



What Docs Should Know About...Head Start

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Head Start is a comprehensive early childhood development program that provides a wide array of services to low-income children ages 0-5 and their families.

- Founded in 1965 to improve the school readiness of poor children, Head Start serves low-income preschool-age children. The program served 906,993 children in 2005.¹ Infants and toddlers (0-3) and pregnant women are served through Early Head Start.
- The four major components of Head Start include: education, health services, parent involvement, and social services.
- Head Start is a federal program administered through grants to local public agencies, private organizations, Native American Tribes, and school systems.

Head Start children receive important health services directly through the program or through a referral to another community resource.

- Head Start Performance Standards require programs to screen children for developmental, sensory and behavioral concerns within 45 days of enrollment. In addition, programs are required to ensure that children receive immunizations, nutrition, dental services, and mental health care.
- Head Start is required to reserve 10% of its slots for children with special needs. These children receive special services through collaboration with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs.

Family involvement and support services are a central component of Head Start.

- The high degree of parental involvement is one of the most valued components of Head Start, according to Edward Zigler, one of the original architects of the program.² Programs endeavor to build relationships with parents from the point of enrollment by working with them to create family partnership agreements that identify family goals as well as strategies and timetables for meeting those goals.
- Head Start Program Performance Standards require that programs involve parents and connect them to other resources in their community, such as education, job training, mental health services and health education.

Research shows that Head Start is effective.

- Children in Head Start have demonstrated increases in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills, and writing skills in comparison to national norms, as well as gains in cooperative classroom behavior, reductions in hyperactive behavior, and improvement in other problem behaviors.³
- Cost-benefit studies of quality early childhood programs estimate returns of \$5 to \$7 for every dollar invested.⁴

Docs can get involved by helping families access Head Start and by advocating for Head Start.

- Children are eligible for Head Start if they are between the ages of 0 and 5, and if their families meet the federal poverty guidelines (\$20,000 for a family of four in 2006).⁵ Children become automatically eligible, regardless of income, if their families receive welfare or social security income or if they are in foster care.⁶ To apply, families should contact the Head Start agency in their community, which can be found by calling the Head Start Information and Publication Center at 866.763.6481 or by using the Head Start Program Search Tool at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/hsweb/index.jsp>
- The Head Start program was reauthorized in 2005. Funding for Head Start was cut by 1% for 2006, and has remained flat in the FY 2007 budget. The Senate passed an amendment to the budget resolution in March 2006 adding \$7 billion to health and education programs, one of the beneficiaries of which could be Head Start. This addition is awaiting approval from the House. (Source: National Head Start Association). Contact Docs For Tots (DFT@DocsForTots.org) to learn more about these issues or to become involved in advocating for Head Start.

Additional Resources for Docs

- "What Docs Should Know About..." Talking Points series information on Early Head Start, Child Care, and Part C Early Intervention Program, available at <http://www.docsfortots.org/resources/talkingPoints/default.asp>.
- National Head Start Association, <http://www.nhsa.org/index.htm>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Head Start Bureau, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/index.htm>

¹ Head Start Bureau website. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/research/2006.htm>.

² Coeyman, M. (2003) "Head Start's Cloudy Future." The Christian Science Monitor. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0617/p13s01-lepr.htm>.

³ Executive Summary for Head Start Family and Child Experiences Study (FACES) 2000, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/faces/reports/executive_summary/exec_summary.pdf.

⁴ National Head Start Association. "A Cost-benefit approach to understanding why Head Start is the nation's pride." http://www.nhsa.org/research/research_position_cost.htm.

⁵ The 2006 HHS Poverty Guidelines. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/06poverty.shtml>.

⁶ Head Start Bureau web site, www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb/ and Schumacher, R. & Irish, K. (2003) What's New in 2002? A Snapshot of Head Start Children, Families, Teachers and Programs. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. www.clasp.org.