



Health Strategies to Support School Readiness

School readiness begins with health!



NATIONAL CENTER ON

Early Childhood Health and Wellness

The Head Start approach to school readiness means that children are ready for school, families are ready to support their children's learning, and schools are ready for children.

- Children who are ready for school receive the recommended preventive care to ensure that each child is as healthy as possible, so they can engage fully in experiences that support their learning and development.
- Families who support their children's learning are able to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to thrive in school and life.
- Schools that are ready for children provide safe environments and interactions with responsive adults who support children's physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development, so they can succeed in kindergarten and later learning.

This document identifies nine strategies that support the connection between health and learning described in [Healthy Children are Ready to Learn](#). Used together, these two resources explain how children's physical and mental health and family wellness support and enhance a child's ability to learn.

Program leaders, school readiness teams, health services staff, and education staff can use this document to identify strategies to help accomplish program-wide school readiness goals for Head Start children ages birth to five in all program options.



9 health strategies to support school readiness are:

1. Learn about each child, their family, and their community to develop health services that address each child's individual needs.
2. Support children's readiness to learn by ensuring each child is as physically healthy as possible.
3. Ensure all indoor and outdoor early learning environments allow children to challenge themselves safely while minimizing the risk of injury.
4. Support every child's mental health and social and emotional well-being.
5. Promote consistent attendance to support each child's ability to participate in program activities.
6. Establish partnerships with local schools and early care and education programs to exchange health information and support healthy transitions between settings, including kindergarten.
7. Develop individual healthcare plans for children with special healthcare needs that maximize their ability to participate in program activities.
8. Build family health literacy to help families act as health champions for their children.
9. Support the needs of pregnant mothers and expectant families so each child has the best possible foundation for good health and learning.



Strategy 1: Learn about each child, their family, and their community to develop health strategies that address each child's individual needs

Why is this strategy important?

Health services are not one-size-fits-all. Children enter their Head Start program at different developmental levels and with many types of health conditions. Their families have diverse health practices, beliefs, values, and cultural backgrounds. Programs can customize health services to meet children's individual needs by working in partnership with families. Some families face barriers to accessing healthcare services for their children. Programs that learn about each family's successes and challenges in accessing healthcare can facilitate effective connections to community resources. Promptly identifying children's health issues and assisting families with follow-up and referrals connects young children to services as early as possible to promote their school success.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Develop and monitor a system for communicating health information about each child to education staff to ensure individualized teaching practices to meet each child's needs. By planning education and health strategies together, programs can tailor the services they provide for children who may need additional support.
- Use the [daily health check](#) to gather information about whether a child is showing signs or symptoms of illness or injury. This

“first look” can help staff observe changes in a child's health and well-being. Even symptoms from minor illnesses can have an impact on a child's ability to learn. The sooner a health concern is identified, the sooner it can be addressed.

- Consider a child's health status when introducing new learning activities or conducting child observations. For example, children who are tired or ill may not be able to engage fully in learning activities. Collect child observation data mid-week rather than on a Monday for children who may be food insecure. Use [When Health Affects Assessment](#) to plan and interpret child assessment results.
- Learn about each family's health beliefs, traditions, values, and preferred language to provide culturally and linguistically responsive health services. Culturally and linguistically responsive practices result in more effective partnerships with families and allow staff to consider different health beliefs and traditions when communicating health information.
- Use information from the community assessment to learn about barriers families face in accessing healthcare. This information can help programs cultivate partnerships with providers who offer affordable, accessible, and culturally and linguistically responsive care.



Strategy 2: Support children’s readiness to learn by ensuring that each child is as physically healthy as possible.

Why is this strategy important?

In a national survey, kindergarten teachers reported that “being physically healthy, rested and well-nourished . . . were the most essential qualities for children to be ready for kindergarten.”¹ It is easier for children to build the skills, behaviors, and knowledge of key concepts in all learning domains when they have access to nutritious foods, are physically active and healthy as possible, and get adequate rest.

Head Start programs play a critical role in preparing children for kindergarten and later learning by partnering with families to ensure that children have health insurance and a continuous source of ongoing medical and oral healthcare. Programs that promote daily routines to help children learn and practice healthy and safe behaviors, lay a lifelong foundation for health and wellness. Programs that use opportunities such as family education, socializations, and home visits to demonstrate healthy practices can build skills to support family wellness.

1 Hair, E., Halle, T., Terry-Humen, E., Lavelle, B. & Calkins, J. (2006). Children’s school readiness in the ECLS-K: Predictions to academic, health, and social outcomes in first grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 431–454. Retrieved from <http://childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/First-Grade-Readiness.pdf>

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Ensure children have an ongoing source of care for prevention, early identification, and treatment of health concerns. To be as healthy as possible, children need to receive timely healthcare services, including well child visits and immunizations.
- Offer to assist families, as needed, to schedule healthcare appointments, arrange for transportation, and address challenges that may make it difficult to set up and keep an appointment.
- Implement and monitor strategies to reduce the spread of illness, such as handwashing, gloving, diapering, cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting procedures. Measures to reduce the spread of illness can result in improved attendance, which supports school readiness.
- Recruit vision and hearing experts for your Health Services Advisory Committee (HSAC) to prepare for vision and hearing screenings. Identifying a child’s vision and hearing issues early can help improve their reading, writing, and speech and language skills.
- Educate staff and families that tooth decay is the most common preventable chronic childhood disease. To be as healthy as

possible, children need to have good oral health. [Poor oral health](#) can impair children's ability to eat, speak, concentrate, and learn.

- Share these [messages](#) with families and pregnant women about how to promote good oral health:
 - Limit foods and beverages with natural or added sugar.
 - Drink water throughout the day.
 - Brush with the right amount of fluoride toothpaste twice a day.
 - Take your child to the dentist by their first birthday.



- Provide nutritious, culturally appropriate meals and snacks that follow USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) guidelines to support healthy cognitive development. Children need the right nutrients to support their developing brain. A well-nourished child is better able to concentrate on learning, control impulses, and solve problems.
- Identify children who may be food insecure. To the extent possible, provide additional food for these children to take home on the weekend and connect families with local pantries.



- Develop partnerships with state and local programs to support the nutrition needs of low-income children and their families. [Enhancing Participant-Centered Services Between the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\) and Head Start Programs](#) includes ideas for developing these collaborations.
- Provide age-appropriate amounts of physical activity in children's daily routines. Physical activity contributes to overall better health, higher rates of immunity, and improves cognitive skills and executive functioning.
- Create safe sleep environments for infants and share this information with families. Provide opportunities for children to nap who need to rest during the program day, and support families to set up a consistent bedtime routine for their child. Children who are rested are better able to pay attention, remember what they learn, and manage their feelings.
- Look for opportunities to connect health practices with learning goals. For example, toothbrushing and handwashing are excellent opportunities to build fine motor skills.



Strategy 3: Ensure all indoor and outdoor environments allow children to challenge themselves safely while minimizing the risk of injury.

Why is this strategy important?

In an environment that is free from hazards, children can safely explore and try new skills. The best learning environment for children is one that challenges them in developmentally appropriate ways but presents low risks for injuries. Not only does a safe environment encourage children's curiosity and development, but it also helps protect them from injuries that could harm their physical or cognitive development. By ensuring that indoor and outdoor environments are challenging but low risk, Head Start programs help children grow into learners who have the confidence to practice and master new skills.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Use safe and developmentally appropriate equipment, furniture, toys, art supplies, and [playground structures and surfacing](#) that comply with safety standards. Matching the right materials to children's developmental level supports better learning outcomes in all program options and reduces the risk of injuries.
- Use evidence-based [checklists](#) and ongoing monitoring procedures to identify and remove hazards associated with common injuries to young children. Home visitors and

family engagement staff can have home [safety conversations](#) with families using home safety checklists.

- Hazard-free indoor and outdoor environments allow children to explore freely and learn safely.
- Implement and monitor active supervision strategies in all indoor and outdoor settings, during transitions, and on vehicles in programs that provide transportation. [Active supervision](#) encourages responsive caregiving, which allows staff to individualize their support for each child to maximize learning.
- Use data from injury reports to identify injury trends. Using [hazard mapping](#) helps programs identify where children are injured most often so they can make improvements in the environment, daily routines, materials and equipment, and train staff to prevent additional injuries. Injury data can also help identify which children may need extra support to safely explore the environment.



Strategy 4: Support every child’s mental health and social and emotional well-being.

Why is this strategy important?

Children’s mental health is the foundation for social and emotional learning and development. Children who experience secure, trusting relationships with responsive caregivers develop the ability to experience and express their feelings in appropriate ways. They learn how to manage strong emotions and control their behavior, which helps them stay on task and cope with frustration. Children who experience a sense of social and emotional well-being have positive self-esteem and find it easier to make friends. When children feel good about themselves and what they can do, they engage more fully in learning opportunities (See the [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework \(ELOF\)](#) for more information).



Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Explore [resources](#) to find an infant and early childhood mental health consultant (IECMHC) and establish an effective mental health consultation program. A mental health consultation approach, such as [Family Connections](#), promotes children’s social and emotional health and school readiness. In collaboration with an IECMHC:
 - Provide opportunities for professional development and coaching to help staff use evidence-based approaches to support children’s social and emotional development. Social and emotional competence is essential to children’s mental health and early learning success.
 - Implement positive behavioral supports for all children and intensive, individualized interventions for children who demonstrate persistent social, emotional, and behavioral concerns. This helps children develop the ability to follow rules, solve problems, manage frustration, and experience positive interactions with peers and adults—all of which are important for school readiness.



- Implement [trauma-informed care](#) for children who have had [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#). High levels of stress in young children can negatively affect their health, behavior, and ability to learn. Programs that implement highly responsive early learning environments and teaching practices help children develop [resilience](#) and cope with adversity.
- Identify children who may need additional therapeutic support and partner with families to make referrals to mental health professionals.
- Support family wellness by connecting families who are experiencing mental health issues, substance substance misuse, interpersonal violence, and other adverse experiences to local community resources. These services benefit the whole [family](#)—adults and children.
- Promote a [staff wellness](#) program to help staff address their own health and wellness needs and develop increased resilience. Staff wellness activities support responsive caregiving practices.



Strategy 5: Promote consistent attendance to support each child's ability to participate in program activities.

Why is this strategy important?

Children must be [present and engaged](#) to learn. This is particularly true for low-income children, who may need more time in the classroom to master the skills needed to be successful learners. Children with better preschool attendance have higher kindergarten readiness scores and are more likely to be reading at grade level by third grade.² Attendance patterns set in preschool continue into the early elementary school years. Children who are frequently absent in preschool are five times more likely to be chronically absent in second grade.³ Head Start programs support children's learning and lay a foundation for better attendance in elementary school when they help families address barriers to consistent attendance.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Partner with family service and home visiting staff to engage families in discussions about steps to ensure their child's regular attendance in program activities, especially when children miss more time than expected.
- Explore the resources on [Attendance Works](#), which include parent handouts, toolkits for staff, and other materials to raise awareness of how consistent attendance in preschool positively affects children's school readiness and later school success.
- Track whether children are absent due to health-related conditions that may require additional follow-up. For children who are at risk of missing 10 percent of program days due to health issues, develop a plan with their family and healthcare provider to improve attendance. For additional strategies, see [Health Services to Promote Attendance](#).

² *Attendance in the Early Grades: Why it Matters for Reading*. A Research Brief. Attendance Works, February 2014

³ Ehrlich, S.G., Gwynne, J. A., et al, *Preschool Attendance in Chicago Public Schools: Relationships with Learning Outcomes and Reasons for Absences*, May 2014, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research

- Use evidence-based criteria to develop policies and procedures to guide decisions about the [inclusion and exclusion of children who are ill](#). Exposure to frequent mild infections helps young children’s immune systems develop in a healthy way. Most children can participate in program activities, even when they have a cold or other mild illness, which reduces unnecessary absenteeism.
- Provide additional support to help staff modify their daily routines to care for a child who is mildly ill.
- Assist families when needed to obtain timely treatment for their child’s illness or injury.





Strategy 6: Establish partnerships with local schools and early care and education programs to exchange health information and support healthy transitions between settings, including kindergarten.

Why is this strategy important?

Children experience many [transitions](#), including from home to early care and education (ECE) programs, between age groups or program settings, and from preschool to kindergarten. When Head Start, other ECE programs, and schools exchange health information in partnership with families, they support healthy transitions by promoting opportunities for children to receive ongoing health services. This continuity helps children succeed in school.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Include health staff in developing policies and procedures that support consistent transitions throughout a child's time in Head Start, including transitions between classrooms, centers, and program options.
- Establish ongoing communication with local schools and programs sending or receiving Head Start children to exchange information about health services. Ongoing communication between the organizations strengthens relationships. It also helps programs share consistent information with families. This has a positive impact on children's early school success. See

[Supporting Transitions: Working with Early Education Partners](#) for more about how to build a culture of collaboration.

- Invite representatives from local schools and programs sending or receiving Head Start children to serve on the HSAC.
- Support kindergarten readiness by having conversations with families before they leave Head Start. The tip sheet, [Healthy Transitions to Kindergarten](#), includes questions to engage families and suggested actions health services staff may take to help children make a healthy transition.
- Establish a formal protocol for sharing information from children's health records with written permission from families, such as immunization records and health assessments. This will help the receiving organization ensure children are ready to succeed in their new school.



Strategy 7: Develop individual healthcare plans for children with special healthcare needs that maximize their ability to participate in program activities and include a transition plan for children entering kindergarten.

Why is this strategy important?

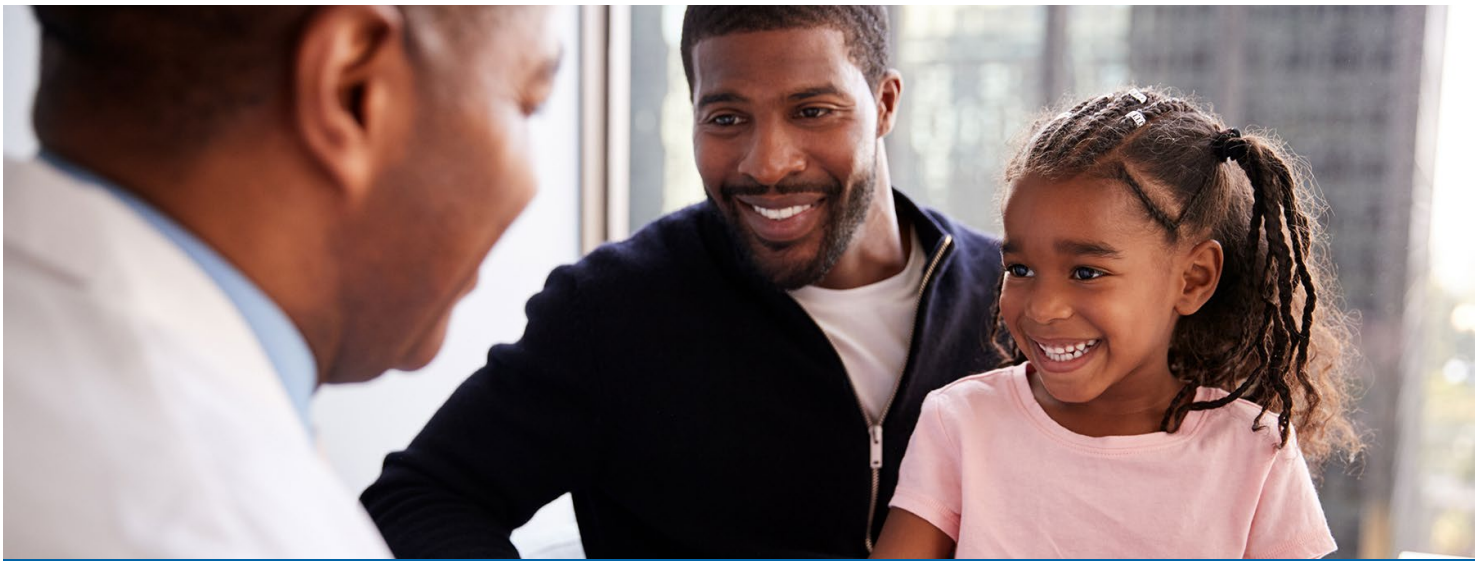
Children with special healthcare needs (CSHCN) are better able to develop in all domains when they have access to inclusive environments and individualized support to fully participate in program activities. An individual healthcare plan (IHP) defines the specific ways a program will ensure the safe participation of children with complex health needs. Care for children with chronic health conditions requires close communication with families. A team approach encourages coordination and puts children on track for school success.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Develop partnerships among families, Head Start staff, primary care providers, and related specialists to ensure frequent communication and promote successful learning outcomes for CSHCN.
- Create a written IHP so CSHCN can participate fully and safely in all program activities. *The Caring for Our Children (CFOC) Online Standards Database* is a set of national evidence-based standards for ECE programs developed by early childhood and health experts, and includes a [collection](#) of standards for ECE programs caring

for CSHCN. Standard [3.5.0.1](#) provides recommendations about what information to include in an IHP.

- Collaborate with families to develop attendance plans for children who have a health condition that results in frequent program absences. Many CSHCN experience barriers to consistent attendance, which is important for school success.
- Convene education and health staff from sending and receiving organizations to determine how to support successful transitions for children who have an IHP, including behavioral health plans. This may include transferring a plan and sharing what works, always with a family's consent and participation.
- Develop an individualized transition plan when CSHCN enter kindergarten to support healthy transitions to local school systems. The tip sheet, [Healthy Transitions to Kindergarten](#), includes questions to engage families and suggested activities health services staff may take to connect families with a nurse or special needs coordinator in the receiving school.



Strategy 8: Build family health literacy to help families act as health champions for their children.

Why is this strategy important?

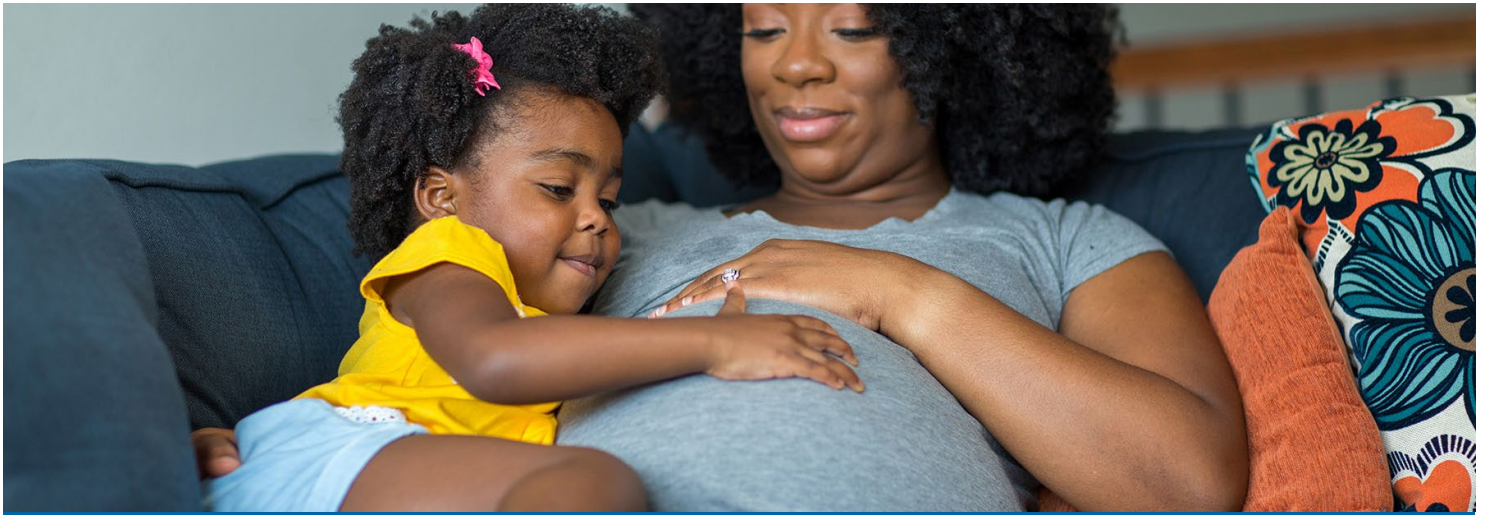
Families, staff, and healthcare providers have to work together to meet the diverse needs of children. Helping families understand developmental screening and referral, illness and injury prevention, and how health issues affect children's learning, enables them to communicate about what their children need to succeed in school. Strong staff-family partnerships can help families exercise their rights and seek out the health, educational, and community resources they need to support their children. For more about engaging families, see [Family Engagement in Transitions: Transition to Kindergarten](#).

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Ensure families have access to information they can understand and use to make informed decisions, such as the [Well-Visit Planner](#). Develop a program-wide family literacy plan for all health communications with families that begins at enrollment, and includes [plain language](#) health resources to make it easier for all families to understand the information.
- Make Head Start health and education information available to families in their preferred language. Share easy-to-read resources with families such as [Health](#)

[Tips for Families](#) that are available in many languages. These tip sheets can help families understand and use health information they receive from their doctors and other sources.

- Obtain interpretation services in a family's preferred language during meetings or when talking about their child's health and learning. This will allow program staff to engage the family in effective partnerships to support their child's school readiness and focus on specific strategies to ensure the success of children who are dual language learners (DLL).
- Help families understand their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act so they can advocate effectively for their child in any educational program.
- Connect families with community health and education partners at parent meetings.
- Assist families to understand how they will obtain health and learning information they can understand when children leave Head Start. Help families prepare for their children's transitions to kindergarten by sharing information about available resources and connecting them to school personnel as appropriate.



Strategy 9: Support the needs of pregnant mothers and expectant families so each child has the best possible foundation for good health and learning.

Why is this strategy important?

School readiness starts with a healthy pregnancy and even earlier. Programs can help families establish a foundation for school readiness by helping families learn what happens during pregnancy and how to support each baby's healthy development. Pregnant mothers with early and consistent prenatal care have better birth outcomes. New families who have postpartum support are better able to nurture their growing infants.

Tips for implementing this strategy:

- Provide information about healthy pregnancy in family education and outreach efforts, including information about immunizations, healthy nutrition, and that it is safe to receive oral healthcare during pregnancy. Oral health is important for a mother's overall health and a healthy pregnancy. Including information about preconception health topics can help families prepare for a healthy pregnancy.
- Connect pregnant women to prenatal care. Pregnant mothers with early and consistent prenatal care have healthier babies.
- Share information with expectant families about the benefits of [breastfeeding](#) on children's health and development as well as a mother's health. Women who make a commitment to breastfeed while they

are pregnant are more likely to initiate breastfeeding and continue to breastfeed for longer.

- Help pregnant women understand the risks to their baby of substance misuse during pregnancy, and connect them to substance misuse treatment resources, when needed. Exposure to alcohol and other substances during pregnancy can affect a baby's brain development and cause problems with learning, and physical and social and emotional development.
- Screen mothers for maternal depression and connect mothers to services when needed. Mothers who are depressed may have trouble bonding with their babies, and their infants may develop insecure attachments. Young children with depressed mothers may experience developmental delays and have more difficulty in school. [Five Action Steps to Address Maternal Depression in Head Start Programs](#) can help identify families who are struggling with maternal depression, connect them to treatment services, and reduce the stigma associated with mental health conditions.

For more information on how health supports school readiness, visit the [School Readiness collection](#) on the ECLKC.