and a snack. The half-day afternoon classes and the full-day children get lunch, and those in the extended day program get an additional snack later in the day. The food is nutritious, and meals are times for socialization, for gaining competence through serving and preparing food, and for developing positive attitudes toward food. CAS supports families' healthy nutrition habits through the CAS God Kids! program. The Go Kids program is implemented in the classrooms and supplemented by parent meetings. The Go Kids program is an obesity preventing program that encourages healthy eating and physical activity.

The list below shows the breakdown of participation in the Zero to Five Program:

- 75 children in Early Head Start:
 - 30 children at PS 8
 - 45 children at PS 5
- 75 children in PS 5 Head Start:
 - 35 children in half-day three-year-old classes
 - 40 children in two four-year-old classes
 - (20 Children continue in extended-day class until 5:30 P.M.)
- 68 children in PS 8 Head Start:
 - 28 children in half-day three-year-old classes
 - 40 children in two four-year-old full day classes
 - (18 children continue in extended-day class until 5:30 P.M.)
- Total: 218 children in Zero to Five Program

Parent involvement in education within the home is fostered through the Home-School Connection Curriculum. The Home-School Connection Curriculum ensures that children's developing minds are engaged in questioning and discovery activities all day long, through conversation, artwork, and games. These activities are designed to engage parents in their children's education in the fullest sense and from the very start.

Every week, children take home a set of activities to be completed by the parent and child. A central component is a language-based activity that sparks conversation and seeks to kindle in-depth dialogue between parent and child. All Home-School connection activities are distributed in both Spanish and English, allowing parents to choose the language in which they feel most comfortable interacting with their children. Parents record (in English or Spanish) their children's responses to the questions and write "adult reflection journals" that describe their personal experience of their child during the activity. These observations by parents are included as components of each child's assessment portfolio.

The home activities are unique in that they provide a set of questions for parents to ask their children while they engage them in activities. The conversation technique has a twofold goal: to build children's basic knowledge and vocabulary and to develop their higher-level thinking skills. For example, one week parents and children take a walk around the park, and parents ask their children the following set of questions:

1. What would you like to do in the park?



2. Do you think the park is a good place for children? Do you think it is a good place for grown-ups? Why?
3. What do we have at home that we don't have here?
4. What do we have here that we don't have at home?
5. Do you see any birds?
6. Where do you think the birds live?
7. What do you think birds do at night?

Parents record the child's answer to these questions. In their adult reflection journals, they answer the same three questions each week:

1. How did you feel about this activity?
2. What did you find out about your child?
3. What other questions did you ask your child?

Zero to Five

Special Needs

The Children's Aid Society Zero to Five program strives to provide optimal services to children with special needs and to meet all Head Start Performance Standards regarding Special Needs. Providing comprehensive and consistent services to special needs children is a priority because we view the positive impact of early identification, quality services and family involvement as essential for optimal development. The CAS Head Start Programs meet the performance standards through staff training, timely comprehensive screenings and assessment, integration of special needs children within the program, family involvement and support throughout the process. The Programs provide quality special needs services and follow up throughout the program year.

Our Community Needs Assessment suggests that there are issues outside the control of the CAS programs that effect the provision of services to special needs children and that these issues need to be addressed by the Programs in order to meet the children's needs. The issues effecting families attending the CAS Programs are not unique in New York City. There is presently a class action lawsuit that claims that early childhood special needs services are not meeting federal mandates. Children throughout New York City suffer from a delay in the assessment and evaluation process, a delay in obtaining services, a lack of bilingual therapists, and inconsistent staffing patterns that result in incomplete services and a limit of on site services. As a Program we have also observed that only children with the most extreme delays are being assessed as needing services. These extreme categories ignore a large part of the population that requires special services.

The CAS Program follows through on the procedures established by New York City to assess and provide services to special needs children and we have established our own intervention to ensure that children receive timely and ongoing services. All Head Start Performance Standards regarding special needs children are met. All children are assessed within 45 days of entering the Program. Those that are deemed to require services are referred by the Special Needs Coordinator for further evaluation. Families



are fully included in this process. The Special Needs Coordinator makes sure the family understands the process and feel supported.

The Talk and Play project has been implemented to insure that all CAS children that require services receive them immediately and that there is consistency in the provisions of services. The model requires individualized, timely, and frequent sessions. Within Early Head Start the model includes the parent child dyad and the Three to Five model assists the individual child, however, family members are kept informed. Children found through the assessment process as not needing services although the program identifies them as needing services are also included in Talk and Play. Children attending CAS Head Start programs have a short window of opportunity to have access to special needs services. Talk and Play is a response to the constant delays and failures within the system to provide services. Talk and Play is a formalized approach within the Program to provide services to special needs children.

Mental Health

Mental Health services are tied into every aspect of the Zero to Five Program. From the developmental continuum of pregnancy to post partum, new born, infant, toddler, preschool to Kindergarten transition there are temperament, child development, attachment, individuation, separation, identification, family history, values, customs and relationship issues that interact with each other. There are individual behaviors, emotions and interests that define children and parents and contribute to their relationship. There may be violence, anger, loss, despair, and instability as well as love, tenderness, and bonding. Each family has their own history, method of interaction, roles, expectations and child rearing practices. Specific to the population of families living in poverty there is a lack of financial stability and stress that results from social isolation, exposure to violence, lack of education, inadequate health care, decaying housing, and limited resources. Mental Health services within the Zero to Five Program begin during pregnancy and provide crisis intervention and supportive counseling during the first five years of life, reinforcing healthy family interactions and family stability.

Parent Involvement

The Zero to Five Program provides continuity, community, and enrichment for the parents as well as the children. From their initial contact with the program, parents become accustomed to a public school as an inviting educational environment. Within the program they find friends, as well as support from professionals. Advocacy is available to them in such areas as public assistance, housing, education, and the legal system. In a crisis the program is able to assist families with food, furniture, and clothing. Most important, parents feel supported in determining and reaching their own goals.

An important element of the Zero to Five Program is that its staff is representative of the community. In particular, this is demonstrated by the number of former parents from Early Head Start and Head Start who are now employed by the Zero to Five Program. With encouragement, training, and opportunities to volunteer, they have made



the leap from parent to employee. Former parents work as teachers, assistant teachers, teacher aides, substitute teachers, custodians, family workers, and cooks.

Employment for parents is also found in the Community Schools, which are central parts of the communities they serve. Parents from the Zero to Five Program have been employed in the community schools as teachers, teacher aides, custodians, cafeteria aides, and after-school assistant teachers.

The organizational structure of the Zero to Five Program requires shared decision making with parents – this is both a requirement for federal funding and consistent with CAS’s philosophy and approach in our Community Schools. We strongly believe that parent involvement is critical for a successful program. All parents are members of the Parents Committee, which elects a leadership group called the Policy Committee. The Policy Committee participates in decisions about the program. Through monthly classroom meetings held with each Head Start teacher, monthly Parents Committee meetings, and administrative meetings, parents become part of a collaborative leadership team.

The extensive parent involvement in the governance of the Zero to Five Program has served as a training ground for the Public School Parent Association at both PS 5 and PS 8. Consistently, upon graduating from the Zero to Five Program, parents serve as leaders in the Community School, meeting regularly with the school administration and organizing parent groups.

Staffing

Staffing is designed to provide comprehensive services to children and families. Staff members are bilingual and representative of the community; they have expertise and receive training in such specialized areas as education, special needs, health, nutrition, social service advocacy, and counseling. They receive ongoing training and supervision about their individual roles and responsibilities, and they find support in our team approach to addressing the needs of families.

The Children's Aid Society Zero to Five Program’s model for supervision supports a cohesive staff, encourages independence, develops individual talents, values new program ideas and ensures quality services. Supervision is consistent, reflective, individualized and established throughout the staff hierarchy. Supervision is primarily formally planned, however, because the program is so comprehensive, supervision does take place frequently on an informal basis. Staff respect the confidentiality of supervision, therefore, it is utilized as a time to resolve personal and programmatic concerns that are inhibiting productivity.

Summary

The Children’s Aid Society’s Zero to Five Program is comprised of the Children’s Aid Society Home Based Early Head Start Program, providing intensive integrated prevention and intervention services through a relationship based model to pregnant mothers and families living in poverty with children zero to three years old and the Children’s Aid Society center based Head Start Program, therefore, establishing a five



year commitment for children and families. The Programs are housed in the same Children's Aid Society Community School providing a transition from one program to another that is sensitive to individual family needs, sustains healthy relationships and is developmentally appropriate. The teamwork between the programs ensures a seamless transition from Early Head Start to Head Start, establishing a Zero to Five Program that assists children and families for the five years before they enter Kindergarten within the same Children's Aid Society Community School.

The Children's Aid Society's Zero to Five Program model is based on a fundamental belief that the loving connection between a parent and child is always ready to be expressed. Parents want what is best for their children and they will participate in a Program that requires a long term commitment when they are treated with respect and understanding and they realize their involvement encourages their child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. When parents witness their children experiencing joy, they in turn experience happiness. During playful and spontaneous interactions between parent and child a feeling of connection and pleasure is experienced. Parents and children build on the habits of interaction that occur during their joyful experiences with each other. For families living in poverty and limited resources it is essential that comprehensive and integrated social and educational services begin during pregnancy.