Active Supervision
A Referenced Fact Sheet from
The Head Start National Center on Health

Keeping children safe is a top priority for all Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The Head Start Program Performance Standards require that "no child shall be left alone or unsupervised while under their care" (45 CFR 1304.52[i][1][iii]). But what is active supervision and how will it benefit children and staff?

Active supervision is the most effective strategy for creating a safe environment and preventing injuries in young children. Educators from all over the world use this strategy to make sure that children of all ages explore their environments safely. Each program can keep children safe by teaching all educators how to look, listen, and engage.

What is Active Supervision?

Active supervision requires focused attention and intentional observation of children at all times. Educators (all Head Start staff who care for children) position themselves so that they can observe all of the children: watching, counting, and listening at all times. They also use their knowledge of each child's development and abilities to anticipate what they will do, then get involved and redirect them when necessary. This constant vigilance helps children learn safely.

Strategies to Put Active Supervision in Place

The following strategies allow children to explore their environments safely. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers must be directly supervised at all times. This includes daily routines such as sleeping, eating, and changing diapers or using the bathroom. Programs that use active supervision take advantage of all available learning opportunities and never leave children unattended.

Set Up the Environment

Educators set up the environment so that they can supervise children at all times. When activities are grouped together and furniture is at waist height or shorter, adults are always able to see and hear children. Small spaces are kept clutter free and big spaces are set up so that children have clear play spaces that educators can observe.

Position Staff

Educators carefully plan where they will position themselves in the environment to prevent children from harm. They place themselves so that they can see and hear all of the children in their care. They make sure there are always clear paths to where children are playing, sleeping, and eating so they can react quickly when necessary. Educators stay close to children who may need additional support. Their location helps them provide support, if necessary.

Scan and Count

Educators are always able to account for the children in their care. They continually scan the entire environment to know where everyone is and what they are doing. They count the children frequently. This is especially important during transitions, when children are moving from one location to another.

Listen

Specific sounds or the absence of them may signify reason for concern. Educators who are listening closely to children immediately identify signs of potential danger. Programs that think systemically implement additional strategies to safeguard children. For example, bells added to doors help alert educators when a child leaves or enters the room.

Anticipate Children's Behavior

Educators use what they know about each child's individual interests and skills to predict what they will do. They create challenges that children are ready for and support them in succeeding. But they also recognize when children might wander, get upset, or take a dangerous risk. Information from the daily health check (e.g., illness, allergies, lack of sleep or food, etc.) informs educators' observations and helps them anticipate children's behavior. Educators who know what to expect are better able to protect children from harm.

Engage and Redirect

Educators use active supervision skills to know when to offer children support. Educators wait until children are unable to solve problems on their own to get involved. They may offer different levels of assistance or redirection depending on each individual child's needs.

What Does Active Supervision Look Like?

To understand what active supervision might look like in your program, consider the following example. As you read the vignette, identify the specific strategies used in the bolded text.

Maria and Yasmin have taken their class of 3 year olds out to the playground for outdoor playtime. The 15-foot square playground has a plastic climber, a water/sand table, and a swing set. ***Maria and Yasmin stand at opposite corners of the playground to be able to move quickly to a child who might need assistance.***[1] *The children scatter through the playground to various areas. Some prefer the climber, while others like the swings. Many of the children play with the sand table because it is new.* ***Maria and Yasmin have agreed on a supervision plan for the children they will observe***[2] *and are always* ***counting the children in the areas closest to them, occasionally raising their fingers to***

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show each other how many children are close to them.[3] *This helps them keep track of where the children are, and to make sure no one is missing.* **If one child moves to a different area of the playground, they signal each other so that they are both aware of the child's change in location.[4]**

Maria has noticed that Felicity loves to play in the sand table. She **hears children scolding each other[5]** *and notices that Felicity throws the toys without looking. As Maria sees Felicity and Ahmed playing at the sand table,* **Maria stands behind Felicity and suggests she put the toy back in the basket when she is done with it.[6] By remaining close, she is also able to redirect Ahmed who has never seen a sand table before and throws sand at his classmates.[7] Kellan has been experimenting with some of the climbing equipment and is trying to jump off the third step onto the ground. While he is able to do this, some of the other children whose motor skills are not as advanced also try to do this. To help them build these skills, Yasmin stands close to the steps on the climbing structure.[8] She offers a hand or suggests a lower step to those who are not developmentally ready.[9]**

Maria and Yasmin signal to each other 5 minutes before playtime is over, then tell the children they have 5 minutes left to play. **When the children have 1 minute left, Maria begins to hand out colors that match color squares they have painted on the ground.[10] She asks Beto, a child who has trouble coming inside from play time, to help her.[11]** *When the children are handed a colored circle, they move to stand on the colored spot on the playground.* **As the children move to the line, Maria guides them to the right spot.[12] When all the children are in line, both Maria and Yasmin count them again. They scan the playground to make sure everyone is in place, then move the children back into the classroom.[13] They also listen to be sure that they do not hear any of the children still on the playground.[14] Yasmin heads the line and Maria takes the back end, holding Beto's hand.[15] When they return to the classroom, there are spots on the floor with the same colors that were on the playground. The children move to stand on their matching color in the classroom.[16] Maria and Yasmin take a final count, then collect the circles, and begin the next activity.[17]**

Both Yasmin and Maria are actively engaged with the children and each other, supporting the children's learning and growth while ensuring their safety. They use systems and strategies to make sure they know where the children are at all times, and to support children in developmentally appropriate risk-taking and learning.

1. Position staff	7. Engage & redirect	13. Scan & count
2. Set up the environment	8. Anticipate	14. Listen
3. Scan & count	9. Engage & redirect	15. Engage & redirect
4. Scan & count	10. Set up the environment	16. Set up the environment
5. Listen	11. Engage & redirect	17. Scan & count
6. Anticipate	12. Engage & redirect	

Self-Reflection Tool
Questions to Help You Assess Active Supervision Practices

How do we teach active supervision strategies and support educators to apply these skills in everyday practice?

How do we arrange the space to create a safe environment in classrooms, playgrounds, and family child care so that it is easy for educators to observe children?

How do we make sure that educators position themselves to be able to see the children at all times and quickly get to those who need assistance?

How do we ensure that educators continually scan and count children during both indoor and outdoor play?

How do educators assess individual children's skills and abilities, adapt activities to avoid potential injuries, and use their observational skills to anticipate when a child may need closer supervision?

How do educators engage and redirect children who need additional support?

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To understand how this approach will work for you, consider the following tool.

Active Supervision Implementation Plan		
Key Strategy	**Current Practice**	**Action Steps**
Set up the environment		
Position staff		
Scan and count		
Listen		
Anticipate children's behavior		
Engage and redirect		

Resources

Relevant Head Start Program Performance Standards
      45 CFR 1304.52(i)(1)(iii)
      45 CFR 1304.53(a)(9)
      45 CFR 1306.32(a)
      45 CFR 1306.35(a)(3)

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