

Interactive Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five

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A guide to what children should know and do in five central developmental domains

Introduction

The *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* describes the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that programs must foster in **all** children.

The Framework is grounded in a comprehensive body of research about what young children should know and be able to do to succeed in school. It describes how children progress across key areas of learning and development and specifies learning outcomes in these areas. This information will help adults better understand what they should be doing to provide effective learning experiences that support important early learning outcomes.

Programs should use the Framework to guide their choices in curriculum and learning materials, to plan daily activities, and to inform intentional teaching practices. Aligning instruction and opportunities for play, exploration, discovery, and problem-solving with the early learning outcomes described in the Framework will promote successful learning in all children. Programs should also use the Framework with families to help them engage in their children's learning. This Framework replaces the 2010 Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework.

The first five years of life is a time of wondrous development and learning. Children grow from infants communicating through babbling and crawling on all fours—to toddlers speaking short sentences and beginning to run—to preschoolers telling detailed stories and kicking a ball to a friend. All young children learn in the context of caring, responsive, and stimulating relationships as they explore the world around them.

Yet, the quality of their early experiences can vary dramatically, and this can influence their learning and development. For example, by three years of age, some children have large vocabularies and others have much smaller ones. These differences usually reflect the everyday language experiences that children have with adults as well as other experiential and developmental factors. Such differences can have a lasting impact on later school success. Head Start and other early childhood programs must create stimulating learning environments and implement intentional teaching strategies that ensure all children are ready to succeed in school.

Family engagement and comprehensive services also play critical roles in children’s development and school readiness. They remain essential services in Head Start. The Framework does not address these service areas because they are detailed in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. The Framework describes the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that programs need to foster in all children.

Guiding Principles for School Readiness

The guiding principles of the Framework have been fundamental to the Head Start program from its inception. They underlie the program policies and practices that prepare young children for success in school and beyond.

- **Each child is unique and can succeed.** Children are individuals with different rates and paths of development. Each child is uniquely influenced by their prenatal environment, temperament, physiology, and life experiences. With the appropriate support, all children can be successful learners and achieve the skills, behaviors, and knowledge described in the Framework.
- **Learning occurs within the context of relationships.** Caring families, teachers, and other adults matter in a young child's life. Responsive and supportive interactions with adults are essential to children's learning.
- **Families are children's first and most important caregivers, teachers, and advocates.** Families must be respected and supported as the primary influence in their child's early learning and education. Their knowledge, skills, and cultural backgrounds contribute to children's school readiness.
- **Children learn best when they are emotionally and physically safe and secure.** Nurturing, responsive, and consistent care helps create safe environments where children feel secure and valued. In these settings, children are able to engage fully in learning experiences.
- **Areas of development are integrated, and children learn many concepts and skills at the same time.** Any single skill, behavior, or ability may involve multiple areas of development. For example, as infants gain fine motor skills, they can manipulate objects in new ways and deepen their understanding of cause and effect. As preschoolers gain new verbal skills, they can better manage their emotions and form more complex friendships.
- **Teaching must be intentional and focused on how children learn and grow.** Children are active, engaged, and eager learners. Good teaching practices build on these intrinsic strengths by providing developmentally appropriate instruction and opportunities for exploration and meaningful play.
- **Every child has diverse strengths rooted in their family's culture, background, language, and beliefs.** Responsive and respectful learning environments welcome children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Effective teaching practices and learning experiences build on the unique backgrounds and prior experiences of each child.

The Organization of the Framework

The Framework is organized into the following elements: **Domains, Sub-Domains, Goals, Developmental Progressions, and Indicators.**

- **RESEARCH-BASED**—Informed by research as being reasonably achievable, age appropriate, and aligned with kindergarten expectations.
- **COMPREHENSIVE**—Cover the central domains of early learning and skills children need to succeed in school and provide sufficient breadth and depth in each area.
- **INCLUSIVE**—Relevant for children from diverse linguistic, economic, and cultural backgrounds and for children with disabilities.
- **MANAGEABLE**—Include a reasonable number of domains, sub-domains, goals, and indicators that programs can effectively implement.
- **MEASURABLE**—Reflect observable skills, behaviors, and concepts.

Domains

The **Domains** are broad areas of early learning and development from birth to 5 years that are essential for school and long-term success. The central domains are:

- Approaches to Learning
- Social and Emotional Development
- Language and Literacy
- Cognition
- Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development

Each domain is related to and influences the others. For example, as preschoolers' working memory develops (a component of Approaches to Learning), their ability to follow multiple-step instructions improves, and their ability to learn complex math concepts increases.

Because areas of early learning become more differentiated as children get older, some domains for preschoolers are captured differently than they are for infants and toddlers. Specifically, the single domain of Language and Communication for infants and toddlers becomes two domains—Language and Communication and Literacy—for preschoolers. This distinction best reflects the breadth and depth of development for 3- to 5-year-olds. Likewise, the single domain of Cognition for infants and toddlers is presented as two different domains for preschoolers: Mathematics Development and Scientific Reasoning. The domain structure captures important developmental differences across the ages and guides effective teaching practices that support strong child outcomes.

Sub-Domains

The **Sub-Domains** are categories or components of development within a domain. For example, for the Social and Emotional Development domain, sub-domains include relationships with adults, relationships with other children, emotional functioning, and sense of identity and belonging.

Goals

The **Goals** are broad statements of expectations for children's learning and development. The goals describe broad skills, behaviors, and concepts within a sub-domain that are important for success in school. These are sometimes referred to as standards in state early learning guidelines.

Developmental Progressions

The **Developmental Progressions** describe the skills, behaviors, and concepts that children will demonstrate as they progress towards a given goal within an age period. The term "emerging" is used for the youngest infant age group when specific skills, behaviors, or concepts have not yet emerged or are not yet observable.

Indicators

Indicators are identified for each goal for children 36 months and 60 months of age. They describe specific, observable skills, behaviors, and concepts that children should know and be able to do at the end of Early Head Start (by 36 months) or at the end of Head Start (by 60 months). Given children's individual differences, some children may demonstrate these indicators before the designated age period and some may demonstrate them later. The indicators listed for each age are not exhaustive—other indicators related to the goal may be observed.

The Framework is not to be used as a curriculum, assessment, or checklist. It is never to be used to conclude a child has failed in any way or that a child is not ready to transition into Head Start or kindergarten.

How to Use the Interactive Framework

Please select a **Central Domain** from the top row of the grid below to get started. The domains are broad areas of early learning and development for children birth to 5 years. They are essential for school and long-term success.

Select a central domain from the second row to review the **Infant/Toddler Subdomains** within that domain. Choose from the third row to review the **Preschool Subdomains**. The subdomains are categories or components of development within a specific domain.

Each infant/toddler and preschooler central domain is broken down into subdomains. Choose a subdomain to view the **Goals, Developmental Progression, and Indicators**. The goals are broad statements of expectations for children's learning and development. Select a goal to view the development progression that describes the skills, behaviors, and concepts that children will demonstrate as they progress toward that goal. The goals also include indicators, which describe specific, observable skills, behaviors, and concepts that children should know and be able to do by the end of Early Head Start (36 months) or Head Start (60 months).

Select any item to see the associated subdomains, goals, developmental progressions, and indicators. Find related resources for frontline staff, professional development, and for families.

Central Domains

Infant / Toddler Domains

Preschooler Domains

[Approaches to Learning](#) [Approaches to Learning](#) [Approaches to Learning](#)
[Social and Emotional Development](#) [Social and Emotional Development](#) [Social and Emotional Development](#)
[Language and Literacy](#) [Language and Communication](#) [Language and Communication](#) [Literacy](#)
[Cognition](#) [Cognition](#) [Mathematics Development](#) [Scientific Reasoning](#)
[Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development](#) [Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development](#) [Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development](#)

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Related Resources

Frontline Staff

BabyTalks

- [Playing to Learn: Benefits of Play in Early Childhood](#)

News You Can Use

- [Approaches Toward Learning—Foundations of School Readiness \(Part 1\)](#)

- [Approaches Toward Learning—Foundations of School Readiness \(Part 2\)](#)
- [Approaches Toward Learning—Foundations of School Readiness \(Part 3\)](#)
- [Music \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Music \(Part 2\)](#)
- [Play](#)

Professional Development

- [Early Essentials Webisode 4: The First Three Years](#)
- [Effective Practice Guides: Approaches to Learning](#)

Related Resources

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Front Porch Series

- [Building Executive Function Skills in Children and Adults](#)
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- [Promoting Creativity in Early Childhood Classrooms](#)
- [The Characteristics of Intentional, Mature, Make-Believe Play: How Play Influences Development](#)
- [Help Me Calm Down! Teaching Children How to Cope with Their Big Emotions \(Teacher Time Preschool Series\)](#)
- [Why Children’s Dispositions Should Matter to All Teachers](#)
- [A Creative Adventure](#)

Professional Development

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15-Minute In-Service Suites

- [Schedules and Routines](#)
- [Following Children's Lead](#)

Related Resources

Frontline Staff

BabyTalks

- [Playing to Learn: Benefits of Play in Early Childhood](#)
- [Responsive Caregiving as an Effective Practice to Support Children's Social and Emotional Development](#)

- [Supporting Children's Early Brain Development](#)

Front Porch Series

- [The Role of Music in Children's Development](#)

News You Can Use

- [Foundations of School Readiness: Social Emotional Development](#)
- [Early Experiences Build the Brain - Foundations of School Readiness](#)
- [Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#)
- [Play](#)
- [Mirroring the Early Parent-Child Bond for Infants and Toddlers](#)

Caring Connections Series

- [Let's Talk About Routines](#)
- [Let's Talk About Empathy](#)
- [Let's Talk About Following the Baby](#)

Online Lessons

- [Daily Separations and Reunions](#)

Professional Development

- [The Pyramid Model for Promoting the Social and Emotional Development of Infants and Young Children](#)
- [Sharing Knowledge with Infant Toddler Teachers and Home Visitors](#) [PDF, 652KB]
- [Effective Practice Guides: Social and Emotional Development](#)

Early Essentials

- [Webisode 4: The First Three Years](#)
- [Webisode 8: Responsive Interactions](#)
- [Webisode 8 Practice Moment: Responsive Interactions](#)
- [Webisode 2: Building Relationships](#)
- [First Connections: Attachment and Its Lasting Importance](#)
- [Parent-Child Relationships: The Cornerstone to School Readiness in the Home-based Option](#)
- [Understanding and Managing Young Children's Behavior](#)
- [What Works Brief No. 21 - Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children: Labeling Emotions](#)

Related Resources

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- [Playing to Learn: Benefits of Play in Early Childhood](#)
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Front Porch Series

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- [Facilitating Children's Friendships: The Adult's Role in Supporting Peer Relationships](#)

Teacher Time Series

- [Help Me Calm Down! Teaching Children How to Cope with Their Big Emotions](#)
- [It's a Big Problem! Teaching Children Problem Solving Skills](#)
- [Teachers' Choice! Digging Deeper into Challenging Behavior, Part 1](#)
- [Teachers' Choice! Digging Deeper into Challenging Behavior, Part 2](#)

- [Daily Separations and Reunions](#)
- [Head Start Center for Inclusion: Inclusion Basics: Membership](#)

Professional Development

- [Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children](#)
- [Effective Practice Guides: Social and Emotional Development](#)

15-minute In-service Suites

- [Building a Solid Foundation](#)
- [Building Relationships: Fostering Connections](#)
- [Building Relationships: Being Aware of Children's Needs](#)
- [Building Relationships: Creating a Caring Community](#)
- [Interest-Based Learning: Following Children's Lead](#)
- [Behavior Guidance: Stating Behavioral Expectations](#)
- [Behavior Guidance: Redirecting Behavior](#)
- [Behavior Guidance: Problem Solving in the Moment](#)

Front Porch Series

- [Understanding and Using Evidence-Based Social Emotional Curricula](#)
- [Classroom-Based and Parent-Focused Interventions for Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Young Children](#)
- [Head Start CARES: The Implementation and Impacts of Preschool Social-Emotional Interventions at Scale](#)
- [Tools for Rules: Using Practice-Based Coaching to Support Behavior Expectations \(Coaching Corner Webinar\)](#)
- [Getting to Cooperation: Using Practice-Based Coaching to Support Social Problem Solving \(Coaching Corner Webinar\)](#)

Related Resources

Frontline Staff

- [News You Can Use: Foundations of School Readiness: Language and Literacy](#)

BabyTalks

- [Babbling Babies: Early Language Development](#)
- [Brilliantly Bilingual: Growing up with Two Languages](#)

Planned Language Approach

- [Five Key Areas of Language and Literacy Development for School Readiness](#)
- [Home Language for Success in School and Life](#)
- [Language Modeling with Dual Language Learning Infants](#) [PDF, 407KB]
- [Language Modeling with Dual Language Learning Toddlers](#) [PDF, 401KB]
- [Code Switching: Why It Matters and How to Respond - A Workbook for EHS/HS Programs](#)

Professional Development

Early Essentials

- [Webisode 9: Language Development](#)
- [Webisode 9: Practice Moment: Language Development](#)

15-Minute In-service Suites

- [Birth to Five: Engaging Children in Conversations](#)
- [Birth to Five: Thick and Thin Conversations](#)
- [Birth to Five: Asking Questions](#)
- [Birth to Five: Novel Words](#)
- [Birth to Five: Expansions](#)
- [Highly Effective Teachers Use Key Language and Literacy Strategies All Day, Every Day, With Every Child!](#) [PDF, 506KB]

Effective Practice Guides

- [Attending and Understanding](#)
- [Communicating and Speaking](#)
- [Vocabulary](#)
- [Emergent Literacy](#)

For Families

Planned Language Approach

- [How Parents and Families Support Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#) [PDF, 956KB]
- [How Parents and Families Support Background Knowledge](#) [PDF, 907KB]
- [How Parents and Families Support Book Knowledge and Print Concepts](#) [PDF, 951KB]
- [How Parents and Families Support Oral Language and Vocabulary](#) [PDF, 943KB]
- [How Parents and Families Support Phonological Awareness](#) [PDF, 948KB]
- [The Importance of Home Language Series](#)
- [My Parents, My Teachers](#)

Related Resources

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Planned Language Approach

- [Five Key Areas of Language and Literacy Development for School Readiness](#)
- [Teaching New Words: Embedding Vocabulary Instruction in Storybooks](#)
- [Home Language for Success in School and Life](#)
- [Supporting English Language Development When Children Have Little Experience with English](#) [PDF, 670KB]
- [Code Switching: Why It Matters and How to Respond - A Workbook for EHS/HS Programs](#)
- [Nature-based Learning and Development: Language and Literacy Ideas for Teachers](#)

Front Porch Broadcast Series

- [Measuring What Children Can Do in All Languages: Developmental Assessment for Children Who Are Dual Language Learners](#)

Professional Development

15-Minute In-service Suites

- [Preschool: Engaging Children in Conversations](#)
- [Preschool: Thick and Thin Conversations](#)
- [Preschool: Asking Questions](#)
- [Preschool: Novel Words](#)
- [Preschool: Expansions](#)
- [Highly Effective Teachers Use Key Language and Literacy Strategies All Day, Every Day, With Every Child!](#) [PDF, 506KB]

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- [Attending and Understanding](#)
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- [Vocabulary](#)

For Families

- [Strategies for Parents and Families: Background Knowledge](#) [PDF, 907KB]
- [How Parents and Families Support Oral Language and Vocabulary](#) [PDF, 943KB]
- [The Importance of Home Language Series](#)

Related Resources

Frontline Staff

Planned Language Approach

- [Planned Language Approach: Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#) [PDF, 1.0MB]
- [Joan Talks About the Big Five: Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#) [PDF, 1.1MB]
- [Planned Language Approach: Book Knowledge and Print Concepts](#) [PDF, 1.1MB]
- [Joan Talks About the Big Five: Book Knowledge and Print Concepts](#) [PDF, 1.2MB]
- [Planned Language Approach: Phonological Awareness](#) [PDF, 954KB]
- [Joan Talks About the Big Five: Phonological Awareness](#) [PDF, 1.1MB]

- [Home Language for Success in School and Life](#)
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- [Selecting and Using Culturally Appropriate Children's Books in Languages Other than English](#) [PDF, 791KB]
- [Teaching New Words: Embedding Vocabulary Instruction in Storybooks](#)
- [Supporting Young Writers in Preschool: A Framework for Understanding Early Writing Development](#)

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- [A Framework for Planning Professional Development in Emergent Literacy - Dr. Jeanette McCollum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#)
- [Highly Effective Teachers Use Key Language and Literacy Strategies All Day, Every Day, With Every Child!](#) [PDF, 506KB]

Effective Practice Guides

- [Phonological Awareness](#)
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- [Writing](#)

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- [Strategies for Parents and Families: Alphabet Knowledge and Early Writing](#) [PDF, 956KB]
- [Strategies for Parents and Families: Book Knowledge and Print Concepts](#) [PDF, 951KB]
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Related Resources

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- [Understanding STEAM and How Children Use It](#) [PDF, 3.3MB]
- [High Five Mathematize](#) [PDF, 21MB]
- [Finding the Math](#)

BabyTalks

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News You Can Use

- [Early Experiences Build the Brain - Foundations of School Readiness](#)
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- [Supporting Early Math Learning for Infants and Toddlers](#)
- [Early Science Learning for Infants and Toddlers](#)
- [Environment as Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers](#)

- [Take It Inside](#)
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- [Exploration and Discovery](#)
- [Memory](#)
- [Reasoning and Problem-Solving](#)
- [Emergent Mathematical Thinking](#)
- [Imitation and Symbolic Representation and Play](#)

For Families

- [My Parents, My Teachers](#)

Related Resources

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- [Building Executive Function Skills in Children and Adults](#)
- [It's a Big Problem! Teaching Children Problem Solving Skills](#)
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- [Preschool Math Ideas: Hiding in Plain Sight](#)
- [Science and Math in Preschool Curriculum: Can All Young Children Benefit?](#)
- [Nature-Based Learning and Development: Math Ideas for Teachers](#)
- [Understanding STEAM and How Children Use It](#) [PDF, 3.3MB]
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- [Playing to Learn: Benefits of Play in Early Childhood](#)

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15-Minute In-Service Suites

- [Fostering Children's Thinking Skills](#)
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- [Focusing Children on Learning Goals](#)
- [Scaffolding Children's Learning](#)
- [Making Learning Meaningful](#)

Effective Practice Guides

- [Counting and Cardinality](#)
- [Operations and Algebraic Thinking](#)

- [Measurement](#)
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Related Resources

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Front Porch and Teacher Time Series

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- [Science for Preschoolers? Yes and No](#)
- [Science in the Preschool Classroom: Why and How This Can Be a Teacher's Best Friend](#)
- [Science and Math in Preschool Curriculum: Can All Young Children Benefit?](#)
- [Click, Zoom, Buzz: Adding STEAM to Everyday Activities](#)
- [When Children Ask "Why?" STEAM Sharpens Their Inquiry Skills](#)
- [More than Fun and Games: Digital Technologies and Children's Learning](#)
- [Beyond Sink and Float: Science for Preschool Children](#)
- [Learning by Building: Engineering for Preschool Children](#)
- [Art and Storybooks: Ideas from STEAM](#)
- [Take It Outside! Adventures in Nature with STEAM](#)

- [Marvelous Explorations Through Science and Stories \(MESS\)](#)
- [Using the Scientific Method](#)
- [Nature-Based Learning and Development: Science Ideas for Teachers](#)

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Coaching Corner

- [Full STEAM Ahead: Using Practice-Based Coaching to Support the Teaching of Science](#)
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Effective Practices Guides

- [Scientific Inquiry](#)
- [Reasoning and Problem-Solving](#)

Related Resources

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News You Can Use

- [Foundations of School Readiness: Physical Development and Health](#)
- [Music \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Music \(Part 2\)](#)
- [Learning at Home and Homelike Environments](#)
- [The Culture of Sleep and Child Care](#)

Caring Connections Series

- [Let's Talk About Movement](#)
- [Let's Talk About Music](#)
- [Let's Talk About Nourishment](#)

- [Watch Me Grow!](#)
- [Spending Time Outdoors Matters for Infants and Toddlers!](#)
- [Tummy Time](#)

Professional Development

- [Effective Practice Guides: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development](#)

For Families

- [Growing Healthy Family Goals Worksheet](#)
- [Encourage Healthy Eating Habits](#)

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- [Why Young Children Need Structured Motor Play](#)
- [Nature-based Learning and Development for Teachers](#)
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- [Loose Parts on the Playground](#)
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Early learning outcomes

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