

(Revised2)-Head Start Program Performance Standards 2017: Infants and Toddlers

Sarah Merrill: Welcome, we're here today to talk about infants and toddlers and particularly how they relate to the new Head Start performance standards. So, David, I'm really happy that you're here, 'cause we often talk about babies and toddlers when we're back in the office.

David Jones: It's a big part of our passion, Sarah.

Sarah: Absolutely.

David: I'm happy to be here with you as well.

Sarah: Thanks. And I think it's important to remember and remind us all that the scope and the design of early Head Start is really steeped in the Head Start Act. So, grantees and program specialists should really think about going to the act. And what's exciting about the new standards is that they're written for a birth to five approach. So, the majority are framed for all children, regardless of their age, and then there are a few that highlight the particular nuances toward preschoolers or infants and toddlers.

David: Yes, Sarah, you know, we know that the early years are sensitive and an important time for young children, particularly in infants and toddlers and their families. So, although they are extremely resilient, there's vulnerabilities. Babies and toddlers need adults to shape their understanding and interactions with people, experiences, and the real world. Parents and staff are learning about the needs and the interests of the young child and constantly have to adapt as the child grows and develops.

The programs really need to design and implement services based upon research-based and long-promoted practices to ensure growth and development of infants and toddlers. And also to provide supports for their family, based upon the identified family and community needs.

Sarah: Right, I think you'll all agree to that, 'cause that's not too unfamiliar for what we've been doing in Head Start for a long time. And rest assured that these new standards provide that familiar frame and the ideal of providing such services.

So, we're gonna sort of talk through them as we're going through our presentation today. And the first one is providing responsive, ongoing, continuous care. That's not a new concept for Early Head Start, and even Head Start programs. What is new: we now have minimum annual hours. So, Early Head Start Center-based program must provide no less than 1,380 hours over their program year. And likewise, Early Head Start programs doing home-based model, they have a minimum of 46 weekly home visits for the family and then 22 group socializations throughout the program year.

We want programs to think about developmentally-appropriate and individualized supports for all children. For infants and toddlers, although it's not listed in the education part, it's in the health part, they have to provide formula and diapers.

David: Right.

Sarah: Makes sense. And they need to support the developmental progress of infants and toddlers through intentional and planned, yet flexible, learning experiences. So, they need to make sure that the curriculum is developmentally-appropriate.

David: Right.

Sarah: They provide ongoing child assessments, and that they really ensure that children are progressing along the domains that are outlined in the early learnings outcome framework.

David: Absolutely, and what I really like is the HR component. So there has to be a focused approach to staff training and professional development for staff that are working with this particular age group. And there's more information about that in sub part I. But effectively implementing curriculum to fidelity, sub part C, under early child development. And also ensuring that the environments, the interactions, regarding infants and toddlers are appropriate.

Sarah: Right, and I think grantees have some flexibility about what that really means for them.

David: Yeah, absolutely right. And then of course, finally, the staff qualifications. So, center-based teachers reference the act, CDA, and competencies, essentially all that are, the qualifications that you need, and that's in sub part I. We're talking about home visiting, family child care, and also in areas where you would work with infants and toddlers.

Sarah: That's a good reference, and I'm glad you mentioned the staff qualifications 'cause that leads to the next component where, when serving with infants and toddlers, there's always been the frame around small groups and intimate settings. So, the group size and ratios, which is in sub part B about program structure. So, when providing center-based care, grantees now have two options to consider. They can have two teachers with eight children, or three teachers with nine children.

And each of those teachers need to be qualified because they're each responsible for no more than four children, so that's an important consideration. Programs don't need waivers to change or use these models, but they do need to think about the square footage requirements that are in the standards, as well as ensure that all two or all three of those teachers are qualified, because they're providing the comprehensive services and the curriculum delivery that's really needed.

And also, in this section, it talks about, which is the sub part B, the family child care ratios, and particularly for those programs who are serving children under the age of 36 months, they still have the one provider to four children ratio, and that includes their own children, when they're home. And those four children, only two can be under the age of 18 months in that really helps with providing that intimate, individualized, flexible programming. So, there's a lot to think about. Standards are written simply, but it's a lot of management and thinking.

David: Absolutely, and so lastly, we really wanna make sure that programs are being thoughtful about the integration of linguistically and culturally relevant settings and services for the specific age and population. Based on the supporting development of home languages, first to ensure the linguistic competence, supporting parent and child attachment, connections to family and their culture, while also exposing them to English and eventually building English learning upon the great foundation of the home language.

And that's also in sub part C in the early child development. Assessments are critically important, making sure they're done in the child's natural language. But they have to be culturally-relevant for young children in a familiar context. We need to--it's important that we also think about working with other and all relevant family members, and this is a part where, you know, it's something I like to talk about often is working with fathers. And I think we can't also forget about pregnant women that are sort of talked about a little bit in more detail in sub part H.

Sarah: Yeah, they have their own sub part which is great. David, I'm really glad you mentioned the familiar context, because with babies and toddlers, their cultural context is their family, primarily, and obviously, it encompasses their community, but that's who they really know is their mom, their dad, and all those relevant caring adults, so that's a really important thing to do.

David: Yes.

Sarah: Well, thank you for joining us today about babies and toddlers and appreciate all your work you do on behalf of them out in your communities.

David: Thank you everyone.

(upbeat music)