

Frequently Asked Questions about Illinois Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

1. Who is eligible for Head Start/Early Head Start?

Children birth to age five from families **whose income is within 100% of the federal poverty guidelines** are eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start services. Children from homeless families, and families receiving public assistance such as TANF or SSI are also eligible. Foster children are eligible regardless of their foster family's income. Head Start programs also reserve 10% of their enrollment for children with disabilities. Pregnant women may also be eligible for Early Head Start. **Every Head Start/Early Head Start program develops and implements a system to ensure identification and enrollment of children and families with the greatest need for Head Start/Early Head Start services.**

2. What's the difference between Head Start and Early Head Start?

Head Start serves children age three to five.

Early Head Start serves pregnant women and children birth to age three.

3. Why might a child need Head Start services more so than an Illinois Preschool for All classroom?

Head Start supports families facing difficult circumstances and seeks to mitigate obstacles to learning in the early years. Head Start serves **both the child and the family** in a focused intervention setting. Head Start provides **comprehensive services** that includes four major components to Head Start:

Education: Providing a variety of learning experiences to help children grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

Health: Providing health services such as immunizations, dental, medical, and mental health, and nutritional services, and early identification of health problems.

Parent Engagement: Involving parents in the planning and implementation of activities. Parents serve on policy councils and committees that make administrative decisions; participate in classes and workshops on child development; and volunteer in the program.

Social Services: Provide outreach to families to determine what services they need and support the attainment these services.

To best support families in achieving stability and self-sufficiency, Head Start adopts a **multigenerational approach**, focusing on creating opportunities for and addressing the needs of **both children and their parent(s)**. Head Start works with all parents to set goals based on their individual strengths and needs. Goals can be anything from completing their GED to finding

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stable housing or accessing better career opportunities. Head Start also engages parents in understanding more about their child's development and how they can support it, as well as healthy habits for the whole family. Head Start supports families dealing with tough issues like domestic violence and substance use disorders, connecting them with resources in the community or providing direct services to support family wellbeing. **Some families need these extra support services that are not provided in other early childhood programs.**

- **Head Start enhances parents' education level, employment status, and income.**
- **Head Start improves parents' skills, reduces parental stress, and improves overall family stability and self-sufficiency. Family stability and well-being are strong contributors to a child's outcomes in early childhood and throughout their lifetime.**

Programs like Head Start work with children for, at most, five years. Parents and other family caregivers are their children's first teachers, and the people who stand by them long after their experience in Head Start.

5. How does Head Start/Early Head Start help get children school ready?

School readiness describes the level at which children possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and life. Kindergarten readiness refers to the developmental domains that contribute to children's ability to adapt to the kindergarten classroom, which is often a new and unfamiliar environment. There is no single agreed upon definition of Kindergarten readiness in Illinois. Although, the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards provide reasonable expectations for children's growth, development, and learning in the preschool years. The Illinois Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) collects data for the 14 State Readiness Measures that span across the three developmental areas most important for long-term success — social and emotional development, language and literacy, and math — within the first 40 days of entering Kindergarten. KIDS aligns with the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards, which establish expectations for children's development at kindergarten entry. The KIDS survey also incorporates the state's Social and Emotional Learning Standards and Illinois Learning Standards in math and English language arts.

Head Start's goals for school readiness are threefold:

1. **Children are ready for school. Our curricula and assessment tools are aligned with KIDS and the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards.**
2. **Families are ready to support their children's learning. Head Start recognizes the role of parents as their child's first and lifelong educators and engages parents as equal partners. Head Start/Early Head Start programs must utilize a research-based parenting curricula. Parents participate in decision-making, policy development, and "activity organization" in communities across Illinois to improve children's safety, health, development, and learning experiences.**

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- 3. Schools are ready for children. Head Start builds intentional connections between Head Start programs and receiving schools. Strong relationships among Early Head Start programs, Head Start programs, families, and receiving elementary schools, work together to offer children and families continuity, security, and resources for smooth transitions.**

6. How do we know if Head Start/Early Head Start works?

Head Start children make progress towards norms in math and have significantly enhanced cognitive abilities.

Dual language learners in Head Start have higher scores on receptive vocabulary, letter-word identification, and spelling.

Head Start children are more likely to have hearing and vision screening, health insurance, to have received dental checkups, and to be immunized.

Head Start children are less hyperactive, withdrawn, and aggressive, and participation in Head Start increases their self-control and self-esteem.

Head Start children have lower rates of abuse and neglect and are less likely to be involved in the child welfare system.

Head Start provides parenting training opportunities, improves parent involvement and parent-child relationships, and decreases parental distress.

For children already involved in the child welfare system, Head Start enhances school readiness and social emotional outcomes and decreases their subsequent child welfare encounters.

Longitudinal studies demonstrate Head Start's long-term impact on children's educational attainment and life chances, including increased high school graduation rates, increased likelihood of pursuing and completing higher education, and decreased criminal behavior among African-Americans.

Children that participate in Head Start programs receive innumerable benefits. These advantages appear immediately, last a lifetime, and even have an effect on other generations. The effects are particularly strong amongst certain subgroups of children, particularly Hispanic and African-American children, dual language learners, children who are homeless or in foster care, those who qualify for free lunch, and those whose mothers didn't graduate high school.

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Citations

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