

BUS MONITORS AND PLACEMENT

Question: I understand the Head Start teacher-child ratio in the classroom is 1:10. Does this also apply when transporting children on the bus? Currently, we adhere to state child care licensing ratios while riding on the bus.

Answer: Head Start does not require that programs meet the same ratio because the children are all in child safety restraints and are doing a limited activity. Some state licensing requires that programs meet the ratio. Head Start's rule states that programs have at least one bus monitor. If there are children with exceptional needs, then programs should provide additional staffing as necessary. Programs must follow the more stringent of the rules when state or Tribal rules conflict with federal regulations.

Question: My program has children that ride the bus on a rural route. The driver takes the bus home after the route, and so the monitor does not have a way back to school. Therefore, we do not have monitors on all rural route buses. Does a waiver have to be done with the school system each year?

Answer: Head Start requires that there be a monitor on the bus until the route is complete. If it is necessary for a driver to take the bus home, the route should be planned so that the last child is dropped off before the monitor is dropped off. In some cases, programs may be able to employ monitors who live in the same communities as children and can be conveniently picked up before the first child and dropped off after the last child each day.

Question: Do you recommend that a center use the same bus monitor every day or different bus monitors?

Answer: It is critical that bus monitors have the required training to perform their role and ensure child safety. Active supervision also is key. Programs should make it clear to monitors that their job is to be constantly listening, looking, and counting children. Monitors should also be following the agencies' procedures for taking attendance as children enter and exit the bus and are released to parents or approved caregivers.

Question: Is there a recommended place for the monitor to sit on the bus (front, back, middle) in order to provide effective monitoring of all children and also the bus surroundings?

Answer: The bus monitor's seating should be based on the safety and needs of the children on board. Bus monitors may need to sit close to a child with special needs, such as a health problem or behavioral concerns. It is important to note that adults riding on the bus must use seat belts. Unrestrained adults on a bus could injure children in the event of a crash.

Question: Are public school systems required to have a bus monitor on the school bus when there are Head Start, Early Head Start, pre-K or children on board?

Answer: Many school systems do have monitors on school buses transporting preschool-age children. In some cases, when the district transports children to Head Start, Head Start employs the bus monitors. In cases where the school district transports a few Head Start children each on many buses, the Head Start grantee may request a waiver of the monitor requirement.

Question: Is there a rule on how many monitors are needed per child?

Answer: Head Start requires one bus monitor per vehicle providing Head Start transportation services. Based on the needs of the children, programs may need to provide additional monitors. Some states also require more than one monitor. Programs must follow the more stringent of the rules when state or Tribal rules conflict with federal regulations.

Question: What is your opinion of a bus with 50 children on it? Should there be two bus monitors for better safety?

Answer: The Head Start regulations require one monitor with more as necessary to meet the needs of the children. Many programs would find that helping 50 children safely board and exit, as well as be seated in age and weight appropriate safety restraints, would require more than one monitor.

Question: We have a child who uses a wheelchair, doesn't speak, and requires a feeding tube. Would you recommend extra monitor on bus?

Answer: If a child requires frequent care during the route, it may be necessary to provide an additional bus monitor. Programs also must be aware of any transportation-related Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or other requirements.

CHILD RESTRAINTS

Question: Can you provide clarification about the regulations regarding child restraints?

Answer: The Head Start Program Performance Standards require that when children are receiving Head Start transportation they must be in age- and weight-appropriate child safety restraints. Some programs have received waivers if they are working with school districts that are providing transportation, but there is no waiver for children birth to 3.

Question: Is there any guidance on getting newly enrolled children acclimated to being strapped in? We operate Migrant and Seasonal Head Start centers and children enroll at different times.

Answer: Part of the reason Head Start thinks it is so important that kids are in safety restraints on school buses is we want to bring up children knowing they buckle up when they get in a vehicle. It starts when they are infants in their rear-facing car seats and it progresses through life. We also know there are lots of populations where there is low compliance with the use of child safety restraints and very low adult compliance with seatbelts.

Head Start encourages programs to do activities in the classroom and at home, such as buckling up teddy bears in play car seats. Children love this activity. There is a study that shows children were more likely to encourage their parents to buckle up if there was a Buckle Bear program in schools. You may also want to work with parents in telling the child seatbelts and car seats are safe.

Question: I'm going to have a 130lb child coming in, whom I believe is quite tall. What is my limit for restraints vs. seatbelts?

Answer: There are 4-year-old children who weigh over 100 pounds, and some people have wondered if that means they do not need a child safety restraint. They do. Even if the child is tall for age 4 or 5, their stature and skeletal system are such that they still need to be in a child safety restraint. There are a

number of products that work really well. There are vests that work with the school bus seatbelts that can be used with larger children. There also are products that have been developed for children with special needs.

Question: What is the size and age of a child who should be in a booster seat? Most buses only have lap belts, and booster seats require lap/shoulder combo belts.

Answer: Again, many programs have found that a safety vest works very well for most children. It is an easy solution. In fact, you can use vests with buses that are not seatbelt-equipped because there is a device called the "cam-wrap" that goes around the back of the seat. There are a number of other products that are available as well. Learn more about the use of various child safety restraint systems at <http://www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/buses/busseatbelt/>.

Question: Are there harness waivers for contracted transportation vendors?

Answer: Contracted providers of Head Start transportation services must comply with the regulations.

Question: Occasionally, when a bus has mechanical problems, our bus contractor wants to send us a bus without restraints for a day or two while repairs are made. Is this permissible?

Answer: No. The contractor must provide a vehicle with appropriate child safety restraints. If the vehicle is not equipped with integrated seats, they may have harnesses available for use on substitute vehicles.

Question: Can you discuss shelf life of child restraints? Most companies recommend replacing after 5 years?

Answer: You should follow the manufacturer's guidelines for the replacement of child safety restraint systems. Most programs benefit from having a planned replacement program for vehicles (if applicable) and child safety restraint systems built into their operating budget.

Question: What if a parent does not want their child buckled down in a seatbelt? What would you tell the monitor and driver?

Answer: Programs must ensure that parents and guardians understand that children will only be transported in appropriate child safety restraint systems. If a parent objects, it is important to find out what their concern is and to address it in any way possible. If, for example, the parent was concerned about the possibility of a fire on the bus, Head Start staff can explain that buses have special protections that make fires very rare and that the risks of injury due to bouncing out of a seat compartment are much greater.

DISTANCE OF BUS ROUTES

Question: How far must a child live from the school to qualify for transportation?

Answer: The Office of Head Start (OHS) does not have a rule. It is not an issue of distance; it is an issue of having access to the center. If a parent lives five blocks away and has no ability to get the child to the Head Start center, then there is a need for transportation.

Programs establish their own policies and procedures based on family and community needs. The core of Head Start's mission is to enroll the highest need families and to assess and help mitigate barriers so that families can participate.

Question: We always plan our bus route to be less than the one hour. Sometimes during winter months we go over that hour. Is that okay?

Answer: There is a big misunderstanding that programs cannot exceed an hour. The language in the regulation is that programs should do everything possible to avoid exceeding an hour. We have many places in the country where it is impossible to do that. The key is that programs are planning routes as safely and efficiently as possible. When children must be on buses for a long time, every effort should be made to engage children in enjoyable and meaningful activity, such as story time, singing, or conversations between the monitor and children.

Question: Does the state law regarding riding time take precedent?

Answer: Programs must follow the more stringent of the rules when state or Tribal rules conflict with federal regulations.

Question: Is it okay to select a centrally located pick up area for families in far outlying areas with a lot of geographic area to cover?

Answer: There is no prohibition against a central pick-up and drop-off point. Obviously, such a location must allow curbside vehicle entry and exit and be a safe location for parents and children to wait.

Question: For Head Start transportation of children ages 3 to 4 years old, should the bus route be door-to-door or at an assigned bus stop with their parents?

Answer: There is no prohibition against a central pick-up and drop-off point. Obviously, such a location must allow curbside vehicle entry and exit and be a safe location for parents and children to wait.