

Handout 2: The Head Start Vision for Parent Involvement

THE HEAD START VISION FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT

To create and sustain a partnership and collaboration with all Head Start parents, with goals to

- support parents as primary educators, nurturers and advocates for their children;
- provide every parent with opportunities for a significant experience in Head Start; and
- ensure that parents are involved in making policy and program decisions for their Head Start program.

Each Head Start program should reflect this vision through efforts to carry out the following principles:

- all aspects of the program support the cultures of the families and the community in which the program operates
- parents have opportunities for participation and shared decision making in every area of the program
- the staff and program meets the expressed interests and needs of each parent, through an ongoing process of personal and family goal setting and partnering of activities to meet these goals
- all aspects of the program respond to and support children with disabilities and their families
- families build the confidence, skill and knowledge they need to access community resources on their own behalf
- family members and male caregivers in their parent involvement activities, especially those involving the development of their children
- parents, staff and Policy Council work together to strengthen their community, to communicate with their communities about the gifts, interests and needs of Head Start families, and to assist in improving existing services or bringing in new services that are needed.

PURPOSE OF THE VISION STATEMENT

Partnership with parents has always been a cornerstone of each Head Start program. The purpose of the Vision Statement is to describe a framework for how Head Start grantees can think about and carry out their parent involvement mission in a quality manner, which meets the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and which reflects the Head Start Parent Involvement Vision Statement.

DESCRIPTION OF THE VISION STATEMENT

It is organized into three main sections, which reflect the chronological way parents experience Head Start.

First, the program must plan and prepare for the entry of families into Head Start, focusing on:

- program development and management;
- recruitment and enrollment of children;
- orientation of parents; and
- beginning the process of goal setting and planning with parents about how to gain the most from their Head Start experience.

Second, parents experience opportunities to participate in all aspects of the program—supporting them:

- in their role as primary educators, caregivers and nurturers of their children;
- in their own personal development; and
- in their responsibility as decision-makers for themselves, their families and their Head Start programs.

Third, parents prepare to transition out of Head Start and move on to the next steps in their lives by:

- trying out and experiencing the opportunities and responsibilities that lie ahead as they continue to support the health and well being of themselves and their children; and
- actually going through the steps of leaving Head Start at the end of their children's enrollment.



PLANNING AND PREPARATION FOR ENTRY INTO HEAD START

Parent partnership and involvement begins with the first contact that a family has with Head Start. Each grantee must develop and manage a program whose policies, staffing and activities reinforce the goals of the vision statement, so that families experience Head Start as a partnership from their first encounter in recruitment and enrollment, through orientation and the beginning process of goal setting.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

The Head Start Management Team has the responsibility for developing a successful parent involvement program. The Management Team consists of the Head Start Director, Program Coordinators, the Policy Chairperson, the Grantee Director and the Grantee Board Chairperson. Together, they must ensure that policy and program development reinforces the role and responsibility of each staff person to support parent involvement and enhances the opportunity of each parent to participate fully in the Head Start experience. They must also ensure that all staff have training in the vision for parent involvement and the responsibilities of each staff person to contribute leadership in carrying out that vision.

Sometimes the members of the Management Team work independently of each other. A Head Start director initiates a major activity without consulting with the grantee director or staff. The Policy Council makes important changes in program operation or financing without consulting with the grantee board chairperson. Coordinators get excited about an idea and begin to implement it without working through the director. When this happens, no matter how important or effective the activity or policy, it will probably fail to achieve the desired results, because it does not have the full support of all the Management Team. It may also cause different parts of the organization to mistrust each other, especially if some parents want the activity or policy and others do not. Or it will confuse or conflict with other activities or policies. For all these reasons, it is very important that the Management Team work together to develop an operational style that shares information, carries out joint planning and assessment, values training, and handles conflicts and disagreements without lasting harmful effects.

To plan and prepare for families' entry into Head Start each Management Team must develop strategies which answer the following questions:

Does our Management Team reinforce the Head Start parent involvement mission through program development and management?

Does our Management Team ensure that each parent has the greatest possible opportunity for involvement in the Head Start program?

RECRUITMENT AND ENROLLMENT

The period of recruitment and enrollment is the first exposure most families have to Head Start. It is a critical time to introduce parents to the opportunity to partner with Head Start—to convey how parents and staff work together to achieve the parents' goals for themselves and their children.

Often the recruitment and enrollment steps with families are viewed by Head Start staff as getting the paperwork straight and making sure that parents have the basic information they need to decide about enrollment. For many programs which have waiting lists, recruitment is not viewed as a priority—the children and families are there, waiting to be signed up. These programs may concentrate more on getting the enrollment done and starting the program. For other programs it may be more difficult to recruit children and families and to find the most needy families in the service areas that meet the recruitment priorities established by the Policy Council. For all programs it is very important to have a strong recruitment strategy for children with disabilities.

Whether recruitment is easy or difficult, the real beginning for every parent and child is the very first contact they have with a Head Start staff person, or another parent. Because this encounter is a preview of what they can expect from their experience with Head Start, it is important that this encounter model the important opening messages about Head Start:

Head Start is interested in you and your child. We value your strengths as well as your needs. We value your culture and language. We have many interesting things to do in Head Start. We welcome you into the Head Start family.

The Head Start program needs to have strategies which answer the following question:

Does recruitment and enrollment period effectively stimulate parents' interest in the Head Start program for themselves as well as their children?

ORIENTATION

The orientation of families to Head Start is the time when families step into a more detailed awareness of the special opportunities of the Head Start experience. It is a time for welcoming, sharing information and engaging parents in beginning activities while their interest is peaked. Programs need to think very carefully about how orientation is carried out, who participates in and leads it, when it starts, over what period of time it is carried out, and how the partnership message is presented. A positive experience with orientation can set the stage for a successful long term relationship with Head Start.

The Head Start program needs to have strategies for carrying out the orientation which answer the following question:

Does the process of orientation promote parents' enthusiasm and interest in Head Start and lay the foundation for every parent to have a significant experience while they are in the program?

Family Goal Setting and Planning

The Head Start program needs to get to know each new parent, and each new parent needs to find a way to get started with Head Start. A beginning plan, developed in partnership with the parents, will help the parent get the most out of the experience for him or herself, the family and the Head Start child.

There are some very important features of the process of family goal setting and planning that must be addressed, so the partnership develops successfully:

The plan is not a one time event, or a form that is filled out during an opening interview or during enrollment. It must result from a process of interactions over a period of time.

The purpose of the plan is to help the parents begin to think: how can we get the most out of Head Start? Since parents will understand this better and better as they participate in Head Start, the plan will change, and probably become more focused as time goes by.

The planning process engages both the mother and the father or supportive person in the life of the family and the child.

The plan needs to start with identifying goals based on strengths and interests, and then assessing needs that will help families reach their goals. It should not just focus on things that are wrong or that the staff wants to “fix”.

The plan can be developed in small pieces at a time. It can start with what is most important for the parents at that time, and identify some activities and timetables to carry out those immediate goals. Later other goals and interests can be added when the parents are ready.

Whatever goes into the family’s plan, the Head Start program and the parents need to decide how they will partner to carry it out, and how they will get together from time to time to see how things are going.

By the end of the parent’s experience with Head Start, the plan should have some closing activities that will help the parent move on. These closing activities should help the parents find other resources to help the family continue to develop its interests and strengths and meet its needs.

The Head Start program needs to develop strategies for family goal setting and planning which answer the following question:

Do we develop and carry out a family goal setting and planning process that will help each parent and Head Start child get the most out of their Head Start experience?

PARTICIPATION IN HEAD START

Head Start programs support each parent on his or her journey through Head Start. In order to provide each parent with opportunities for a significant experience in Head Start, programs should offer many different kinds of experiences that will speak to each of the following variations within their families and communities:

needs	interests
strengths	cultures
personalities	attitudes
schedules	size of families
access to transportation	safety of community
weather	community resources

Some parents will want to be part of sequential, structured events, such as parent education classes and workshops. Others will want to be much more informal and spontaneous in their activities, and will prefer one time events such as socials, crafts, and parent-child activities.

Some parents will want to participate in activities at their Center. Others will only want to do things from their homes.

Some parents will want to make a long term commitment to a responsibility such as serving on the Policy Council or Health Advisory Committee, or volunteering regularly in the classroom. Others will only want to participate occasionally, such as visiting in the classroom once in a while, or occasionally showing up at an activity.

Some parents will best like working on an activity with a team of other parents. Others will prefer to make a contribution or find a way to participate in an activity they can do by themselves.

Some parents will be eager to learn new things, improve themselves, and try out new experiences. Others will be most comfortable participating in the “tried and true”, familiar and less stimulating activities.

Some parents will welcome the opportunity to get out into their communities, take on issues, and advocate for parents. Others will feel more comfortable sticking with their Center, their classroom, their children.

Some parents will find it fairly easy to organize their lives so they can find the time and energy to participate in some activities. Others will have so many difficult issues they are trying to deal with, or schedules to juggle, that they cannot extend themselves into the planned array of center-based opportunities. For them, rare and very well-supported instances of participation may be the best possibility.

The Head Start challenge is:

- to provide the opportunities for participation which meet all these variations and which “catch” parents where they interact with all parts of the program,
- to make sure that at least one staff person gets to know each parent, and to help each one figure out what fits best with his or her individual personality, interests and goals, and
- to have strategies which encourage and support each one in trying out different possibilities until the right opportunities “click”.

When they are developing and organizing their variety of parent involvement opportunities, Head Start programs should think about each area of the program, and each of the primary parent involvement goals:

- support for parents in their role of primary educator, caregiver and nurturer,
- support for parents in their own personal development, and
- support for parents as decision-makers for themselves, their children and their Head Start program.

Parents as Educators, Caregivers and Nurturers of Their Children

Most parents come to Head Start because they want to do something good for their children. This is a unique characteristic of Head Start that makes it different from most other programs designed to serve low income families. Because parents come voluntarily to the program around the needs of their children, an immediate, positive bond is established. A natural starting point for a relationship is presented. An immediate parent strength is established: “I am interested in my child’s development and I think you can help.”

Sometimes Head Start staff point out that some parents only see Head Start as a safe and supportive place to “babysit” their children leaving the parents free to pursue other activities. But even for these parents, the relationship with Head Start through the placement of their child in a safe place, is a beginning. It supports parents in feeling they can open up, share their goals and problems, try out solutions.

Head Start programs need to develop opportunities for parents to learn about child development, to try out home-based activities that reflect what is going on with their children’s developmental and classroom experiences, to visit or work in the classroom itself in order to understand how young children learn and grow, and to participate in decisions about the classroom curriculum and the education plans of children with disabilities.

“Parents” should include fathers or supportive men in the lives of the children. They must be seen as nurturing partners with the mother, and not only as the person who does work around the Head Start Center. Each program needs to find the mix of opportunities, interests, time schedules and personalities that can support male involvement with the children.

To support parents in their roles as educators, caregivers and nurturers of their young children each Head Start program should develop strategies which answer the following questions:

Do we encourage parents to participate in the child development activities as visitors, volunteers or paid employees?

Do we provide a variety of experiences for parents to work with their children at home in developmentally appropriate, educational activities?

Do we create meaningful, “user friendly” opportunities for parents to become involved in program decisions which help them better understand the needs of their young children, and help them to shape a developmentally appropriate educational program which meets these needs?

Do we support parents in learning about the health and safety needs of their children and their parental opportunities to meet these needs?

Parents' Personal Development

For many parents, Head Start is a journey whose entry point is their interest in finding something helpful for their children, but whose pathway frequently takes them through experiences related to their own personal strengths, interests, needs and hopes. Like parents everywhere, they realize that their own personal growth and development affects the growth and development of their children. Their vision for themselves affects their vision for their children.

For some parents this realization comes quickly, or perhaps they come into the program with a vision for themselves already in place. For them, Head Start may be part of a plan they have already formulated. For others it comes more deliberately, as a result of several opportunities that they enjoy, succeed at, contribute to or learn from. For these parents, life opportunities may not yet have presented a future or a vision of what is possible. Their life experiences may have profoundly discouraged them or distracted or delayed them from thinking about themselves and their futures.

Head Start programs need to develop a wide variety of options for parents to explore their personal development:

- how to master everyday life skills tasks which may still challenge them;
- how to plan for their family life together;
- identify strengths and skills they have that will help them succeed at managing their families or finding jobs;
- work on skills they would like to learn or improve;
- learn how to reduce stress, tackle problems, live a healthy lifestyle;
- create opportunities to socialize with friends and enjoy their families in a safe, healthy environment;
- participate in a community of people who value and celebrate their language and culture;

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- work with other parents and staff to address community issues and needs that are important to themselves and their families, or to support important community activities;
 - experience relationships with coaches, mentors and teachers who are interested in them and what they want to accomplish; and
 - have the opportunity to set some goals for themselves and progress toward achieving them.

As with all efforts to provide opportunities for adult personal development, Head Start programs need to provide these kinds of experiences to appeal to and meet widely differing levels of availability, interest, energy, self awareness and capacity to plan ahead.

To support the personal development of Head Start parents, each Head Start program must develop strategies which answer the following question:

Does our program have a range of personal development strategies and experiences that will offer a meaningful opportunity for each parent to participate?

Support for Parents as Partners in Decision Making For Themselves and Their Program

Head Start staff and parents frequently refer to themselves as the Head Start family or Head, Start community. They recognize they are in a partnership which shares common concerns and values about the program and the people who participate in it. One of the most important areas of this partnership is that of shared decision making.

Although most Head Start partners think of participation on the Policy Council and Center Committees as the most important area for shared decision making, in fact, this sharing in decisions goes on throughout the whole program. For example, Head Start parents make decisions about:

- the curriculum used in the classroom;
- health services, through participation on the Health Services Advisory Committee;

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- parent involvement activities, through planning groups and surveys;
 - ways in which the program can respond to and support varying cultures and languages;
 - participation in their disabled child's Individual Education Plan;
 - participation in family assessment and goal setting activities;
 - participation or provision of leadership to community groups and activities;
 - choice of activities they would like to work on at home with their children;
 - ways to volunteer in the program; and
 - serving on special committees or workgroups that are planning and carrying out specific activities or events.

Often we do not think of this wide variety of activities as involving decisions. However, they are all significant opportunities for parents to make choices and decisions that affect their lives, the lives of their children and the Head Start program itself.

To support parents as decision-makers, Head Start programs must develop strategies which answer the following questions:

Does our program expand and highlight the scope and range of opportunities for parents to participate in making decisions about themselves, their families and the program?

Do we reinforce and support the decision making responsibilities of the Policy Council and Parent Center Committees, so that parents truly share in the important responsibility to govern the program?

PREPARING TO TRANSITION FROM HEAD START

Each family needs to feel ready to move on and capable of sustaining the important experiences and opportunities gained from Head Start in their future lives.

Sometimes in Head Start we talk about parents “transitioning out into the community”, as if families are not already living in communities when they enter Head Start. What we mean by this statement is “parents moving on to the next stage of their lives in their communities, carrying with them the supports and strengths they have experienced in Head Start.” In order to provide this support, Head Start programs need to continually develop and maintain the networks and collaborations within their communities, both formal and informal.

Other times Head Start programs think of transition primarily as an experience for the child, moving from pre-school to kindergarten. They make very specific plans for helping the child with this transition, but spend fewer resources helping the parents themselves make the change.

In order to support the capacity for families, as well as the Head Start child to move on, Head Start needs to think about transition of families in two stages:

- preparing for transition by offering the opportunities to try out and experience the things that lie ahead as they continue to support the health and well being of themselves and their children; and

- actually going through the steps of leaving Head Start at the end of their children’s enrollment.

In stage one, parents have the chance to expand their knowledge about community services and resources, and to explore their strengths, interests and needs in relationship to being an active part of their community. They may learn more about how to access and manage health or social services; link up with community networks in churches, schools or neighborhood groups; serve on community committees or advisory groups or boards; discover community resources they did not know about; plan to continue a service or relationship begun under Head Start; or get a clearer picture about how to relate to their child’s new school. These opportunities and activities go on during their whole time in Head Start.

In stage two, they actually prepare for leave-taking. This is a time of reflecting on the experiences they have had in Head Start, making specific plans for what they will do over the summer and fall following the end of the school year, gathering together the records, resources and materials they acquired in Head Start, and making specific plans with their child for enrollment in kindergarten. These are activities that may take place nearer the end of their Head Start experience.

To prepare and support parents and children in their transition from Head Start each program needs to develop strategies which answer the following questions:

Does our program create parent involvement activities that enhance and strengthen the experiences, capacities and learning which parents will carry into the next stage of their lives?

Does our program help parents who are nearing the completion of their Head Start experience to prepare themselves and their children for leave taking?

