

Home-Based Head Start/Early Head Start: The Right Choice?

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One of the defining strengths of Head Start is that grantees can carefully evaluate and decide upon the strategy by which Head Start services will be delivered. Grantees have the choice of center-based, family child care homes, home-based, or a combination model to deliver Head Start/Early Head Start services. Being responsive to the needs of families is a hallmark of quality programs: *"Does the program option we are using meet the needs of our families?"* This is the important question asked during the annual self assessment and strategic planning sessions.

Of the approximately 3,000 Head Start and Early Head Start grantees nationwide, about 700 provide all or part of their services to children and families using the home-based program option. The *2007 Head Start for School Readiness Act* defines home-based Head Start as: "...a Head Start program that provides Head Start services in the private residence of the child receiving such services." (Sec. 637 (10)). The Head Start Performance Standards define the purpose of the home visit:

1. ... to help parents improve their parenting skills and to assist them in the use of the home as the child's primary learning environment. The home visitor must work with parents to help them provide learning opportunities that enhance their child's growth and development.
2. Home visits must, over the course of a month, contain elements of all Head Start program components. The home visitor is the person responsible for introducing, arranging, and/or providing Head Start services. (CFR 1306.33)

The first assessment that has to be made before choosing the home-based option is to evaluate the needs of the families and community to be served: ***Is this service delivery model right for our families?***

Many families benefit from participation in the home-based option, including the following:

- families who for personal, cultural or religious reasons do not wish, or need, to send their children to a center-based situation;
- families who have already made child care arrangements for the parts of the day, when they are at work or at school, but who still are in need of the strong comprehensive services that a Head Start/Early Head Start enrollment will provide;
- families that are socially isolated (geographically or by language or culture), and for whom the regular contact of a home visitor will provide social interaction and relief from that isolation.

Parents need to make the choice for using the home-based option. Therefore, “selling” the home-base option is an important consideration. Families should be provided accurate information at registration about what the program expectations are for enrollment in the home-based option:

- hour and a half visit in the home weekly,
- two group socializations each month,
- active participation in the visit,
- use of the home as the learning environment,
- and the home visit must to be with the parent or parents of the child enrolled.

For families who cannot meet these requirements, enrollment in the home-based option is not going to be successful for either the family or the program.

If the decision has been made to deliver Head Start/Early Head Start services using the home-based model, grantees need to consider and remember that **Home-based Head Start/Early Head Start is an adult education model**. Home-based staff, both home visitors and supervisory staff, must have a strong grounding in the philosophy and techniques of adult education.

To be effective, home-based staff must have the skills to present information and or teaching strategies to parents, in a one-on-one situation, and in a manner that allows the parent to use the information/strategy without the presence of the home-based staff member. Home visitors and the materials they present have to be adaptable to the diversity of Head Start and Early Head Start families, including age, culture, education level, language, social/family situation, as well as being developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate for the child.

Curricula chosen for use in a home-based program need to be developed specifically for home-based programs. Attempting to take a center-based curriculum and “adapting” it for home-based is essentially changing the scope and intent of the original curriculum and negates the research foundation of the materials.

From a program perspective, the commitment to adult education also means a commitment to the home-based staff that training in adult education techniques will be provided. Supervisors must support staff in their interactions with families, and the program’s budget must allow for adequate supplies and materials for both the children’s and the adults’ experiences”.

The home-based option is an excellent opportunity to deliver Head Start/Early Head Start services. Its one-on-one focus on parenting techniques and using the home environment for learning can dramatically influence parents’ interactions with their child. However, this option is only effective if it is the right choice for the grantee, the community, and the enrolled families.