



Health Services Newsletter

The New Head Start Health Services Competencies

Introduction

The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness (NCECHW) is pleased to introduce the Head Start Health Services Competencies. The competencies are a science-informed framework for successfully performing functions related to Head Start health services. Programs can use them to build their capacity to provide high quality health services to children and families. Staff can use them to identify areas where they may need additional professional development.

The newly released competencies are an optional set of tools—not required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards—to help health services staff and consultants to strengthen their attitudes, knowledge and skills. The quality of health services depends on the knowledge, skills, and experience of the individuals who are responsible for these services.

Competencies are one way for an individual to determine what he or she values or does not value; knows or does not know; and can or cannot do.

Many science-informed resources from the fields of Head Start, early childhood health, and health care delivery systems informed the development of the competencies. NCECHW drafted the competencies after reviewing more than two-dozen sets of competencies and performance measures, qualifications, and credentialing for early care and education and health personnel, including the Head Start Program Performance Standards; *Caring for Our Children, National Health and Safety Performance Standards for Early Care and Education Programs*, 3rd Edition; two descriptive studies of Head Start health services; and the report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*.

In 2015 the Institute of Medicine, now known as the Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, released *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*. This report cites both the importance of professional competencies and aligning professional learning and workforce development with those competencies. It recommends a shared knowledge base and set of competencies for the early childhood workforce. The report also highlights the need for specific competencies for the many roles in early care and education programs.



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Four principles guided the development of the competencies.

1. High-quality early childhood health and nutrition services provide the foundation for lifelong wellness.
2. The quality of health services that programs provide improves when directors and health managers have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to manage health services effectively.
3. Competencies create an evidence-informed framework for supervisors and staff to build upon identified areas of strength and intentionally attend to areas for improvement.

And perhaps most importantly,

4. Families are the primary decision makers for their children's health.

The Head Start Health Services Competencies: A Tool to Support Health Managers and Staff

The Head Start Health Services Competencies: A Tool to Support Health Managers and Staff (the Competencies Tool) is the full set of competencies with some background information. There are a total of 68 competencies, each indicating an attitude, knowledge base, or skill set associated with science-informed practices for early childhood health staff. They include attitudes in addition to knowledge and skills, because NCECHW believes that health values and beliefs contribute to the delivery of effective health services.

The competencies are not an exhaustive list—some people will know or be able to do considerably more than what is described in the tool. Nor are they a template for a job description. Many programs have multiple personnel carrying out health related tasks such as a nurse, health aide, oral health coordinator, mental health professional, nutritionist or a consultant who perform some of these responsibilities.

The competencies are categorized into four groups: Overarching, Child and Family Health, Engaging Families, and Leadership. The overarching competencies reflect the most critical set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. They form a foundation for high quality health services within Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

The eleven Overarching Competencies address the general principles of health and wellness, including promotion, prevention, early identification, and intervention, as well as the risk factors that make some people healthy, and other people unhealthy. These personal, social, economic, and environmental factors can contribute to health disparities among culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

The Child and Family Health Competencies address the healthy growth and development of young children from birth to five years of age, family well-being, and Head Start requirements regarding the health and safety of children, families, and staff. This is the largest category of competencies. There are 32 individual competencies in this category. Three of these competencies are unique to Early Head Start.

While the Engaging Families Competencies is the smallest category, it is a key element of the principles that informed the development of all of the competencies. The Engaging Families competencies reflect the relationship-based approach found in the [Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework](#) and [Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-Based Competencies for Staff and Supervisors Who Work with Families](#). They recognize that families are the primary decision makers for their children's health, engagement is relational, and it promotes positive child and family outcomes.

Finally, the Leadership Competencies recognize the fact that many health staff hold management positions or other jobs that require leadership skills. These competencies address how to effectively manage and lead Head Start health services. Staff can also use them to consider effective strategies to work collaboratively with families, other program staff, individual providers, health organizations, and service delivery systems.

The Head Start Health Services Competencies Professional Development Assessment

The *Head Start Health Services Competencies Professional Development Assessment* (also known as the PDA) is designed to be used with the Competencies Tool. Individual staff members and their supervisors can use the PDA to record strengths as well as areas in which an ongoing professional development plan may be helpful. The PDA allows the user to consider each competency by measuring accomplishments as basic, proficient, advanced or expert. Staff can identify their strengths and areas for future development.

At the basic level individuals successfully perform their job responsibilities. Staff understand and use introductory concepts and methods. They require regular coaching and support.

The proficient and advanced levels provide room for growth and learning. At the proficient level staff work independently and are able to understand and use introductory concepts and methods. Staff use data effectively and can plan and guide the work of others. At the advanced level staff understand and consistently use more complex concepts and methods as well as perform in-depth analyses. They can lead and direct other staff, specialists, and consultants.



At the expert level staff have a deep, specialized expertise. They play a leadership and mentoring role within their organization, community, and among their peers. Staff at the expert level have achieved mastery and can mentor others in that particular competency.

Consider that everyone learns in his or her own way, and individuals will be at varying proficiency levels in different competencies within any category.

In addition to encouraging individual professional improvement, these tools also have implications for the whole program. For example, programs can also use the Competencies Tool to:

- Explore values and ideas about health care practices;
- Examine how to communicate with families about health topics;
- Hire and supervise health services staff; and
- Create individualized professional development plans for health staff.



Using The Competencies Tool and PDA together can build the capacity of individual Head Start staff as well as agencies to provide high quality health services to young children.

Download copies of the Head Start Health Services Competencies and the Professional Development Assessment from the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/health-services-management/competencies.html>.



NATIONAL CENTER ON Early Childhood Health and Wellness

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