

# EARLY HEAD START TIP SHEET

No. 23 – Revised

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**As Early Head Start programs design and adapt their program models based on the needs of the families they serve, how do they determine which program option(s) to offer, and the flexibility within those program options?**

**Response:**

## *Determining a program option*

Before a program can begin to plan for services, they must understand the strengths and needs of the families in the community. One of the most important features of the Head Start program is ensuring that programs are designed to meet the needs of families in local communities. Head Start and Early Head Start programs do this by completing a community assessment once every three years as required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR 1305.3).

Based on what they learn from the community assessment, programs design and adapt their services to best meet the need of the families in that community. Grantees should work with their Regional Offices to update their Grant Application Awards to meet the changing needs of their families and communities.

Programs serve families using one or more of the following program options:

- **Home-based**, which bring EHS staff into family homes every week to support child development and to nurture the parent-child relationship. Twice per month, the program offers opportunities for parents and children to come together as a group for learning, discussion, and social activity [1306.3(j); 1306.33].
- **Center-based**, which provide care and enrichment experiences to children in an early care and education setting. Staff members also visit family homes at least twice a year [1306.3(a); 1306.32; 1304.52(g)(4)].
- **Family child care**, which provide care and education are provided to children in a private home or other family-like setting (not necessarily the child's home as in the home-based option) [1306.3(n); 1306.35].
- **Combination**, which provide services to children in both a center setting and through intensive work done with the child's family in the home [1306.3(b); 1306.34].

Programs are encouraged to partner with local agencies providing child care services to best meet the needs of enrolled families (i.e. needing full-day / full-year services or non-traditional child care schedules) [1304.41(a)(2)(viii)].

## *Flexibility within program options*

EHS programs have had to be creative in their approach to providing services for families whose needs change frequently. The Early Head Start National Evaluation has shown that those programs that have been able to thoughtfully and deliberately adjust to family needs, while maintaining the integrity of their services and adherence to the Head Start Program Performance Standards, have the best outcomes for children and families in EHS. In order to meet the changing needs of families, Early Head Start (EHS) programs are encouraged to be flexible in the options they offer in two ways:

- 1) *By allowing families to move between home-based, center-based, and family child care services as their needs change.*
- 2) *By supporting families with additional home visiting services as determined by family need regardless of which program option they are enrolled.*

1) *Allowing families to move between home-based, center-based, and family child care services as their needs change.*

It can be a challenge for programs to balance the changing needs of the child and family with the funding and staffing complexities of the program. It is therefore important to incorporate careful transition planning when considering a change in program options. The flexibility of moving from one option to another better enables EHS programs to serve pregnancy through age three, since parental and child needs fluctuate over time.

The complexity of multiple options can be difficult to administer as children and families move between options. Programs need to be thoughtful about issues such as staffing patterns, caseloads, coordination of services, transition planning, and training for staff.

#### *Historical perspective*

When Early Head Start began in 1996, most of the programs started out with home-based program options. However, the impact of welfare reform led to an increase in the need for center-based child care for some families, and affected other families' availability for home visiting (Administration for Children and Families, 2003). In the face of welfare to work policies and programs, the needs of families changed. Family members who had been appropriately serviced through home-based services were now entering the work force or job training, and requiring out of home care for their children. Over time, as the employment status of parents changed, some families needed to reenter home-based services. EHS programs quickly learned that they needed to accommodate changing family needs by offering multiple program options.

2) *Supporting families with additional home visiting services as determined by family need regardless of which program option they are enrolled.*

EHS programs have found that some families need more support than their enrolled program option allows. As staff members focus on the parent-child relationship, they find they need additional time with the parent and child in order to facilitate strengthening this relationship. Some EHS programs opt to enhance their services with additional home visits for some families, mainly focusing on parenting and attachment issues.

Some EHS programs working with families with multiple challenges (such as teen parents or very high risk families) see a need to provide additional support through regularly scheduled home visits in addition to center-based care. Yet, other programs consider it best practice to provide regular home visits for all center-based families, and incorporate that into their program model. Increasing home visits adds additional costs to the program and increases the complexity of staff roles and responsibilities.

EHS is required to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards for the program option that the child is enrolled. However, if the family is receiving additional home visits while enrolled the center-based or family child care option, there is no requirement for the frequency and length of these visits. The EHS program, based on family need, determines what the additional home visiting services will be.

## **Questions to Consider for Planning and Programming:**

- Does the program engage in ongoing community assessments?
- What did the last community assessment indicate about the value of the services currently offered? Is the program offering home-based services when the need in the community is for more center-based care? What else is needed by families in the community?
- Does the program have opportunities for staff training in areas of home visiting and center-based services?
- Are families fully engaged in the options currently offered? If not, is the program asking the question, “why not?”
- Are there other community services offering home visits and/or center-based care? Are there gaps? Is there a potential for partnerships?
- How does the program build relationships with families characterized by mutual trust and ongoing communication?
- How does the program work with families and children as they transition between options?
- Is the program accessing other funding streams that help support mixed model services?
- A number of EHS programs are serving homeless families, so this may be a population to consider in terms of additional and enhanced support.
- How does the program plan and coordinate the availability of slots and staff with the changing needs of the families, such as when services to a pregnant family change to require services for the born child, or when a family needs to transition from home based to center based services?
- How does the program address continuity of care issues when a family moves from one program option to another?

## **Performance Standards, Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations:**

- 1304.51(a)(1)(i) Grantee and delegate agencies must develop and implement a systematic, ongoing process of program planning that includes consultation with the program’s governing body, policy groups, and program staff, and with other community organizations that serve Early Head Start and Head Start or other low-income families with young children. Program planning must include an assessment of community strengths, needs and resources through completion of the Community Assessment, in accordance with the requirements of 45 CFR 1305.3.
- 1305.3(c)(2) Each Early Head Start and Head Start grantee agency must conduct a Community Assessment within its service area once every three years...
- 1305.3(d)(2) The Early Head Start and Head Start grantee and delegate agency must use information from the Community Assessment to determine the type of component services that are most needed and the program option or options that will be implemented.
- 1304.40(a)(1) Grantee and delegate agencies must engage in a process of collaborative partnership-building with parents to establish mutual trust and to identify family goals, strengths, and necessary services and other supports. This process must be initiated as early after enrollment as possible and it must take into consideration each family’s readiness and willingness to participate in the process.
- 1304.40(h)(1) Grantee and delegate agencies must assist parents in becoming their children’s advocate as they transition both into Early Head Start or Head Start from the home or other

child care setting, and from Head Start to the elementary school, a Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act preschool program, or a child care setting.

- 1306.35 Family Child Care Program Option  
<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/Program%20Design%20and%20Management/Head%20Start%20Requirements/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1306/1306.35%20Family%20child%20care%20program%20option.htm>
- 1306.31(a) Grantees may implement one or more than one of four program options: a center-based option, a home-based program option, a combination program option, or a family child care option.
- 1306.31(b) The program option chosen must meet the needs of the children and families as indicated by the community needs assessment conducted by the grantee.
- 1306.31(c) When assigning children to a particular program option, Head Start grantees that operate more than one program option must consider factors as the child's age, developmental level, disabilities, health or learning problems, previous preschool experiences and family situations. Grantees must also consider parents' concerns and wishes prior to making final assignments.
- 1304.41(a)(2)(viii) Grantees and delegate agencies must take affirmative steps to establish ongoing collaborative relationships with community organizations to promote access of children and families to community services that are responsive to the needs, and to ensure that Early Head Start and Head Start programs respond to community needs, including providers of child care services.

## **Resources:**

Administration for Children and Families. *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families: The impacts of Early Head Start*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2002. <http://www.caajlh.org/caaehs.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2009).

Administration for Children and Families. *Pathways to quality and full implementation of Early Head Start*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2003.

Early Head Start National Resource Center. *Transition Strategies: Continuity and change in the lives of infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2004.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Training guides for the Head Start learning community: Infant and toddler transitions*. Washington, DC: Head Start Bureau. 1999.

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*This Tip Sheet is not a regulatory document. Its intent is to provide a basis for dialogue, clarification, and problem solving among Office of Head Start, Regional Offices, TA consultants, and grantees. If you need further clarification on Head Start Policies and regulations, please contact your Regional Program Specialist.*