

Services for Infants with Significant Disabilities in Early Head Start Programs

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Office of Head Start (OHS) have jointly developed this resource to support programs as they promote the inclusion of infants with significant disabilities and their families.

A significant disability in infancy refers to a specific developmental or medical condition experienced by an infant, birth to 12 months. Examples include chronic illness, physical injury, or congenital anomaly (a structural or functional difference from typical development that is present from birth).

Significant disabilities in infancy can lead to developmental delays that increase over time and may interfere with the infant's acquisition of knowledge and skills needed for independence.



Infants with significant disabilities may require intensive individualized supports to fully participate in daily experiences at home, in their communities, or in an early care and education program. Early Head Start (EHS) programs offer this support, in careful and collaborative planning with families.

How do EHS programs help infants with significant disabilities?

EHS programs provide free, family-centered services beginning as early as the mother's pregnancy and continuing until the child is age 3. Programs engage with the local community to understand the needs of families and provide resources for infants and families in the areas of health, mental health, nutrition, education, and family services.

Programs also partner with families to promote the physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development of infants. Services are offered in the home, in an EHS or family child care setting, or both.

EHS programs can connect families of infants with disabilities to the state's [Part C](#) program of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This program for infants and toddlers with disabilities provides individualized early intervention services in the infant's natural environment, which includes their home or child care setting.

How do EHS programs support families?

EHS programs promote the physical, cognitive, and social and emotional development of infants and toddlers through safe and developmentally enriching caregiving in nurturing and natural environments.

Programs help family members meet their own personal goals and achieve self-sufficiency. They may support families by working with them to reach housing stability, continue their education, or achieve financial security. EHS programs also provide opportunities and tools for family members to advocate for their infant and to become a parent leader if they wish.

What is the screening and support process for infants with significant disabilities enrolled in EHS programs?

All infants enrolled in EHS programs receive developmental and sensory screening. Parents of infants with suspected delays are referred for evaluation by an agency qualified by the state under Part C to provide that service. Infants who are identified as having a disability receive early intervention services as listed in their Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).

Part C services can be provided to the infant and family in the EHS program. Special education and related service providers partner with children's parents and EHS staff to support progress toward IFSP goals.

EHS staff support families navigating the Part C process and through the child's transition to Head Start or another preschool program at age 3.

Examples

- An EHS teacher works with the program's disability services coordinator and family services worker to assist a new migrant family in preparing to attend a meeting where the infant's IFSP will be discussed. They coordinate with other Part C service providers to ensure the family has transportation to and from the meeting, is provided with an interpreter, understands the roles of the different team members, and feels prepared and supported for the meeting.
- An EHS teacher uses a special seat that helps an infant sit up. This allows the infant's hands to be free to explore toys. It also lets the infant more easily interact with the people around them. With the infant able to sit up, the EHS teacher can focus on motor, communication, social, and cognitive development.
- An EHS home visitor coaches a family how to lay the infant on their back so they are able to play with toys using their eyes, hands, and mouth. The home visitor also



demonstrates how to place toys directly in the infant's hand and how to put the infant on a special mat with toys hanging overhead. These actions help the infant learn about the texture of objects and how they can be manipulated. They also engage the infant in face-to-face interactions with family members and the home visitor.

Who is qualified to receive EHS services?

- **Families with low income:** Eligibility is generally based on family income at or below the poverty level, according to federal [poverty guidelines](#).
- **Families with infants with significant disabilities:** EHS grantees must fill at least 10% of their total funded enrollment with children who have been deemed eligible to receive Part C services.
- **Families receiving public assistance:** Families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are eligible, regardless of income.
- **Children in foster care** are categorically eligible, which means they are eligible regardless of their family's income or resources.
- **Children from families experiencing homelessness** are categorically eligible.

How can families find an EHS program for their infant with disabilities?

The [Head Start Locator](#) identifies EHS programs in the local community. Families should contact their local EHS program to learn about its process for enrolling infants with significant disabilities.