

About Early Head Start

The reauthorization of the Head Start Act in 1994 made it possible to establish Early Head Start as a program to serve infants and toddlers under the age of three, and pregnant women.

Early Head Start provides early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive child development and family support services to low-income infants and toddlers and their families, and pregnant women and their families.

The Goals of Early Head Start

- To provide safe and developmentally enriching caregiving which promotes the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of infants and toddlers, and prepares them for future growth and development;
- To support parents, both mothers and fathers, in their role as primary caregivers and teachers of their children, and families in meeting personal goals and achieving self sufficiency across a wide variety of domains;
- To mobilize communities to provide the resources and environment necessary to ensure a comprehensive, integrated array of services and support for families;
- To ensure the provision of high quality responsive services to family through the development of trained, and caring staff.

The Principles of Early Head Start

These principles are designed to nurture healthy attachments between parent and child (and child and caregiver), emphasize a strengths-based, relationship-centered approach to services, and encompass the full range of a family's needs from pregnancy through a child's third birthday.

They include:

- **An Emphasis on High Quality** which recognizes the critical opportunity of EHS programs to positively impact children and families in the early years and beyond.
- **Prevention and Promotion Activities** that both promote healthy development and recognize and address atypical development at the earliest stage possible.
- **Positive Relationships and Continuity** which honor the critical importance of early attachments on healthy development in early childhood and beyond. The parents are viewed as a child's first, and most important, relationship.
- **Parent Involvement** activities that offer parents a meaningful and strategic role in the program's vision, services, and governance.
- **Inclusion** strategies that respect the unique developmental trajectories of young children in the context of a typical setting, including children with disabilities.
- **Cultural competence** which acknowledges the profound role that culture plays in early development. Programs also recognize the influence of cultural values and beliefs on both staff and families' approaches to child development. Programs work within the context of home languages for all children and families.
- **Comprehensiveness, Flexibility and Responsiveness** of services which allow children and families to move across various program options over time, as their life situation demands.
- **Transition planning** respects families' need for thought and attention paid to movements across program options and into—and out of—Early Head Start programs.
- **Collaboration** is, simply put, central to an Early Head Start program's ability to meet the comprehensive needs of families. Strong partnerships allow programs to expand their services to families with infants and toddlers beyond the door of the program and into the larger community

Cornerstones

1. **Child Development:** Programs must support the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development of each child. Parenting education and the support of a positive parent-child relationship are critical to this cornerstone. The services that programs must provide directly or through referral include:
2. **Family Development:** Programs must seek to empower families by developing goals for themselves and their children. Staff and parents develop individualized family development plans that focus on the child's developmental needs and the family's social and economic needs. Families that are involved in other programs requiring a family service plan will receive a single coordinated plan so that they experience a seamless system of services. The services that programs must provide directly or through referral include:
3. **Community Building:** Programs are expected to conduct an assessment of community resources so that they may build a comprehensive network of services and supports for pregnant women and families with young children. The goal of these collaborative relationships is to increase family access to community supports, make the most efficient use of limited resources, and effect system-wide changes to improve the service delivery system for all families in the community.
4. **Staff Development:** The success of the Early Head Start program rests largely on the quality of the staff. Staff members must have the capacity to develop caring, supportive relationships with both children and families. On-going training, supervision, and mentoring will encompass an inter-disciplinary approach and emphasize relationship-building. Staff development will be grounded in established "best practices" in the areas of child development, family development, and community building.

Program Options

All Early Head Start programs serve families through a full day, full year program option that best meets the needs of their families. Program options provide options, determined through the data collected from their community needs assessment and conversations with families, provide them with the ability to comprehensively and flexibly meet the needs of families. As infants and toddlers grow and change, and as family needs evolve, diverse program options can support them over time. This ensures that families can grow within a consistent, supportive setting, buttressed by strong relationships and developmentally-appropriate care and services. Program options for EHS include the following:

- **Center-Based services** provide early learning, care and enrichment experiences to children in an early care and education setting. Staff members also visit family homes at least twice per year.
- **Home-Based services** are provided through weekly home visits to each enrolled child and family. The home visitor provides child-focused visits that promote the parents' ability to support the child's development. Twice per month, the program offers opportunities for parents and children to come together as a group for learning, discussion, and social activity
- **Family Child Care services** provide care and education to children in a private home or family-like setting.
- **Combination services** combine both home- and center-based services.