



# Health Literacy Guiding Principles for Early Childhood Programs

Health literacy requires a combined focus on personal and organizational health literacy. Early childhood programs and other organizations play an important role in making sure people understand and have equal access to health-related information and services. By focusing on health literate practices, programs can improve communication, reduce health disparities, and advance health equity for all. [Healthy People 2030](#) defines health literacy as both personal and organizational:



## Personal health literacy

is the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. Promoting personal health literacy helps to make sure that people can understand and act on health information so they can be healthy. Also, personal health literacy can help people focus on the health of their community.



## Organizational health literacy

is the degree to which organizations make it possible for all individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others. An organization improves personal health literacy by making its health information and services easier for people to understand and use.

Head Start and other early childhood programs that focus on health literacy can improve the well-being of children, families, and staff. Promoting health literacy also increases the likelihood that children are healthy and ready to learn. Helping people understand and respond to the conditions and factors that affect their overall health is one of the best ways to do this.

Early childhood programs can use guiding principles to become health literate organizations.



# Guiding Principles

Based on recommendations from the [National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy](#), the guiding principles highlight seven core concepts. They are capacity, content, equity, dissemination, feedback, practice, and evaluation. Programs can use them to increase their capacity to implement health literate practices and evaluate their progress.

1	<b>CAPACITY:</b>	Understand health literacy and implement health literate practices.
2	<b>CONTENT:</b>	Offer health information that is easy to find, understand, and use.
3	<b>EQUITY:</b>	Implement equitable, inclusive, and culturally and linguistically responsive practices.
4	<b>DISSEMINATION:</b>	Share accurate, accessible, and actionable information to guide health decisions.
5	<b>FEEDBACK:</b>	Ask for, review, and apply feedback.
6	<b>PRACTICE:</b>	Adopt and implement guidance, resources, and tools that promote health literacy.
7	<b>EVALUATION:</b>	Assess the impact of health literacy principles on early childhood program practices.



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## Capacity

### **Understand health literacy and implement health literate practices.**

For early childhood programs, expertise in health literacy is key to increasing the capacity to deliver health literate information, programs, and services. That includes clear communication and plain language principles.

Organizational health literacy improves a program's ability to carry out strategies that make it easier for staff and families to understand health information. It also helps a program engage with community partners in the health care system. This allows families to get the greatest benefit from early childhood programs.

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## Content

### **Offer health information that is easy to find, understand, and use.**

Early childhood programs can include health literacy principles in all products and services. Doing so makes it easier for staff and families to understand and use the messages and materials. Programs can use these principles to improve the information and resources they develop and share with families and staff. Here are a few strategies:

- Develop or adapt materials so they're relevant to families in the program.
- Choose resources that are accurate, accessible, and actionable.
- Communicate in the format most often used by the families in the program.

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## Equity

### **Implement equitable, inclusive, and culturally and linguistically responsive practices.**

When early childhood programs are more aware of how culture and language influence communication, they can support staff and families better. Health literacy practices can lead to culturally and linguistically appropriate services. This can improve cross-cultural communication. These practices also make it easier to access care, increase the quality of care, and reduce health disparities.

The [National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services \(CLAS\)](#) helps programs understand how important culture and language are. The CLAS standards are "a set of 15 action steps providing a blueprint for individuals and health and health care organizations to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services."

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## Dissemination

### **Share accurate, accessible, and actionable information to guide health decisions.**

Sharing evidence-based resources with families and staff is important to health literacy. Early childhood programs help families and staff by making sure the resources they share are accurate, accessible, and actionable. Programs can also help families learn how to find trusted sources of health information.

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## Feedback

### Ask for, review, and apply feedback.

Include the intended user in the process of developing, choosing, and sharing health information. This is an essential feature of health literate organizations. Programs can gather feedback to improve content by inviting families and others in the community to review resources. Users can provide feedback on health messages, handouts, or other resources. You can also ask for their input on educational events and community-based programs or activities.

Early childhood programs can model best practices. They can do this by creating a culture of listening and including the recommendations of the audiences served. The audience may be families with young children, staff in early childhood programs, community partners, program consultants, and others in the community engaged with children from birth to age 5. Increasing the capacity of programs to gather and use feedback is important to advancing health literate practices and making sure health communication is effective.

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## Practice

### Adopt and implement guidance, resources, and tools that promote health literacy.

To be a health literate organization, programs must include health literacy in the program's mission and operations. Leaders can build health literacy into planning, evaluation, policies, procedures, service design, policy development, partnership building, and quality improvement.

Use the guiding principles to review health literacy practices throughout the year and during the annual self-assessment. This helps ensure programs are developing, promoting, and carrying out practices that support and improve health literacy.

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## Evaluation

### Assess the impact of health literacy principles on early childhood program practices.

Programs can be more effective by setting up continuous quality improvement efforts that focus on health literacy. For example, they can use the guiding principles to assess their resources. Organizations can also set up metrics to show how effective their health literacy practices are for families. Reviewing organizational practices with a focus on health literacy improves communication. It also builds the capacity to become health literate organizations.

The seven guiding principles described above raise the responsibility of early childhood programs to put health literacy into practice. By adopting and applying these principles, early childhood programs can develop processes to improve their staff and families' ability to make informed health-related decisions and actions.

This resource is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$8,200,000 with 100% funded by ACF. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACF/HHS or the U.S. Government.

March 2024



National Center on

Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

888-227-5125  
[health@ecetta.info](mailto:health@ecetta.info)