The Family Services Manager’s Handbook

A Head Start Training Guide from
Training & Technical Assistance Services
Western Kentucky University
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Family Services in Head Start

The Head Start Experience

Many people see Head Start only as an educational experience for children. Although Head Start is proud of its education component, its services are much more comprehensive. The Head Start program includes health, education, parent involvement and education, family services, and community partnerships. Such comprehensive services are designed to meet the needs of children in the context of the family. With these services, Head Start maximizes the strengths and influences the development of each child and family.

Traditional assumptions about parent involvement see parents as outside of the main program. In contrast, Head Start accepts and expects parents to be key players in the program. From the day Head Start staff recruit children, they expect families to be involved. Encouraging and facilitating family involvement is a mandated responsibility of each Head Start staff member.

Parents are welcomed, not only as participants, but also as decision makers. Parents help decide what type of services to provide, where centers will be located, and who will be hired and terminated. Unlike programs that respond to parents as a group, Head Start provides individualized attention to meet the needs of each family. Head Start operates on the premise that family needs must be assessed and appropriate services provided if low-income children are to be served properly. With this family support, the program empowers parents as the primary educators of their children.

Head Start believes that collaboration with other service providers and community programs is essential to providing quality services. The many interagency collaborative agreements work to strengthen Head Start services and ensure the community can meet the needs of low-income children and families.

Head Start identifies with the communities it serves. Frequently, Head Start teachers, teacher aides, parent involvement staff, and family service workers are members of the community. Staff from the community are of inestimable value because they represent the program to eligible families and the
families to other program staff. Locally designed options and innovations allow programs to respond to special community needs and to deliver services in centers and homes.

Every Head Start program must have a Family Services manager. This important staff member does much to assure that the mandates regarding family involvement, family education and family support are assigned to specific staff members and that there is two-way communication between staff and parents which build relationships and facilitate family development. Thus, the process of involving families becomes more than just talk.

What lessons have been learned from the Head Start experience of the past 45 years? Head Start works because of the comprehensive services it provides to children and families. Head Start knows that a healthy family is a child’s best and most important resource.

This digest was adapted from an article titled, *Head Start Works! Two Head Start Veterans Share Their Views*, which appeared in Vol. 45, No. 6 (September, 1990) of *Young Children* (pages 36-39; Nancy J. Mallory and Nancy A. Gold.)

**Head Start Program Goals**

Head Start and Early Head Start are comprehensive child development programs, which serve children from birth to age five, pregnant women, and their families. The purpose of Head Start is to promote the school readiness of low-income children by enhancing their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development:

(1) In a learning environment that supports children’s growth in language, literacy, mathematics, science, social and emotional functioning, creative arts, physical skills, and approaches to learning, and

(2) Through the provision of health, educational, social, and other services to low-income children and their families that are determined to be necessary based on family assessments.

Head Start services are also family-centered, following the belief that children develop in the context of their family and culture and parents are respected as the primary educators and nurturers of children. Head Start offers family members opportunities and support for growth and change, believing that people can identify their own strengths, needs, and interests and are capable of finding solutions.

To support the overall goal, Head Start embraces a core set of values, including commitments to:

- Establish a supportive learning environment for children, parents, families and staff, in which the processes of enhancing awareness, refining skills, and increasing understanding are valued and promoted;
- Recognize that the members of the Head Start community – children, families, and staff – have roots in many cultures. Head Start families and staff, working together as a team, can effectively promote respectful, sensitive, and proactive approaches to diversity issues;
- Understand that the empowerment of families occurs when program governance is a responsibility shared by families, governing bodies, and staff, and when the ideas and opinions of families are heard.
and respected;

- Embrace a comprehensive vision of health for children, families, and staff, which assures that basic health needs are met, that encourages practices that prevent future illnesses and injuries, and promotes positive, culturally relevant health behaviors to enhance life-long well-being;

- Respect the importance of all aspects of an individual’s development, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth;

- Build a community in which each child and adult is treated as an individual while, at the same time, a sense of belonging to the group is reinforced;

- Foster relationships with the larger community, so that families and staff are respected and served by a network of community agencies in partnership with one another; and

- Develop a continuum of care, education, and services that allow stable, uninterrupted support to families and children during and after their Head Start experience.

The Head Start program has a long tradition of delivering comprehensive and high quality services designed to foster healthy development in low-income children. Head Start grantee and delegate agencies provide a range of individualized services in the areas of early childhood development, medical, dental, and mental health, nutrition, family involvement, family education, and family support. In addition, the entire range of Head Start services are responsive and appropriate to each child and family’s developmental, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage and experience.

Head Start fosters the role of parents as the primary educators, nurturers, and advocates for their children. Therefore, local Head Start programs work in close partnership with parents to assist them in developing and utilizing individual and family strengths in order to successfully meet personal and family objectives. Parents are encouraged to become involved in all aspects of the program, from participation in children’s activities to direct involvement in policy and program decisions.

Head Start is committed to cultivating partnerships within the community. Through the establishment of meaningful links with community organizations and programs focused upon early childhood development, family support, health, and education, each Head Start agency ensures that children and families receive an array of individualized services, and that community resources are used in an efficient and effective manner.

Head Start strives for excellence in program management that supports the provision of quality services for children and families. Policy groups, representative of Head Start parents and the larger community, and strong governing bodies play a critical role in overseeing the implementation of Head Start legislation, regulations, and polices. To achieve national excellence, local agencies are required to establish effective systems and procedures for program, financial, and human resources management. Additionally, a strong focus on staff training and development helps to ensure that children and families are served by individuals with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to provide high quality, comprehensive services.
Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs

Effective Head Start programming requires understanding, respect, and responsiveness to the cultures of all people, but particularly to those of enrolled children and families. Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has recognized the importance of nurturing the self-esteem of each child and family in the program. The Head Start Program Performance Standards stress the importance of enhancing the sense of dignity and self-worth of each child and his or her family. Head Start grantees seek to develop approaches that support this humanizing goal.

Children and their families come to Head Start rooted in a culture that gives them meaning and direction. The same statement is true of the staff and administrators who work in Head Start programs. This culture is a set of rules that governs their world, organizes their physical and social interactions, and shapes their understanding and perceptions of behavior and ideas. This world is a milieu, a context, in which people actively live, develop, and interact. Head Start staff need to understand culture as functioning through their own basic core beliefs and values. Because the child's culture and family provide the foundation upon which the child's social competence develops, Head Start staff must be sensitive to the role culture plays in child development.

Our hope is for each Head Start child to become a world citizen through multicultural programming. For each parent and each staff member to grow is also our goal. The Head Start program goals are the foundation for this set of principles. These principles were developed to guide Head Start grantees in meeting these goals.

The Head Start program is based on the premise that all children share certain needs, and that children of low-income families, in particular, can benefit from a comprehensive developmental program to meet those needs. The Head Start program approach is based on the philosophy that:

- A child can benefit most from a comprehensive, interdisciplinary program to foster development and remedy problems as expressed in a broad range of services.
- The child's entire family, as well as the community, must be involved. The program should maximize the strengths and unique experiences of each child. The family, which is perceived as the principal influence on the child's development, must be a direct participant in the program. Local communities are allowed latitude in developing creative program designs so long as the basic goals, objectives, and standards of a comprehensive program are adhered to.
- The overall goal of the Head Start program is to bring about a greater degree of social competence in children of low-income families. Social competence means the child's everyday effectiveness.