

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 reach the children and families who need it most, which is why eligibility is intentionally built around those facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.

Overview: Populations Served

Not every family with a young child needs the same kind of help – but for the families struggling the most, the right help often doesn't exist anywhere else. Head Start was built for exactly these families: children from the lowest-income households, children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care.

Because the first five years of life are the most critical window for brain development, Head Start meets these children early – offering early learning and care from the prenatal period through age five, so support arrives when it can do the most good and continues consistently as a child's needs change.

Services are provided at no cost, which matters enormously for families who are the least likely to be able to afford them elsewhere. While many states now offer free or low-cost preschool for four-year-olds, Early Head Start remains, in much of the country, the only source of no cost, high-quality early learning available to children under three.

OVERVIEW OF HEAD START ELIGIBILITY: The Head Start Act (the Act) requires the Secretary to define eligibility through regulation – the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) – and sets several baseline requirements those regulations must include. Under the Act, children are eligible if their family income is at or below the federal poverty line (FPL), if they are experiencing homelessness, or if their family receives public assistance. The HSPPS builds on this foundation, extending eligibility to children in foster care and further defining “public assistance” to include families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); the Office of Head Start also interprets Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as qualifying public assistance.

Eligibility, once determined, holds through the end of the following program year. This continuity means families don't have to re-verify income or documentation mid-year, and children aren't at risk of losing their enrollment due to a temporary change in family circumstances, such as a new job or a change in address.

HEAD START ACT

- Establishes eligibility for families earning at or below FPL or eligible for public assistance and for homeless children
- Requires at least 10% of enrolled children to be children with disabilities
- Allows up to 10% enrollment of children from families with incomes above FPL, and up to an additional 35% of children from families whose incomes are up to 130% FPL

CATEGORICAL AND SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Beyond income-based eligibility, federal law recognizes that certain groups of children face barriers that income alone doesn't capture – and guarantees them a path into Head Start regardless of what their family earns.

- **Children with Disabilities:** Programs must reserve at least 10% of their funded enrollment for children eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This set-aside matters because most state early intervention systems only activate once a child is referred – they don't conduct universal screening. Head Start does. That makes Head Start, in many communities, the first place – and sometimes the only place – a child's developmental delay or disability is identified and addressed, particularly in small or rural communities.
- **Children in Foster Care:** Foster children are categorically eligible for Head Start regardless of family income, in recognition of the instability that so often defines foster placements. A guaranteed seat means a child moving between homes doesn't also have to lose access to consistent early learning, health tracking, and developmental support in the process.
- **Children Experiencing Homelessness:** Children experiencing homelessness automatically qualify for enrollment, removing paperwork and residency barriers that would otherwise delay or block a family in crisis from getting help. For these families, Head Start can offer something homelessness makes nearly impossible to find on its own: a stable daily routine, reliable meals, and consistent health care.
- **Pregnant Women and Infants/Toddlers:** Early Head Start (EHS) serves expectant mothers and children from birth to age three, providing prenatal and postpartum support during a period when few other no-cost or low-cost options exist. Because so much brain development happens before age three, this is also when early support has the greatest long-term impact.
- **American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Populations:** Programs operated directly by tribal governments and Native organizations deliver Head Start services that are culturally grounded – often incorporating Native languages and traditions – and reach communities, many of them remote or rural, where other early childhood options are scarce or nonexistent.
- **Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Families (MSHS):** Programs designed for agricultural worker families accommodate the mobile, seasonal schedules that come with farm work – extended hours, flexible enrollment windows, and services that can travel with a family – so that children whose lives move with the harvest still receive consistent early learning and care.

THE IMPACT FOR POPULATIONS SERVED

The first five years of life set the trajectory for everything that follows – yet nationwide, families at every income level struggle to find and afford quality child care, and the families with the fewest resources are pushed furthest from opportunity. Head Start exists to close that gap for the families who need it most: **children in deep poverty, children with disabilities, children in foster care, and children without a home.** For these families, Head Start isn't simply a choice among child care options – it is often the only door that opens.

That is because Head Start doesn't just teach; **it removes the barriers that keep a child from being ready to learn** in the first place. Transportation gets a child in foster care to the classroom even when a family doesn't have reliable transportation. Health screenings catch a hearing or vision problem before it derails a child's education.

And because Head Start is one of the few early childhood programs built to connect families with the broader health care system – helping a parent find a primary care doctor, apply for health insurance, or both – children who might otherwise go without regular medical care get it. For families experiencing poverty, homelessness, or the instability of foster care, these are resources that can be nearly impossible to access on their own, and Head Start's role in making those connections means **families don't have to navigate complex systems alone** – they can draw on the community and expertise built into the program itself.

Head Start treats **parents as partners, not bystanders**, in their child's development – offering resources and involvement in the classroom and in program governance that strengthen the whole family, not just the child. And because services come at no cost, Head Start removes a financial burden that would otherwise be out of reach for the families it serves; consistent, reliable care also frees parents and caregivers to work or pursue an education, adding a measure of financial stability that ripples well beyond the classroom.

This is not a patchwork of separate benefits – **it is a single, integrated model**, and the evidence shows it works: children and families served by Head Start see measurable gains in the short term, and the benefits continue to compound for years after they leave the program.

FROM THE SOURCE

Head Start Act - 42 U.S.C. §§ 9835(d), (m); 9840

Information Memorandum on Categorical Eligibility - ACF-IM-HS-22-03

Contact:
Amanda Guarino, aguarino@ffyf.org