



Preparing for Success: How Head Start Helps Children with Disabilities and Their Families

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Having a child with disabilities is not easy. Since enrolling in Head Start, I have received the best possible care for my child. They are very supportive in helping get the services that I need to help my child succeed. Head Start is always there when I need someone to talk to or when I need some help for my child. Since my child has been in Head Start, his doctors can't believe the progress that he has made. No one ever thought that it would be possible for him to get where he is now. We owe it all to Head Start.

Head Start parent from Evansdale, Iowa

In 2004, 13 percent of the children in Head Start and Early Head Start² (more than 134,000 children) were diagnosed with a disability; the great majority of these children received special education and related services to address their disabilities.³ Both the Head Start Act and the federal Head Start performance standards require comprehensive services for these children and their families to help the children become ready for school. Without Head Start, some of these children might have gone undiagnosed, leaving their disabilities unaddressed for years, and producing hardship for them and their families and higher special education costs for school districts. Any Head Start reauthorization proposal should retain these comprehensive service requirements to build upon the important gains for children with disabilities already achieved.

Local Head Start grantees work in conjunction with other service providers and state and local government agencies to deliver comprehensive early education, health, and other social services to all enrolled children and their families. These services are aimed at addressing the wide range of abilities, experiences, and learning styles of the children Head Start serves. Through the process of determining the appropriate mix of services for each child, Head Start providers can identify young children as having disabilities, support the needs of children with diagnosed disabilities, and provide services to children at risk of developing a disability. In fact, entrance into Head Start can provide the first opportunity for a child's disability or developmental delay to be identified and/or addressed before the child enters school.

The following memo details the requirements that Head Start grantees must meet to serve children with disabilities and provides data on how the programs are meeting them.

Head Start Requires Outreach and Comprehensive, Inclusive Services for Children with Disabilities

The Head Start Act and the federal Head Start Performance Standards require local Head Start grantees to seek out young children with disabilities and provide comprehensive educational, medical, and social services to them and their families. Head Start grantees use the following strategies for addressing comprehensively the needs of children with disabilities: outreach; collaboration and coordination with other educational, health, and social service agencies; provision of comprehensive services to children and families; and training and technical assistance to providers.

The Head Start Act and the federal Head Start Performance Standards require grantees to seek out children with disabilities or who are at risk of developing disabilities in order to provide them with Head Start services.

- The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) must establish policies and procedures to ensure that no less than 10 percent of each grantee's enrolled children are children with disabilities.⁴
- Head Start grantees must incorporate into their general outreach and recruitment activities efforts to identify and enroll eligible children with disabilities through contacts with local education agencies, medical and social service providers, and community-based organizations that serve children with disabilities.⁵ Recruitment efforts must include children with severe disabilities, including children who have already been identified as having disabilities.⁶
- Staff engaged in recruitment of children must be knowledgeable about the laws and regulations prohibiting discrimination against children with disabilities, including the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (which bars discrimination by recipients of federal funds).⁷
- Children with disabilities cannot be denied placement in a program if space is available and the program can serve the child by drawing upon other resources.⁸

The Head Start Act and the federal Head Start Performance Standards require grantees to collaborate and coordinate with other educational, health, and social service agencies in their delivery of services to children with disabilities.

- **State level:** A Head Start representative in each state is required to participate on the State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) established by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The SICC's purpose is to give advice to programs within state early intervention and education systems regarding the delivery of appropriate services to children between the ages of birth and five who live in the state.⁹
- **Local program level:** Collaboration should focus on the needs of each child with a disability. Children with disabilities may either receive all their specialized services at the Head Start program from Head Start personnel or in partnership with other providers in the community:
 - Head Start programs must establish formal linkages and coordinate programmatic efforts with the IDEA agencies administering the Section 619 Pre-School Program and the Part C Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers.¹⁰
 - In many communities, Head Start and local educational, health, or social service agencies share personnel who provide specialized services to Head Start children with disabilities.

- Each Head Start grantee is required to have a disability services coordinator who works with a variety of agencies and providers to coordinate the personnel and processes of eligibility determination and service delivery for Head Start children who are suspected of having, who are at risk of, or who are diagnosed with disabilities. The disability services coordinator assists in developing interagency agreements so that all needed services have an appropriate funding stream and that services to children are not delayed.¹¹ Along with other staff, the disability services coordinator works with the parents of children with disabilities to help them better support their children's development.¹²

The Head Start Act and the federal Head Start Performance Standards require local grantees to provide comprehensive services that assess and address the needs of children with disabilities and their families.

- Head Start agencies must coordinate their definitions, assessment criteria and processes, and services with those of the IDEA Section 619 Pre-School or Part C Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers programs.¹³
- If Head Start staff believe that a child has a disability, they must screen the child to determine whether a full evaluation is warranted.¹⁴
- If a child requires a comprehensive evaluation, it should be conducted in partnership with the local lead agency for the IDEA Part C program (for Early Head Start infants or toddlers) or the local school district's coordinator for the IDEA Section 619 program (for Head Start pre-schoolers), and the child's parents.¹⁵
- Once a child is diagnosed with a disability and determined to be in need of special education and related services or early intervention services, the child must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)—or, if the child is in Early Head Start, an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP). The IEP or IFSP development process involves the parent and either the Head Start program or IDEA agency. The IEP or IFSP assesses a child's level of functioning, provides goals and objectives for the child to meet, and details the specific services that the Head Start or Early Head Start program will provide to address the child's disability.¹⁶
- If the child meets the IDEA Section 619 or Part C eligibility requirement, the IDEA agency supports the child's education and related services (for pre-schoolers in Head Start) or early intervention services (for infants and toddlers in Early Head Start). If a parent wishes his or her child to remain in Head Start, either Head Start staff or other service providers can provide the services.¹⁷
- When a child is not eligible for IDEA-funded early childhood services but still requires specialized services, the Head Start grantee monitors the child's progress and provides supportive services to facilitate the child's development. Head Start programs can use Head Start funds to pay for the following special education and related services for children with disabilities who are not eligible for IDEA-funded services: audiology services; physical and occupational therapy; speech or language services, including therapy and assistive devices; psychological services; transportation for children with disabilities to and from the program to clinics or other service providers; and assistive technology services or devices to help children improve their functioning to meet their IFSP or IEP objectives.¹⁸

The Head Start Act and the federal Head Start Performance Standards require training of service providers to address effectively the educational and other needs of children with disabilities, as well as technical assistance to assure ongoing effective service.

- Special education and related services for Head Start children with disabilities must be provided by or under the supervision of personnel meeting state-defined qualifications.¹⁹
- Programs must provide training to all Head Start teachers on how to modify their teaching activities to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Special training is required for personnel in programs that have enrolled children whose disabilities require specific skills or knowledge to address.²⁰
- The Head Start Act calls for training and technical assistance to be offered to all Head Start programs about caring for children with disabilities.²¹ Over the past six years, this training and technical assistance has been provided through Disability Quality Improvement Centers located in each federal regional office.

Head Start Grantees Are Exceeding These Requirements

Head Start grantees go above and beyond the requirement that no less than 10 percent of the children they serve are children with disabilities, and they are responding to the needs of children with all types of disabilities. In 2004, 13 percent of Head Start's enrolled children had disabilities; the number of enrolled children with disabilities has increased by more than 17,000 children since 1997.²² The most common disability identified in Head Start children in 2002 was speech and language impairments. However, Head Start grantees are serving children with all types of disabilities, including children with multiple disabilities, autism, orthopedic impairments, mental retardation, learning disabilities, vision impairments, hearing impairments, traumatic brain injury, and developmental delays. In 2002, the great majority of children identified with a disability (93 percent) received special education and related services through Head Start.²³

Conclusion: Head Start Should Retain These Comprehensive Requirements for Children with Disabilities

Head Start programs provide critical comprehensive services for young children with or at risk of developing disabilities. Both the Head Start Act and federal Head Start performance standards require a mix of outreach, early child assessments, and evaluations, followed by comprehensive educational, medical, and social services provided in an inclusive, integrated environment. This mix of services, in turn, helps to address the needs of children with disabilities and their families while helping prepare children for school. It is critical that any Head Start reauthorization proposal retain the protections and services the federal Head Start performance standards require for children with disabilities and their families, as well as the inclusive programming that benefits children with and without disabilities.

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² In this piece, “Head Start” refers to both Head Start and Early Head Start unless otherwise indicated.

³ Center for Law and Social Policy calculations of 2004 PIR data.

⁴ Head Start Act, Section 640(d).

⁵ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.5(a); Guidance to Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart C.

⁶ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.5(f).

⁷ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.5(b).

⁸ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.5(c)-(d).

⁹ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Sections 641(b)(1)(H), (e).

¹⁰ Head Start Act, Sections 640(d), 645 A(b)(8). State educational agencies receive funding through Section 619 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to fund special education and related services to preschool-aged children with disabilities. A child between the ages of three and five is eligible for Section 619 services if he or she has a disability and needs special education and related services. States have the discretion to also provide IDEA - funded pre-school services to children experiencing developmental delays (even if they do not have a specific diagnosis of a disability) and who need special education and related services. IDEA’s Part C program supports developmental services for infants and toddlers, up to age three, and their families. Young children and their families are eligible for Part C services if the child is under the age of three and experiences developmental delays in one or more areas of development or has a diagnosed physical or mental condition that has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay. States also have the option of providing Part C-funded services to children at risk of developmental delay.

¹¹ Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart B.

¹² Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.21; Guidance to Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart G.

¹³ Head Start Performance Standards, Part 1308, Sections 1304.20(f)(2)(ii), 1304.21(a)(1)(ii).

¹⁴ Head Start Performance Standards, Sections 1308.6(b), (d).

¹⁵ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1038.6(e).

¹⁶ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.19; Guidance to Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart B. The IEP and IFSP must also identify the personnel responsible for providing the services, provide the date of initiation of the services and their duration, detail objective criteria and evaluation procedures for measuring achievement, and discuss family goals and objectives if they are related to the child’s disability and when these goals and objectives are essential to the child’s progress.

¹⁷ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.4; Guidance to Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart B.

¹⁸ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.4(h).

¹⁹ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.4(k).

²⁰ Head Start Performance Standards, Section 1308.4(k); Guidance to Head Start Performance Standards, Subpart B.

²¹ Head Start Act, Section 648.

²² Schumacher & Irish, 2003; Schumacher, R., & Rakpraja, T. (2003). *Head Start Program Information Report Data for 1997 and 2001 Program Years: Head Start Children*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

²³ Schumacher & Irish, 2003.