

Boosting Early Literacy Through Enhanced Head Start Programs: The Role of Attendance and Home Environments



Cara L. Kelly, Melissa Acton, & Kathleen C. Gallagher
Early Childhood Education Institute, University of Oklahoma

Introduction

Early literacy development is foundational to long-term academic success (Suggate et al., 2018). Both high-quality early education and family engagement play critical roles in shaping children’s outcomes (Horm et al., 2022; Jeon et al., 2020). With a dual focus on high-quality classroom instruction and strong family partnerships, enhanced Head Start programs aim to close the opportunity gap and promote school readiness.

Research Questions

Our study explores how consistent attendance at enhanced Head Start programs and literacy-related activities in the home contribute to infants’ and toddlers’ early literacy skills. Specifically, we ask:

- How have attendance rates changed in enhanced Head Start programs between 2021 to 2025?
- How do home literacy practices relate to children’s literacy outcomes?

Sample

To answer our first research question, we analyzed attendance data from all children enrolled in enhanced Head Start programs across four program years:

- 2021-2022: $n = 703$
- 2022-2023: $n = 725$
- 2023-2024: $n = 705$
- 2024-2025: $n = 682$

To address our second research question, we focused on:

- **444 infants and toddlers** enrolled in enhanced Head Start during the 2024-2025 program year
- **419 families** who completed the Fall 2024 parent interview

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge our community partners, teachers, children, and families for their valuable participation in this study.

Methods

Measures

- *Attendance*: We created a composite attendance variable based on each child’s individual attendance records for each program year (2021-2025).
- *Home Literacy Practices*: During the Fall 2024 parent interview, families were asked how many times someone in their family read their child a story. Options included 0, 1-2, 3-5, and 6-7 times/week.
- *Pre-Literacy Skills*: Teachers completed the Infant-Toddler Literacy Assessment (ITLA; Jackson et al., 2022) in Fall 2024. We used the Print/Book Awareness scale, which assesses children’s ability to attend to books during shared reading and derive meaning from print and illustrations.

Analytic Plan

To address research question 1, we conducted descriptive analyses to examine attendance frequency across the 2021-2025 program years.

To address research question 2, we restricted the sample to infants and toddlers with complete data on home literacy practices and pre-literacy skills. We ran an OLS regression with robust standard errors to examine the relationship between home literacy practices and early literacy outcomes.

Findings

Research Question 1

- Attendance rates in enhanced Head Start programs have steadily increased across four program years (2021-2025).

Research Question 2

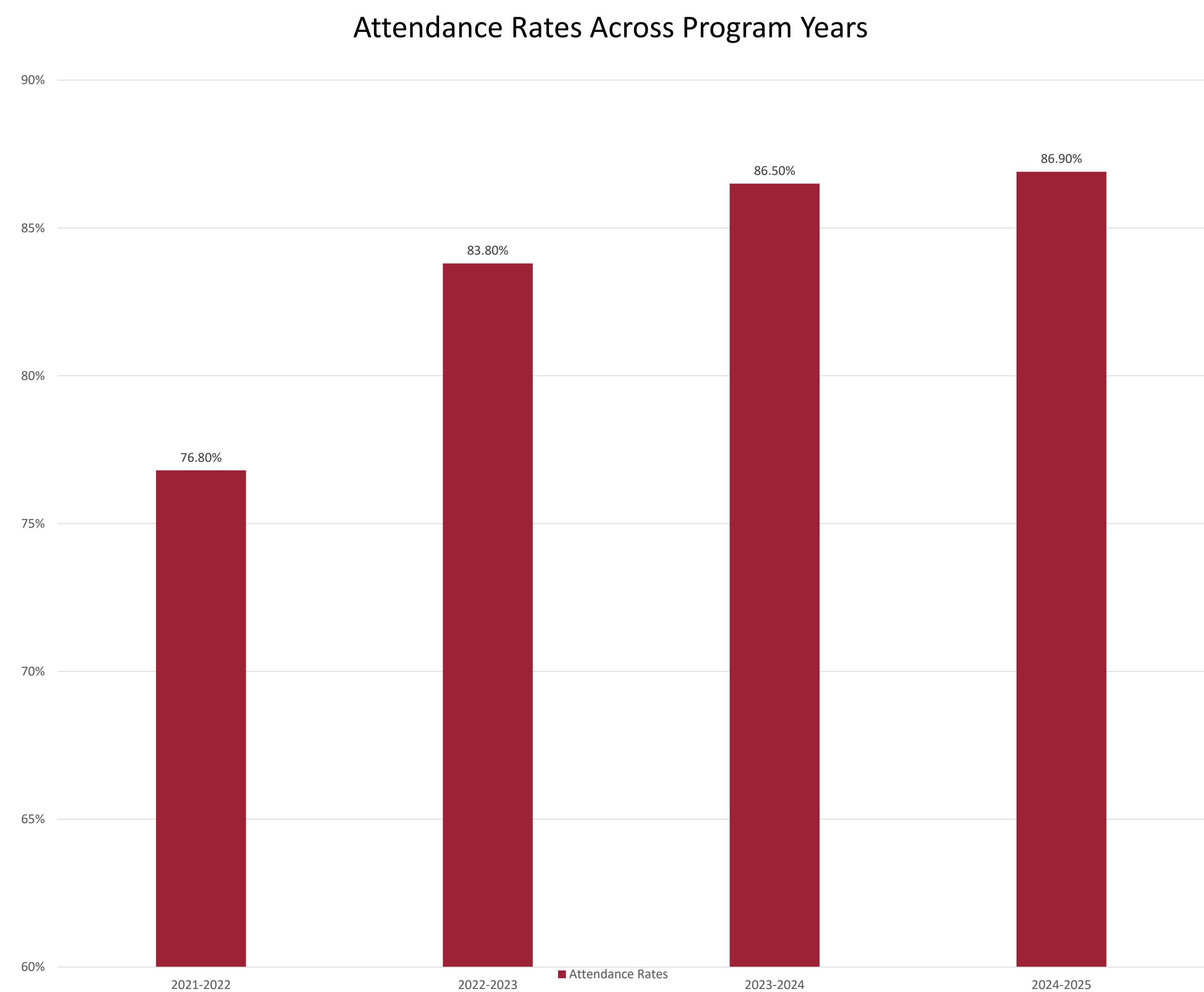
- Children whose parents reported more frequent shared reading demonstrated higher pre-literacy skills on the ITLA Print/Book Awareness scale ($p < .05$).

Conclusion & Implications

Our findings underscore the importance of family engagement and regular attendance in early care and education. Implications for policy include promoting strategies to foster family involvement and reduce barriers to consistent participation.

Results

Research Question 1



Research Question 2

