

The Four Data Activities

Prepare

Planning for data collection helps programs understand up front what data they need to collect so they can complete tasks in a timely manner and track progress toward their goals and objectives. Planning ahead about what information you collect and how you will use it will help you avoid gaps in data, which can be difficult to correct retroactively. Planning will also help you avoid “data paralysis,” which results from collecting too much data.

Consider these questions:

- What do we want to know?
 - What are our significant questions? How do we determine them?
 - What could we find out that would have the biggest impact on our program?
 - What changes are under our control?
 - What would our end point or destination look like?
 - What data are important, given our program goals and SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) objectives?
 - How will we know if we are moving toward our goals and objectives? What are our indicators of progress?
 - What are our measures of success?
 - What are our bright spots?
 - What small wins can we accomplish in reaching our goals and objectives?
- What do we already know?
 - What data do we already have through our ongoing monitoring and self-assessment systems? Think about qualitative, or anecdotal, information as well as quantitative data.
 - What data collection methods do we use in our recordkeeping and reporting systems?
 - Are we collecting enough data? Too much data? The right data?
 - Who collects the data? When is it collected?
 - Who reviews it?
- What new questions do we have?
 - What additional data might we need?
 - Which data collection methods will we use to get it? For instance, you might consider distributing new surveys or conducting interviews or focus groups.

Collect

Head Start programs are required to collect a great deal of data. This wealth of data can be both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes Head Start programs are so inundated with data that it results in data paralysis. To be effective, data collection must be intentional and organized. Follow the “Goldilocks” principle: too much data is overwhelming, but too little may not provide what you need. Collect “just right” data, and only data that you will use. Use a variety of methods to collect it and tap many different sources.

Major data sources in Head Start and Early Head Start programs include:

- Community assessment
- Program Information Report (PIR)
- Ongoing monitoring
- Self-assessment
- Child outcomes data
- Individual reports from the Aligned Monitoring System
- Health services provision
- Family services provision
- Provision of other services, such as those related to mental health or disabilities

Much of the data collected by Head Start programs is what management expert Peter Drucker calls “operational data.” Through their recordkeeping and reporting and ongoing monitoring systems, Head Start programs make sure their service delivery is on target. For example, they track whether all required screenings are completed on time, whether families have a medical home, and whether families have signed partnership agreements.

Management staff review this data regularly to make sure the program has good-quality data—data that is complete, accurate, and timely. Remember, “Garbage in, garbage out.”

When you collect data, decide how:

- Data collection fits into the everyday work of management and staff
- Data will be entered into recordkeeping systems, and who will enter it
- Data will be checked for accuracy, and who will check it
- You will make adjustments to your data collection processes while implementing your program design and services

Aggregate and Analyze

“Aggregate and analyze” means putting your data to use by looking at it in different ways. This is where you begin to understand what your data is telling you. You examine data in various ways to:

- Discover what is and is not working in your program
- Identify trends and patterns that suggest needs, strengths, and challenges
- Connect different types of data and sources to get a bigger picture
- Compare data over time

For instance, you may conduct a longitudinal analysis that compares the same data from year to year. You also may compare Head Start data to external local, regional, state, or national data.

Aggregated data gives you an overview of your entire program. However, you may miss significant facts if you only look at aggregated data. To disaggregate data, you break it down by different sub-groups. Aggregated data may show that a large percentage of your children are meeting expected literacy outcomes. However, if you disaggregate the data, you may learn that the children in your program who are dual language learners or are experiencing homelessness are not meeting this expected outcome.

When you aggregate and analyze data, you decide how you will:

- Organize your data in ways that help you understand what it says
- Coordinate different data sources
- Work together as a team to interpret the data
- Use data to determine trends in needs, strengths, and challenges
- Compare data over time

Use and Share

“Use and share” are particularly relevant activities for Head Start leaders. This is where programs turn data into information. They then use it to make significant program decisions, guide program improvement efforts, solve problems, and identify new critical questions based on the results of their data analysis. It is how you know that your organization is basing its decisions on sound information rather than on hunches, where you move from thinking and believing to knowing.

Once you have looked at your data in different ways, you can begin to make inferences and identify root causes. It’s important to remember that people looking at the same set of facts can sometimes disagree about the interpretation. Also, sometimes you will end up with more questions than answers and need to dig deeper. When programs spend time in the discussion of their data, a shared understanding of the meaning of data occurs.

In interpreting data, consider these prompts:

- I believe the data suggests [blank] because...
- Here are some tentative conclusions we've reached...
- What additional data would help me confirm or refute my conclusion?
- What are possible causes of the trends or issue we have identified?

Head Start programs share data with a range of audiences, from parents to the Office of Head Start. Programs are also required by the Head Start Act to deliver an annual report to the public. Many of these audiences need information on the same topics. Staff, parents, Policy Council and governing body/Tribal Council members, the local education agency (LEA), and the Regional Office all need information related to child outcomes. However, what they need, how they prefer it to be presented, and what they do with the information differs. In developing presentations or reports, follow the four A's of data: **accurate, appealing, accessible, and audience-specific.**

