



*Executive Summary*



# Head Start CARES for Migrant and Seasonal Families

Adapting a Preschool  
Social-Emotional Curriculum

OPRE Report 2014 43  
June 2014

# Head Start CARES for Migrant and Seasonal Families: Adapting a Preschool Social-Emotional Curriculum

OPRE Report 2014-43

June 2014

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Contract Number: HHSP23320072909YC

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Suggested citation: Fishman, Mike, and Jessica Wille (2014). *Head Start CARES for Migrant and Seasonal Families: Adapting a Preschool Social-Emotional Curriculum*. OPRE Report 2014-43. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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MDRC is conducting the Head Start CARES project and the dissemination of its findings under a contract with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), funded by HHS under a competitive award, Contract No. HHSP23320072909YC. The project officer is Ann Rivera.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following funders that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The Kresge Foundation, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and The Starr Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of HHS or the other funders listed above.

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## Acknowledgments

The Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) CARES (Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social-skill promotion) demonstration is made possible by the Office of Head Start and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). As the Head Start CARES program officers at OPRE, Ann Rivera and, during the early stages of the project, Lauren Supplee, supported by Melinda Leida and Wendy DeCoursey, provided wise guidance and vision at every step of the project. A special thank you goes to Sandra Carton from the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Division in the Office of Head Start for her vision in shaping the project. We also thank Naomi Goldstein, Mary Bruce Webb, and Christine Fortunato for their thoughtful review.

We are grateful to the program directors, teachers, coaches, and parents from the two participating MSHS grantees. They work tirelessly to deliver high-quality services that meet the needs of their communities, and they generously gave their time to help the MSHS CARES project team adapt Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) for use in MSHS settings and collect the data needed for the evaluation in the midst of their ongoing program operations.

We are also grateful to the developers of Preschool PATHS — Celene Domitrovich and Rebecca Cortes — for taking on the challenge of adapting PATHS for use in MSHS settings and their helpful insights throughout the project, including during the implementation of the program enhancements and professional development. We also thank Julia Gest and Rebecca Cortes for training and supporting the coaches.

Many thanks go to the team led by Alisu Schoua-Glusk for their careful translation of the adapted version of Preschool PATHS into Spanish under the guidance of Frieda Molina at MDRC and the PATHS developers.

We have also benefited from the involvement of many noted experts in the field of early-childhood education research, program evaluation, and social policy. We give special thanks to Sandra Barrueco for her thoughtful guidance during the full course of the project and to Cybele Raver for her helpful comments on the draft of the report. We also thank a broad group of experts and stakeholders who helped shape the project.

Many individuals at MDRC and MEF Associates contributed to the project. Thanks go to Frieda Molina and Hortencia Rodriguez from MDRC for their work as liaisons to the grantees; Hortencia Rodriguez and Ileri Valenzuela from MDRC and Asaph Glosser from MEF Associates for their field research; and Emily Snell, Electra Small, and Melinda Jackson

from MDRC for their assistance with the project's management information system. Our thanks go to our MDRC senior reviewers Gordon Berlin, Barbara Goldman, Virginia Knox, Frieda Molina, Chrishana Lloyd, Shira Mattera, and John Hutchins, who provided helpful input and review of the report drafts; Mike Bangser for his incredibly thoughtful and helpful edits and comments on the report draft; Mary Farrell and Asaph Glosser from MEF Associates for their edits and comments on the report draft; Pamela Morris for providing invaluable guidance on the project from start to finish; Alice Tufel for editing the report; and Carolyn Thomas for preparing the report for publication.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to the staff and parents of the two participating MSHS grantees, who gave us access to confidential information about themselves as part of the research effort. Without these individuals, this research would not have been possible.

The Authors

## Executive Summary

The early twenty-first century has seen increased attention to developing young children’s social-emotional skills and competencies in preschool programs, including Head Start — the largest federally funded early-childhood education program in the United States. At the same time, there has been greater recognition of the importance of adapting evidence-based programs to meet the needs of special populations such as the children and families of migrant and seasonal workers.<sup>1</sup> The Head Start CARES demonstration,<sup>2</sup> which evaluated three strategies that were designed to improve the social-emotional development of children in Head Start classrooms, provided an opportunity to study the adaptation and implementation of an existing evidence-based, social-emotional curriculum for such a population. The curriculum, called Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), was offered through the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program, which is operated across the country and is the subject of this report. The Head Start CARES demonstration was supported by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and was conducted by MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, in collaboration with MEF Associates and several academic partners.

The MSHS programs present structural, cultural, and language characteristics that make them quite different from regional Head Start programs that serve a more general population of low-income children and families. This study aimed to determine whether a social-emotional program model developed initially for other populations can be *adapted* and *implemented* to meet the specific needs of the MSHS population. Thus, the MSHS CARES case study was designed as a “sister” study to the overall Head Start CARES demonstration. Preschool PATHS was selected for adaptation from among the three strategies, or program “enhancements,” tested in Head Start CARES, based on a review of the needs of MSHS children, the attributes of

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<sup>1</sup>Gonzales et al. (n.d.); Steiker et al. (2008); Bernal, Bonilla, and Bellido (1995).

<sup>2</sup>CARES is an acronym for Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social-skill promotion. The Head Start CARES demonstration was conceived and sponsored by the Office of Head Start and the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The study included an impact evaluation using a research design in which Head Start centers were randomly assigned to a program group that implemented one of three social-emotional strategies, or “enhancements” to the Head Start program, or to a control group that conducted “business as usual.” The three models tested in Head Start CARES were The Incredible Years Teacher Training Program, Preschool PATHS, and Tools of the Mind. For more information on Head Start CARES, see Mattera, Lloyd, Fishman, and Bangser (2013).

PATHS, and the strong interest and experience of the PATHS developers who had prior experience adapting the curriculum for use in other countries.<sup>3</sup>

This case study describes methods for delivering social-emotional programs in MSHS settings, as well as features inherent in MSHS centers and the characteristics of the children in MSHS programs, that can inform adaptations of other program models to these settings. In addition, the lessons from this study are relevant to the considerable debate about how best to balance the competing demands of fidelity to the core components of an evidence-based model with the need to adapt the model for special populations or special circumstances.

Four classrooms from two MSHS grantees were involved in this case study. Both grantees enthusiastically participated in the project. The researchers collected information on program implementation from a variety of sources, including site visits and logs kept by teacher coaches and trainers (who were part of the program’s professional development component, described later), as well as interviews with program staff and parents. While the study does not test the *impact* of Preschool PATHS in the MSHS context — that is, the effect it has on children’s social-emotional outcomes — it provides a rich set of qualitative and quantitative information about the two grantees’ implementation experience. And, even though the sample is small and not representative of the broader MSHS grantee community, examining the experience of these two grantees is a first step in understanding how well such programs can be adapted to this context.

## **Migrant and Seasonal Head Start**

MSHS serves a large and diverse population across the country. Fifty-six MSHS grantees and delegate agencies currently serve 32,000 children across 38 states.<sup>4</sup> MSHS centers function differently from other Head Start centers because of the population they serve. For example, MSHS centers operate on schedules that accommodate the long work hours and varied duration of the local farming seasons, as well as fluctuating demand as families move in and out of the area for work. Thus, the MSHS day can extend up to 12 hours, programs can be conducted at different times of the year, and some programs can be as short as six weeks. As MSHS programs may have brief contact with the children, and as parents are such a strong source of

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<sup>3</sup>Preschool PATHS developers have implemented their curriculum for use in 18 different countries (SAMHSA, 2007)

<sup>4</sup>ACF (n.d.); NMSHSCO (2012). A grantee/delegate agency is the local public or private nonprofit agency that receives federal funding to operate Head Start programs.



support for the programs, a main goal of MSHS is to strengthen parents' involvement in supporting children's education and development.<sup>5</sup>

Since the majority of families participating in MSHS are Mexican immigrant farm-workers whose primary language is Spanish, MSHS classroom instruction is bilingual. In addition to the stresses of poverty, children in these programs are likely to face stressors associated with residing in substandard housing,<sup>6</sup> moving often from place to place, and living with the fear and uncertainty related to the immigration status of their family and friends.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the informal network of MSHS families can be quite strong, supported by large extended families and a sense of *familismo*, whereby the family system is of primary importance.<sup>8</sup>

## **MSHS Grantees Participating in the CARES Demonstration**

The evaluation plan for the MSHS CARES case study called for two MSHS grantees to participate; the grantees were chosen carefully to provide some geographic diversity as well as variation in the age of the children served and the core curricula. Variation in the duration of classroom operating periods, ranging from 10 weeks to 7 months, provided the opportunity to observe adaptation and implementation using a variety of diverse schedules that are common among MSHS grantees.

Selection criteria included program and leadership strength, geographic diversity, variation in program duration, classroom availability, and grantee willingness to participate. The Office of Head Start identified several grantees with a history of strong performance and management that they believed would be interested in participating in the study. The research team contacted those grantees and visited two that met the study's criteria and were enthusiastic about participation. Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) in Immokalee, Florida, and Stanislaus County Office of Education (SCOE) in California were selected for participation. RCMA was founded in 1965 and, as of 2014, provides Migrant and Seasonal Head Start services to 2,000 children annually across 16 counties. SCOE, which is the lead operating agency of the Central California Migrant Head Start program, has operated since 1973 and, as of 2014, is funded to serve 3,000 children annually in a seven-county region.

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<sup>5</sup>Boss (2000).

<sup>6</sup>Farmer and Slesinger (1992); Hansen and Donohoe (2003); Hernandez (2004); Barrueco and O'Brien (2011); Vallejos et al. (2011).

<sup>7</sup>Undocumented noncitizens who meet eligibility requirements can enroll their children in Head Start.

<sup>8</sup>Parra-Cardona et al. (2006); Ojeda and Piña-Watson (2013).

## Preschool PATHS

The Preschool PATHS program (PATHS) is an evidence-based, social-emotional learning “enhancement” that includes explicit lessons and teaching strategies designed to teach children about emotions and responses to peers in social interactions.<sup>9</sup> PATHS is built on research that focuses on the importance of “emotion knowledge” (the ability to identify and communicate about emotions), self-regulation, and problem-solving skills for children’s school-readiness and healthy development. Emotion knowledge helps children accurately interpret the social cues of others, and it lays the foundation for effective problem-solving. The primary focus of the PATHS intervention is to help children *develop and internalize social and emotional skills*. PATHS helps teachers create a supportive classroom environment and interact with their students in ways that help the children understand and apply the skills that they are taught in lessons. The key components of PATHS are summarized in Table ES.1.

MSHS CARES also includes a professional development component (described in more detail later) that consists of structured teacher training, follow-up weekly coaching in the classroom, and ongoing technical assistance.

Preschool PATHS was judged to be a good fit for MSHS CARES based on a review of the research on the needs of children in the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program, the attributes of the program enhancement, and the interests of the model’s program developers.

## Key Findings and Lessons

The findings and lessons from the MSHS experience are relevant not only for Head Start practice but also more generally for curriculum developers and practitioners interested in adapting other programs for use with special populations. Key data sources include notes from site visits and telephone calls to capture the grantees’ interactions with the curriculum developers; weekly and monthly online coach and trainer logs to capture the ongoing coaching process and fidelity of classroom implementation to the model; and site visits to conduct structured interviews with grantee administrative staff, coaches, and teachers. During these visits, the

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<sup>9</sup>At the time that the MSHS case study began, there had been one published randomized controlled trial of Preschool PATHS alone, one published randomized controlled trial of Preschool PATHS plus a literacy component (called REDI), and one published randomized controlled trial of Preschool PATHS plus a professional development component. The results suggested that PATHS led to improvements in direct assessments and teacher ratings of children’s social problem-solving, emotion knowledge, and behavior regulation. See Bierman et al. (2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2013); Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg (2007); Domitrovich et al. (2010); Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, and Downer (2012). More information about Preschool PATHS can be found at [www.pathstraining.com/main/curriculum/](http://www.pathstraining.com/main/curriculum/).

## Migrant and Seasonal Head Start CARES

Table ES.1

### Key Components of Preschool PATHS in Head Start CARES Classrooms

Component	Description
Weekly “circle time” lessons	Weekly lessons introduce feelings and PATHS strategies to the classroom. Puppets of the PATHS characters, stories, and illustrations are used to deliver the lessons.
“Kid of the Day”	Every day, teachers choose a child at random to be Kid of the Day. The class practices giving compliments to this child, which are compiled by the teachers and sent home to the child’s parents.
Extensions	A variety of extension activities are used to further incorporate the PATHS lessons into the classroom. These activities can be related to music, art, literacy, mathematics, etc.
The “Turtle” technique	“Doing Turtle” is presented to children as a way to stay in control when they are feeling strong emotions. It combines a gesture (crossing the arms), controlled breathing, and verbalizing emotions and issues. (“The problem is ___ and it makes me feel ___”)
FREE strategies	Teachers use these strategies to provide children with feedback and support to help them reflect on their behavior and self-correct. They are used as an alternative to direct commands when children exhibit mild forms of disruptive behavior.

SOURCES: Bierman et al. (2008a, 2008b); Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg (2007).

research team also had informal discussions with groups of parents from each of the four participating classrooms.

#### Preschool PATHS Adaptation

- **The Preschool PATHS developers led the adaptation process. Together with input from stakeholders, they maintained the core theory and integrity of the enhancement while responding to the particular needs of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs and the families they serve.**

The PATHS developers led an iterative process of stakeholder input followed by program adaptation and additional stakeholder review. This process lasted about one year, including initial meetings with experts and stakeholders — researchers from academia and private firms, MSHS practitioners and administrators, foundation representatives, and MSHS training

and technical assistance providers, as well as representatives from ACF and the Office of Head Start. Initial consultations were followed by six months of active adaptation by the program developers, and time for translation of materials from English to Spanish. The resulting PATHS adaptation appeared to balance fidelity to the original PATHS model with sensitivity to the unique needs and circumstances of MSHS programs. The adaptation process resulted in structural, cultural, and language adaptations, as described later in this section.

- **The direct and focused involvement of the implementing grantees provided valuable input for the program developers throughout the adaptation process and built grantee buy-in.**

The staff of the grantees provided very direct and specific input to the adaptation process. They described their circumstances; explained their yearly and daily schedules; reviewed lessons, stories, and illustrations; and reviewed the parent workshops (described below). This input helped the developers tailor PATHS changes to address the grantees' specific needs. It also promoted strong support by local leadership and teachers for program implementation.

- **Structural adaptations supported implementation in the varying time frames of MSHS programs and took into account the inclusion of children from 3 to 5 years of age in the classrooms.**

Developers adjusted the enhancement to facilitate PATHS delivery in program durations of 10 weeks, 5 months, and 7 months. This restructuring preserved core lessons on key strategies and basic emotions, and included a selection of "enriching" lessons about more complex emotions that are considered most relevant to the community. Alternative guidelines for pacing the program increased implementation from one lesson per week to at least two lessons per week, enabling teachers to cover the adapted content in the allotted time. An extended daily instruction period in MSHS classrooms made this increase possible. PATHS is targeted primarily to 4-year-old children. The program developers provided developmental notes for teachers and alternative "transition points" (points of transition from one classroom activity to another) in the enhancement to support the generally lower developmental levels of 3-year-old children compared with older children in the classroom.

- **Cultural adaptations focused on the selection of lessons of particular relevance to MSHS children.**

The lessons adapted from the existing PATHS curriculum focused on emotions such as being *calm and relaxed*, *caring*, *tired*, *frustrated*, and *proud*. In addition, new stories ("Tomás Is Moving" and "Tomás Feels Worried") were developed for teachers to address other relevant emotions, such as *worried*, *lonely*, and *safe*.

- **The Preschool PATHS adaptation used parent education sessions to emphasize a connection with families.**

A major adaptation involved creating parent education sessions to expose parents to the PATHS content that their children received in the classroom. While parent involvement is a key component of Head Start overall, the multiple stakeholders reported that the MSHS community believes that it is an especially critical aspect of their programs. Three parent workshops were designed to provide opportunities for parents to learn about and practice the core theories and components of PATHS (talking about feelings, supporting your child's effort, and talking with your child about emotions). Each session covered a particular theme in parent-child interactions, followed by an explanation and demonstration of a PATHS lesson. Parents received small games and descriptions of activities to play with their children at home, with the aim of reinforcing the concepts covered during the sessions.

- **All Preschool PATHS materials were translated into Spanish, including notes and lesson preparations for teachers and for the parent workshops.**

Translation was a critical component of the adaptation process, as MSHS classes are taught bilingually. A rigorous method produced a version appropriate for preschool children and their parents. The translation took into account the national origins and low literacy rates of the MSHS population. As a result, translators used Spanish words and idioms that are common in Mexico as opposed to other Spanish-speaking countries,<sup>10</sup> and selected the simplest Spanish words when an English word could be translated in multiple ways. Maintaining the meaning of the initial PATHS curriculum was challenging, primarily because of lexical and syntactical differences between English and Spanish.

### **Implementation Experience**

- **Implementation of Preschool PATHS was supported by a structured professional development and technical assistance effort that was well implemented in the MSHS grantees' classrooms.**

The professional development and technical assistance effort used with MSHS grantees was based on the model that had been implemented for the larger Head Start CARES study and included both training and coaching. Experienced PATHS trainers provided two training sessions (three days total) for teachers and coaches for each grantee. The training was delivered as planned, well attended, and highly rated for both grantees. In addition, the PATHS trainers and the MSHS CARES research team provided technical assistance to the grantees. Coaches

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<sup>10</sup>The grantees participating in MSHS CARES served primarily Mexican families.

generally spent at least an hour per week in each classroom and then met with teaching staff for at least 30 minutes. Coach quality, as rated by the PATHS trainers, was moderately high — 3.9 on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).

- **Participants reported that the strong professional development model — including teacher training, weekly coaching, and ongoing technical assistance — was essential to the implementation of Preschool PATHS in the MSHS classrooms.**

Grantee managers (directors, MSHS education coordinators, and MSHS center directors) and teachers reported that the training and coaching gave them the tools they needed to implement PATHS. Further, grantee managers indicated that they would need a similar approach to professional development if they were to implement the enhancement more broadly in their programs. This is similar to the experience in the larger Head Start CARES study and further reinforces the importance of ongoing training and coaching for implementing changes in teacher practice.

- **Sensitivity to language and cultural fit were important to delivering the enhancement and coaching in the bilingual, bicultural MSHS settings.**

Training sessions were delivered in English, and trainers were not fluent Spanish speakers. Overall, teachers understood and participated in the training in English with little difficulty, even though the level of English fluency varied among the teachers. However, while two of the three coaches were native Spanish-speakers, the one coach who was not fluent in Spanish faced challenges. These challenges included difficulties in observing Preschool PATHS lessons that were conducted in Spanish and discussing abstract concepts during coaching sessions. However, teachers and grantee management staff were satisfied with this coach's performance. Although trainers, coaches, and teachers might be able to surmount language barriers and cultural differences, the MSHS CARES experience suggests that it is preferable to use trainers and coaches whose language and cultural backgrounds match those of the population served.

- **Implementation of Preschool PATHS went well in all the classrooms; however, challenges that were encountered in the 10-week intervention suggest that the quality of instruction was compromised by this shorter schedule.**

Despite varying program durations, teachers were able to incorporate PATHS into their regular classroom schedules and deliver the curriculum as planned. The teachers found the Spanish translation and the side-by-side presentation of lesson plans in both Spanish and English to be effective. The 10-week program schedule proved to be the most challenging one

to accommodate. Despite a very strong and motivated teacher who delivered all the lessons, there were fewer opportunities for review and reinforcement of the concepts, and children may not have had adequate time to internalize the concepts. All involved believed that the quality of instruction was compromised by the limited classroom time. Ten weeks may not be enough time to implement the curriculum, unless additional adaptations can be made to reduce the content without compromising the integrity of the program.

- **Both grantees felt the adapted version of Preschool PATHS met the needs of their Migrant and Seasonal Head Start classrooms.**

Teachers had positive impressions of PATHS and reported that it made a difference in their classrooms. Teachers particularly appreciated the well-specified lessons and structure of PATHS, as well as its flexibility. Despite the relatively short time period (compared with a traditional school year of approximately nine months) for implementation, staff said they saw changes in children's behavior and peer interactions. They said they perceived increased self-regulation among the children, as well as increased empathy with their peers and teachers. They also reported a positive effect on their own classroom management. While this is encouraging, these staff perceptions do not constitute rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of PATHS.

- **Adding a parent component to Preschool PATHS was very important to the MSHS community.**

Both grantees implemented the parent education workshops using the materials that PATHS developed. Parent workshops for both grantees were conducted in Spanish, and presenters found the translation to be effective. Grantees considered the parent workshops to be of great value and gave high ratings for parent engagement and receptiveness across sessions. Grantees reported that there was a "hunger" in their community for discussions about feelings, and noted that when parents are included in what goes on in the classroom, they can then follow up with their children at home. Given the important role of parents in Head Start and other preschool programs, a similar component might be a valuable addition to the core PATHS program.

- **Parents from both grantees had a very positive impression of Preschool PATHS.**

Parents greatly appreciated the opportunity their children had to participate in PATHS, and they cited numerous examples of positive changes in behavior that they attributed to the program. Many parents were aware of Tomás and other characters that appear in PATHS stories from their children, who in some cases could bring home a puppet when they were selected "Kid of the Day" (a daily PATHS component in which a child is selected for a special job and

receives compliments from the teacher and the other children). Some parents reported that their children were more attuned to their feelings and used PATHS strategies at home.

## **Conclusions**

This study offers insights about the experience of program developers, grantee management staff, coaches, teachers, and parents in adapting and implementing the Preschool PATHS social-emotional enhancement in MSHS classrooms. The adaptation and implementation both benefited from enthusiastic developers and local program directors, MSHS education coordinators, MSHS center directors, and teachers who took the opportunity to participate, working in collaboration to make structural, cultural, and language adaptations. Together, they implemented a comprehensive professional development model designed to support the delivery of PATHS in the classroom. Implementation of the program in the classroom and of the parent workshops went well, and the program staff and parents viewed the program positively. However, all parties agreed that the program, as adapted, included too much material for implementation in 10 weeks.

The MSHS CARES experience suggests that program adaptations can account for important cultural differences, while staying true to the core principles and components of evidence-based interventions. Although significant adaptations were made to Preschool PATHS, teachers and children appeared to respond to the intervention in MSHS settings much as they did in other Head Start programs. This case study found similar patterns as the main Head Start CARES study did in the way teachers integrated PATHS into their classrooms, as well as in teachers' reports of how the program affected classroom management and children's social-emotional development.

Many of the Preschool PATHS adaptations appear to be applicable to the broader Head Start community. Since regular Head Start programs are serving an increasing number of 3-year-olds, efforts to shorten lessons and stories, to build clear steps to help children make the transition from one classroom activity to another, and to include developmental notes for teachers could be helpful in other Head Start classrooms. The translation of PATHS into Spanish was crucial for the MSHS program in this study, and many other Head Start classrooms that serve Spanish-speaking children might likewise benefit from a Spanish version of PATHS. The inclusion of parent workshops, such as those implemented in this project, would be beneficial to other Head Start programs as well.

MSHS CARES generated a strong partnership among local program operators, Preschool PATHS developers, and researchers working collaboratively to identify and incorporate key adaptations into PATHS, to implement the program in the classroom, and to reflect on their collective experience. This partnership was key to the program's successful implementation.



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## **Earlier Publications on Head Start CARES**

*A First Look at the Head Start CARES Demonstration*

*Large-Scale Implementation of Programs to Improve Children's Social-Emotional Competence*

2013. Shira Kolnik Mattera, Chrishana M. Lloyd, Mike Fishman, Michael Bangser.

*Coaching as a Key Component in Teachers' Professional Development*

*Improving Classroom Practices in Head Start Settings*

2012. Chrishana M. Lloyd, Emily L. Modlin.

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