

# Beating the Odds



**C**riminal lifestyle, poor school work, high school dropout, no future. These are the choices society allows for children who are poor. But does it have to be that way?

Angela Taylor, associate professor of family studies at the University of Arizona, has found children who are "bouncing back" from the negative odds through the help of the social support system in the Head Start program.

Head Start was set up in 1965 under the Lyndon Johnson administration. The program began as a massive social experiment to break the cycle of poverty. Today, Head Start is a federally funded program designed to help 3- to 5-year-olds from low income families make a smooth transition to the elementary school setting.

Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes have problems with the "school social rules," Taylor said. Head Start helps these children with task orientation and school social skills which include being able to pay attention, raising their hands, getting what they want without aggression and staying put in their seats.

Taylor and co-collaborator Sandra Machida, professor of psychology at California State University, are conducting a three year "Child Resilience Project" study. Their focus is to learn how Head Start helps children make gains in terms of social competence.

"One of the things we are looking at in the study is the influence of parental involvement on the child's success in the preschool program," she said. "Particularly, we are looking at the level of participation that the parent or caregiver of the child exhibits in the program."

Parental involvement activities include volunteering in the classroom, coming regularly to parent meetings

that are scheduled and following through on learning activities at home that the staff may suggest.

Before the Tucson program was initiated, Taylor and Machida conducted an earlier study at several Head Start centers in Butte County, California. Their findings suggest this kind of parental involvement makes a difference for the child.

"One of the things traditionally emphasized in early education is providing ways for the parent to be involved. Head Start is attentive to this need in the classroom and it's one of the things that they try to work on," Taylor said.

In this current study, consisting of families in 18 Child-Parent Centers in Tucson, they will be focusing on different features of parent involvement.

"Sometimes, being in the classroom is not always feasible for the parent but there are other things that the parent could do at home, such as

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reading or looking at picture books with their children, which could be helpful to their success," Taylor said.

Taylor and Machida will also be studying the quality of the relationship between the parent and the teacher or other Head Start staff. Their study will encompass the aspects of how comfortable the parents are in talking with the teacher about their child and how responsive the teacher is to the concerns of the parent.

"We think the relationship between the parent and the teacher is likely to have an effect both on how much the parent will participate in the child's learning activities and how positive an outcome the child may have in the classroom," Taylor said.

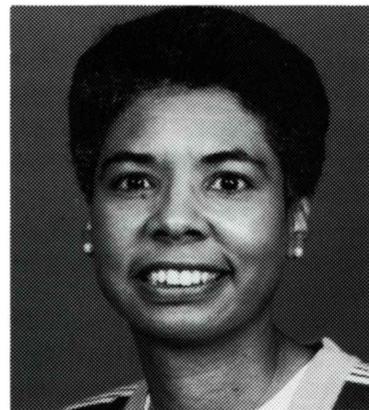
Taylor believes the parent-teacher relationship provides a comfortable environment for the child when there is a good connection with what happens at home and in the school setting. In the current sample of the Tucson centers, Taylor finds both parents and teachers need to feel the other is valuing what is being done in the home and in the classroom.

"Teachers need to feel what they're trying to do is being valued by the parents and parents need to feel what they're trying to do at home is being valued also," Taylor said. "They need to be able to communicate in a way that allows them to work together cooperatively."

"That's why we are examining interpersonal relationship patterns, but it is certainly not all that determines the child's success," Taylor said.

In the future, Taylor plans to study whether the effect of parental involvement differs depending on the ethnicity of a family or their culture.

Taylor and Machida will also examine the children's classroom friendships and whether or not they have an affect on the child's success in the preschool program and facilitate the transition into elementary school. ❖



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