

Disabilities Newsletter Tips for Families

Head Start and Early Head Start staff can use these resources to support families whose children have special needs. These resources are from the Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletter, which offers tips for parents on a number of topics including parent education on disability issues, setting predictable routines, and autism.

The Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletter is produced monthly by the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL). Select this link to view previous [Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletters](#) on the Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC).

Beginning the Journey

Learn more about special education and early intervention services with these resources for families of children with disabilities.

Inspiring Intervention: The Power of Family

Around the world, families are acknowledged as important partners in their child's learning.



When young children with disabilities are provided with early intervention services that meet their individual needs, outcomes improve for the whole family. This video from Open Society Foundations, entitled [Early Childhood Intervention and the Power of Family](#), shows the effects that early intervention can have on children around the world. The video illustrates how the support of a child's family is critical to his or her success later in life.

Parents Helping Parents—Planning Ahead for an IEP Meeting

Parents who have been part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) are in a unique position to help other parents in similar circumstances. The [Pacer Center's](#) resources are rooted in the parents-helping-parents philosophy. This website includes more than 100



handouts about special education written by parents, for parents. The [‘Plan Ahead for Academic Success Using the IEP Meeting’ Checklist](#) is especially useful for families going through the IEP process for the first time. The categories “Before the Meeting” and “At the Meeting” in this handout will help you prepare and know what to expect. The checklist also includes a list of frequently used terms and definitions to help you to decipher the new vocabulary.

Families can find more information on the [All About the IEP](#) page located on the [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#) website.

Parent Training and Information Centers

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) provide nationwide training and assistance to families of children with disabilities. The Centers are funded by the Department of Education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Every state has at least one. Find your local center and learn more by visiting the [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#).

Easy Ways to Record Your Child's Progress

Did your child just say a new word? Teachers aren't the only ones who can record progress.



Families can also play a major role! Start with an easy-to-use system. Write new words in a notebook to share with your child's teacher. Take videos or photos of your child coloring or finding letters in a book. For simple, fun, everyday activities that also teach math, reading, and language skills, see [Parents and Families as Teachers](#) on the ECLKC.

[Milestone Moments](#), from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), lists developmental milestones for children from 2 months to 5 years of age. These guidelines can help you share with your child's teacher the growth and learning you see at home.

Screening, Evaluation, and Assessment—What are the Differences?

These terms can seem confusing! Screening, evaluation, and assessment are separate processes that serve different purposes. *Screenings* are the first step to identify children who may need more testing to see if they have a delay in development, under the provisions of Part C (early intervention program for infants and toddlers) and Part B (services for school age children) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). *Evaluations* show if there in fact is a delay or disability. *Assessments* give ongoing information, over time, about children's levels of performance and their early intervention or educational needs. You'll find more information about the differences between [screening](#) and [assessment](#) on the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHSNRC) portal on the [Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center](#).

Creating Predictable Routines

Find resources on how to build simple and efficient routines for you and your child at home and in the community.

Please, Just Do What I Say

"Why won't she do what I ask her to do?" Parents often struggle to find the best way to give directions to their children without causing meltdowns. Sometimes it's as easy as reframing the direction. Other times, the key is to find the right type of praise or encouragement. The [Challenging Behaviors Tip Sheet on Following Directions](#) highlights six ideas that family members can use.

Hurry Up! We're Going to be Late!

"Quick, get your shoes on! Did you brush your teeth?" Parents often struggle to get their



children out the door on time without feeling rushed and frazzled.

Sometimes it's as easy as creating a morning routine. Other times, it's deciding which tasks children can do on their own and which tasks they need help with. The [Challenging Behaviors Tip Sheet on Leaving the House](#) highlights six ideas that families can use to help get everybody out the door (somewhat) on time and feeling (relatively) calm.

Are We There Yet?

The [Challenging Behaviors Tip Sheet on Riding in the Car](#) highlights activities to keep children engaged during car rides. Consider borrowing children's music from the library to play in the car, keeping favorite books in the car, or playing "I Spy." Additional [Challenging Behavior Tip Sheets](#) about visiting the grocery store, cleaning up toys, and other topics are available from the [Head Start Center for Inclusion](#).

Your Evening Routine: Smooth Going?

After a long day, parents want to give children the attention they desire. But when dinner needs to be made, it's bath night, and bedtime is just around the corner, parents often feel they have nothing left to give. One idea is to create small, manageable routines like these:

- Take off shoes, coats, and backpacks and put them in the same spot each evening before heading to the bathroom to wash hands.
- Place a shoebox full of books, puzzles, and a notebook with crayons near the kitchen, ready to keep little hands busy while dinner is being prepared.
- Create a bedtime routine with your child. Allow them to choose the order of events including:
 - 1) brushing teeth,
 - 2) reading a book,
 - 3) singing a song, and
 - 4) a kiss goodnight.

Children and parents may come to enjoy the predictability of consistent evening routines. When everyone knows what to expect, evenings can go more smoothly!

Stories about Me, and My Everyday Routines

Children who have difficulties with social interactions often don't know how they're supposed to behave. Social Stories™ are short stories that were developed by [Carol Gray](#) to help



children make sense of events and the expectations of other people. In Social Stories™, the child becomes the main character of their own social interaction or routine. Topics include bath time and bedtime expectations, riding the bus, and staying close when shopping. Parents and teachers can [download Social Stories](#) from the Head Start Center for Inclusion. Parents may want to modify the ideas and write stories specifically for their child.

Come On, Eat Your Veggies. Close Your Eyes and Go To Sleep!

Families often struggle with how to get their children to eat healthy foods and get enough sleep. For families who have a child with a disability, healthy eating and good sleeping habits can seem downright impossible. Try the ideas in [Nutrition and Children with Disabilities](#) and [Helping Your Child Sleep Better](#), from the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. The center offers other tip sheets for families, covering a variety of topics like [fitness](#), [going to the doctor](#), and [getting outdoors](#).

Healthy Habits with First Lady Michelle Obama

Big Bird's dancing in the White House, and Elmo's got the moves! Children with disabilities need to have good models of physical activity and healthy eating in their lives. Parents, family, and caregivers can find fun ways to encourage their children's healthy habits with [Sesame Street Healthy Habits for Life](#). There are read-along songs and poems, recipe cards, and quick, easy activities that will get everyone moving.

Mayhem at Mealtime?



After you create healthy meals, what can you do besides just hope that children will eat what's on their plates? For children with special needs, it might take extra planning (and patience) to get mealtimes to run more smoothly. Here are some tips from experts:

- **Seating:** Make sure your child sits comfortably in his chair. If his feet don't reach the floor, place a box or carton under his feet so he can feel a solid surface while eating. Provide a special cushion (with a washable cover) for your child to use during mealtimes, unless it adds more distraction. For infants and toddlers, make sure they're sitting comfortably and that their high-chair or booster seat is positioned correctly.
- **Clear expectations:** How would you like mealtimes to go? Take small steps toward that goal. Ask yourself, do I want my child to sit at the table during meals or can I allow him to stand? How long would I like him to stay at the table? Do I want him to taste each new food, or could I allow him to smell or touch it first?
- **Create routines:** Consistent routines help children learn to predict the order of activities in their day. Create pictures of the dinner routine; while I make dinner, you can listen to music. Then after you eat dinner, I'll read you a book.

Learning at Home

These are ideas for quick and easy ways to help you include more learning into your child's day. Look for resources about numbers, books, and even technology!

1, 2, 3—Is Counting Enough?

Your child is a natural observer. Children with special needs often need clear guidance on what to pay attention to. [A Family Note on Finding the Math](#) gives examples of how family members can help their children use every day experiences to learn early math skills like counting and measuring.

Summer Fun with Books

Experts agree that parents who read storybooks with their children help them develop better language and literacy skills. Take advantage of the summer months to read stories and talk with your children about books. [Reading is Fundamental](#) provides ideas for activities that families can do to promote reading and learning during the summer, such as visiting the library or making a list of your family's favorite ice cream flavors. Check out [easy ways to keep kids reading](#), [fun summer activities](#), and [summer boredom busters](#).



Screen Time—Navigating your Child's Media and Technology World

It can be challenging to stay informed about technology and teach your child how to interact with it safely. The [Children and Media](#) section on the [Parenting pages of the Public Broadcasting Services \(PBS\)](#) website is full of information for parents. Topics include TV and movies, video games, computers, and advertising. Parents of children with special needs will appreciate the [Creating with Media: Preschoolers](#) page, which shows creative, fun, and easily adaptable ways to introduce your child to digital media. Some ideas include:

- Making a recording of your child singing or reciting funny words and play it back for him or her,
- Helping your child send a text message or an email to a friend or family member,
- Printing out black-and-white photos and let your child color them with markers or crayons, or
- Talking about the beginning, middle, and end of a story when you watch a TV program together.

Let's Go Play (and Learn) Outside!

"I see something orange. Do you?"

"Why is this leaf wet?"

"Can you draw the yellow flower?"



During the summer there are so many fun ways you can be outside and help your child make progress on their learning objectives in language and communication, fine and gross motor skills, and pre-academic goals. Take a look at [10 Ideas to Get You and Your Child Exploring Outdoors](#), from the [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#), for simple and fun activities you and your child can do together.

Language Development

This resource gives tips to help develop your child's language skills through music and song.

Language Development Tips

Families may sign up through [The Hanen Centre](#) to receive emails with free tips for communicating with children with language delays or social communication difficulties. The Centre sends out tips for parents of children who communicate without words, have just started talking, or who talk in sentences.

One tip from The Hanen Centre to help increase engagement in children who communicate without words is to sing simple songs together, especially songs with actions like “Row, Row, Row your Boat.” Build in opportunities for your child to participate and respond. This is a fun way for him or her to learn to take his or her turn in an interaction, as well as to learn new words.

- Sing a new song the same way a few times so your child learns the song and it’s “high point.” High points are the most interesting parts of a song. In “Row, Row, Row your Boat,” the high points are the rocking back and forth while you and your child sit on the floor, holding outstretched hands, and saying the last word after a long pause – i.e., “dream.”
- When singing “Row, Row, Row your Boat,” sing the song through once or twice and then, still holding your child’s hands, WAIT for him or her to ask you to sing it again. (He or she will probably make a sound or rock back and forth to ask you to do it again.)
- Start to sing the song while rocking back and forth, pausing mid-song so he or she can ask you to continue.
- Slow down and pause before the last word (“dream”), so he can make a sound—any sound— to end the song.

The Many Benefits of Being Bilingual

Is your family bilingual? Did you know that you can help your children, including your child with special needs, by continuing to teach them your home language? When your children speak and understand their home language, they can keep strong ties to their extended family, culture, and community. All of this plays a role in their future success! The [Benefits of Being Bilingual](#), from the [National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness](#), outlines the research that shows the advantages for all children when they can communicate in more than one language.



Fostering Emotional Connections

Dealing with emotions is a critical skill for children to learn, not only for success in school, but all through life. This resource shares ideas for what to do and say when your child expresses strong emotions.

Teaching Your Child to Identify and Express Emotions



Emotions of preschoolers can be overwhelming for both children and their caregivers. This article from the [Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(CSEFEL\)](#) highlights strategies families can use at home to [encourage positive expressions of emotions](#) in young children. Some practical activities include playing games like “make a face” and making emotion books with children to encourage using language about emotions.

Transitions between Schools

Families will find these resources helpful when their child begins or leaves Head Start or Early Head Start. Read about how to help your child feel confident with school transitions.

Help Children Transition into Kindergarten with a “Student Snapshot”

When a child qualifies to receive special education services, staff members appreciate having information that helps them better understand the child's behavior. This article from the [Pacer Center](#) recommends using the '[Student Snapshot](#)' form, a one-page document that helps parents share the most important information about their child. Head Start disabilities coordinators can work with families to fill in items such as current interests, strengths to build on, and ways to address challenges.



Give Your Child a "head start" on Head Start

Some children with disabilities need more help learning new routines when they start preschool than their typically developing peers. A child with special needs can benefit from extra practice with routines like getting a coat and backpack on and off, putting belongings away, and learning how to use outdoor play equipment. Your child's teacher can help you learn about the routines and safety rules.

Here are some tips to help your child.

- **Prepare:** Schedule a time when you and your child can visit the classroom—when no other children are there—to have a quick look. This will help you both know what to expect on the first day.
- **Rehearse:** Practice typical "Clean Routines" at home. Because washing hands, going to the bathroom, and brushing teeth are activities that your child will need to be able to do every day at school, practicing these routines will help your child be more confident and independent.
- **Plan:** Visit the outside playground, if possible. Teach your child the safe way to use the equipment and practice playing typical games like Hide and Seek.

Learn more about [Your Child's Routine in a Head Start Program](#) to discover other routines or activities that your child could practice. Share your ideas with your child's teacher during your first visit.

Introducing Me! Building a Bridge between School and Home

When a child with a disability transitions from either Early Head Start to Head Start or from Head Start to kindergarten, families want the new teacher to know about their child's strengths and challenges. The free booklet, [Introducing Me!](#), can help families provide information about their child in a fun and friendly way. Children can help answer questions about their favorite things to celebrate and how they act when they're frustrated. The booklet can be given to the teacher on the first day of preschool or kindergarten. It's available in several languages including Chinese, Russian, and Somali, as well as English and Spanish.

Disability and Special Needs

Here you'll find information on strategies that help children with autism.

My Child Has a Disability—What Should I Do First?

Families want accurate and honest information when they learn their child has a disability. The [Center for Parent Information and Resources](#) offers straightforward and encouraging information about [autism spectrum disorders](#). Learn more about typical characteristics, research about these disorders, and organizations that can help support families.

Imitation: A Strong Tool for Connection for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often find it difficult to get their child's attention and connect with him or her during playtime. [The Hanen Centre](#) discusses the benefits of playing games where you imitate your child's actions, like [Follow the Leader](#).

- These types of games encourage your child to lead. When your child notices that you're copying him, it might encourage him to perform new actions to try to get you to copy him again.
- These games promote other social skills. Besides encouraging children to look at the person imitating them, children with ASD have also been observed to vocalize, smile, play, sit closer, and touch the adult who is imitating them.

Some tips for successful playtimes are to imitate your child's actions, movements, or sounds. If your child taps on the table, you tap on the table. If he jumps up and down, you do that too. Or if she beats on a drum, grab a drumstick and beat the drum too. Copy any sounds your child makes during these activities. Basically, you want to do exactly what your child does.

Autism Research

Learn more about the [CDC's Study to Explore Early Development](#) (also called SEED), the largest collaborative scientific study to date of the risk factors of autism spectrum disorder.

Positive Behavior Supports

Here you'll find information on strategies to create positive behavior supports at home.

Positive Behavior Support (PBS), Family Style!

The PBS strategies from [CSEFEL](#) that teachers rely on to make positive changes in their classrooms are also helpful for families. This [easy-to-read packet](#) offers tools to help families strengthen connections with their children. It also guides them through implementing PBS strategies at home.

These parent tips have been compiled from the Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletter produced monthly by the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning (NCQTL), and with the support of the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE). This resource is dedicated to families of young children with disabilities. Select this link to view previous [Head Start Disabilities Services Newsletters](#) on the ECLKC. If you have questions or suggestions for future newsletter topics, please e-mail Kristin Ainslie at ncqtl@uw.edu.