

Head Start is a federal early childhood program that has provided high-quality early learning and family support to low-income children since 1965. Serving children from birth through age five – through Early Head Start for infants and toddlers and Head Start for preschoolers – the program is delivered locally by grantees in communities across the country, including school districts, religious organizations, nonprofits, and tribal governments. Head Start's mission goes beyond the classroom: it is designed to support the whole child and the whole family, which is why comprehensive services sit at the center of the model.

Overview: Comprehensive Services

Head Start pairs high-quality early learning with comprehensive services that support a child's health and development while helping families build stability and self-sufficiency from infancy through the start of kindergarten.

Whether a family enrolls in Early Head Start or Head Start, they get more than just classroom time: they find nutrition support, developmental and health screenings, and responsive relationships that help children build the social-emotional foundation and skills they need at every age and stage.

The term “**comprehensive services**” includes multiple categories of services detailed in both the Head Start Act and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) that are provided to children and families with the goal of enabling children to attain their full potential and reach school readiness.

While grantees are required to meet the standards outlined in the HSPPS, the design and delivery of services are **unique to each program** and tailored to the specific needs of each child and family.

For example, children receive developmental, sensory (vision and hearing), and behavioral/mental health screenings. Programs then **work with parents** to ensure children receive the appropriate care. This might include services provided by the Head Start grantee or a referral for services in the community along with supporting parents to access those services.

While enrolled in Head Start, children receive **high-quality early learning and care** that encourages learning through play and physical activity, as well as healthy meals and snacks. Head Start also supports transitions from Early Head Start and Head Start to ensure both children and parents are prepared for the next chapter.

HEAD START ACT

- Requires grantees to provide comprehensive health, education, parental involvement, nutritional, social, and other services that enable children to attain their full potential and attain school readiness.
- Specifies regulations must include performance standards for required services, including health, parental involvement, nutrition, social services, and transition activities.

Head Start plays a vital role in helping families access early intervention services for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities.

The Head Start Act requires programs to reserve **at least 10%** of their funded enrollment for children eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – the federal law that guarantees early intervention and special education services to children with disabilities.

These children are eligible to attend Head Start regardless of family income. This commitment, paired with Head Start's robust screening requirements, means **far more children with disabilities are identified and served** than would be through state referral systems alone. Studies show that when children receive screening and early intervention services, they are **less likely to be placed in special education** in later grades, reducing the need for costly interventions.

Since so few states conduct universal screenings for every infant and toddler as a matter of course, most state early intervention systems only activate when a referral is made. **Head Start is frequently the one that makes that referral**, catching developmental delays that might otherwise go unnoticed until a child is much older.

It is often where families first learn their child is not meeting key developmental milestones. In many communities, particularly small or rural ones, Head Start may be the only local option equipped to serve children with complex medical conditions or connect them with specialists like speech pathologists – making it not just an early learning option for these families, but their only accessible pathway to the services their child needs.

FROM THE SOURCE

Head Start Act - 42 U.S.C. §§ 9831(2); 9833(1); 9836(c)(1), (d)(2)(B); 9836a(a)(1)(A); 9837(f)(9); 9837b(a)(2)(B)(iv); and 9840a(b)(1)

Contact:

Amanda Guarino, aguarino@ffyf.org

The Impact

Head Start's comprehensive services approach exists because a child cannot learn on an empty stomach, with an untreated ear infection, or without a stable place to sleep at night. **These wrap-around services remove the barriers that keep children from arriving ready to learn**, and that keep families from staying engaged – and they do it before a child ever falls behind.

Preventative health care and follow-up services catch problems early and keep children well enough to attend school regularly, rather than losing weeks of learning to untreated illness. Vision and hearing screenings mean a child struggling to see on the playground or hear their teacher gets help – instead of being labeled as a behavior problem or a slow learner. Nutritious meals and snacks fuel a child's ability to focus, participate, and grow, addressing a need that too many families face today.

These services matter most to children who have the fewest opportunities. For **children from low-income families, children in foster care, and children experiencing homelessness**, Head Start is often the only reliable point of access to health care, consistent meals, and developmental support. Access is even harder for families without transportation or living in rural or isolated communities.

By **coordinating these services** rather than leaving families to navigate separate systems on their own, Head Start ensures nothing falls through the cracks – a child's needs are communicated clearly to their teacher, and no family is left to figure it out alone. Head Start's commitment to family engagement sets it apart from nearly every other early childhood program.

Recognizing that parents are a child's first and most important teacher, Head Start doesn't just serve families – it partners with them, involving parents directly in their child's learning and in program governance and operation, while equipping them with tools to strengthen their families for the long term.

Head Start's comprehensive services approach is not a peripheral feature of the program; **it is central to why Head Start works**. A large and growing body of research confirms that this model – combining education with health, nutrition, and family support – produces measurably better outcomes for children and families, both immediately and for years to come.