

VIRTUAL LEARNING AT HOME IN EARLY HEAD START AND HEAD START

Early Head Start and Head Start programs are seeking guidance on best practices to ensure children's continued learning and to support families and children in the home while programs are physically closed or have reduced onsite services. Virtual learning, particularly in birth-to-age-5 settings, is an emerging approach to education. There are many important considerations when determining when, how, and with whom to implement virtual learning strategies.

As programs grapple with virtual learning, it's important to remember that the key component is starting with thoughtful, respectful, and intentional partnering with families. When this kind of partnering is in place, programs are positioned to effectively support learning at home by focusing on and nurturing the parent-child relationship. Program staff can help parents by reminding them that their main job is to take care of themselves and to keep children as safe and secure as possible during this time. Programs can help parents incorporate learning in the home by providing them with child-family activities in the language they understand best and that are low stress, build on natural routines in the home, that help children feel safe and know what is expected, and are easy to implement.

Supporting learning at home through virtual strategies cannot and will not happen without genuine partnerships that allow programs to assess the family's strengths and needs, identify achievable and realistic goals, agree on practices for families to try with children, and put in place measures to track progress.

The Office of Head Start (OHS) offers the following guidance when determining best practices for virtual learning.



1. FIRST, TAKE A BREATH

We are all worried about families and children during these times. Parents still want what is best for their children, and we want to help them achieve their goals. It's important to remember that if you follow your own guidelines and meet the requirements of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), you are already starting from a good place. There are still many unknowns, but knowing that you are working hard to make the best decisions for children, their families, and your staff is an important place to begin.

2. REMEMBER WE KNOW HOW TO DO THIS

Head Start has long been recognized for excellence in parent and family engagement. Partnering with families to achieve children's school readiness goals is a core principle of the Head Start program.

3. USE YOUR DATA, OHS GUIDANCE, LOCAL INFORMATION AND COMMON- SENSE JUDGEMENT WHEN DECIDING HOW TO APPROACH VIRTUAL LEARNING WITH FAMILIES

- Virtual learning approaches must be individualized for each family's situation. Every family is impacted by the current crisis differently. Some parents work full-time outside the homes, some work staggered hours, some work multiple jobs, some work from home, and some are out of work. Some families have multiple adults in the home, others do not. Conduct individual planning with each family to determine how long virtual learning will take place, who will be involved, and what languages they will use. If no staff speak the family's language, a plan must be in place "to ensure effective communication with the parents in their preferred language, such as through the use of community partners, consultants, interpretation services, or software, or other technology options." Figuring out a plan that honors families' situation and strengths and meets their needs requires individualization, open two-way communication, and coordination. Allow time and space for parents to share their experiences and concerns. Talking with parents gives them reassurance and support.

- Coordination is critical. Family services, education, disability services, mental health, and early intervention staff must work together to ensure a coordinated approach to family engagement. This will minimize overburdening families during this time. Remember that many families are under enormous stress. We do not want them to have to juggle appointments with multiple people or duplicate all the educational experiences of a center. They should focus on keeping themselves and their children safe and healthy while working toward learning goals at their pace with support from program staff.
- Flexibility is key. Programs must be ready to change course as local conditions evolve. OHS has “empowered grantee leadership to make decisions that support Head Start children and families first, and also help others in need” by allowing flexibility when implementing services. For more information, see [Supporting Emergency Child Care Beyond Head Start](#).

4. USE THE RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS ON THE ECLKC

There are many resources on the ECLKC that programs can use to help navigate the virtual learning process with families. Managers should check the [COVID-19 & the Head Start Community](#) page for guidance from OHS, new resources, and additional information to support staff and families during these challenging times. Encourage education staff and managers to continue to use the [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework \(ELOF\)](#) to guide decisions about curricula and age-appropriate learning expectations for children. The National Centers on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning and Parent, Family, and Community Engagement have partnered to create the following additional resources:

- **Ideas to Help Education Staff Plan for Virtual Learning and Suggestions for At-Home Learning**

This document offers important considerations and guidance for virtual learning strategies. Discuss each point with your team to determine your theory of change and virtual learning approach with children and families.

- **Using the Family Partnership Process to Support Virtual Learning in the Home**

Read this scenario-based resource, adapted from *The Family Partnership Process: Engaging and Goal Setting with Families*, to learn how to incorporate a virtual learning approach with families using the [Family Partnership Process](#) and [Seven Steps for Setting and Reaching Goals with Families](#). Walk through the steps and discuss the reflection questions with your team to help generate strategies for your program.

- **Draft Daily Schedules for Infants Under 12 months, 12- to 18-Month-Olds, and 2- to 4-Year-Olds**

These draft daily schedules provide examples of a home daily schedule for children over 1 year old. For children under 1 year old, schedules should be individualized to each child’s daily sleeping, waking, and feeding schedule. It is important to develop daily schedules in partnership with families to ensure they are tailored to meet the specific family culture and needs.