

HEALTH LITERACY



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Health

Tips for Health Managers from the Head Start National Center on Health

What Is Health Literacy?



Health literacy is how well someone is able to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and health care services to make good health choices.

Health literacy includes the ability to read and understand:

- Prescriptions
- Directions
- Medical forms
- Patient education materials

Why Is It Important?

Health literacy is important because it affects people's ability to:

- Use healthcare services
- Ask questions and share information
- Take care of themselves and family members
- Manage diseases like asthma and diabetes
- Change unhealthy behaviors
- Follow through on medical advice

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10 things you should know

- 1 All health information should be easy to read and given to families in their “home language.”
- 2 Know your families and their health needs.
- 3 Know your families’:
 - Language needs
 - Level of education
 - Cultural backgrounds
- 4 Help all families feel at ease if they need help by:
 - Keeping information short and simple
 - Asking everyone if they need help filling out forms
 - Making it easy for parents to ask for help in different ways such as phone, in person, notes, or through a friend or family member
- 5 Help families set goals that promote health. For example, talk with them about adding more fruits and vegetables to their meals or increasing their physical activity in small ways. Work with your families to understand and overcome the barriers they see to reaching these goals.
- 6 Create a health literacy action plan for your agency that includes:
 - A review of written materials for ease and reading levels
 - Feedback from families about what works
 - Feedback from staff about what works
- 7 Model healthy eating and physical activity habits. Make sure your program’s wellness and nutrition policies are available to families in a way that makes sense to them.
- 8 Plan a workshop on health literacy for your staff and for your health service advisory council.
- 9 Make sure your health messages are understood by doing the following:
 - Focus on key points and repeat
 - Listen actively
 - Ask families to “teach back” what they have heard
 - Confirm verbal messages with written information and pictures
 - Encourage questions by asking “What questions do you have for me?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”
- 10 If possible, attend a health literacy course. This will:
 - Help you learn more about health and health promotion
 - Help with family engagement
 - Assist you in helping parents become better first-line caretakers when their children are sick. This helps to avoid unnecessary trips to the emergency room and missing school or work

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Supporting health literacy includes:

- Being aware of literacy and language needs
- Helping parents understand basic health information
- Modeling skills and actions that help parents and children make healthy choices
- Helping parents understand their role in the health of their children
- Providing resources and education

Adults with low health literacy are more likely to:

- Be in poor health
- Make mistakes taking medicine
- Spend more time in the hospital
- Have higher health care costs
- Have more days of lost work because of illness

Children of caregivers with low health literacy are more likely to:

- Be sick more often
- Not get the care they need
- Have unhealthy behaviors
- Have trouble with illnesses like asthma and diabetes
- Miss more days of school

Low health literacy is greater among people:

- With low incomes
- With limited education
- From minority populations
- With limited English proficiency (LEP)
- Who are older adults

Key Resources for Head Start Managers

National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy: <http://www.health.gov/communication/hlactionplan/>

How to create clear communications: http://pilot.train.hrsa.gov/uhc/pdf/module_02_job_aid_clear_health_comm_checklist.pdf

IOM reports on health literacy:

- <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2004/Health-Literacy-A-Prescription-to-End-Confusion.aspx>
- <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Health-Literacy-eHealth-and-Communication-Putting-the-Consumer-First-Workshop-Summary.aspx>

CDC Health Literacy: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/>

UCLA Health Care Institute: <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x682.xml>

