

## Head Start: The Nation's Pride

[Music]

Narrator: Amid the decay, danger, isolation, and poverty in America, there's a glimmer of hope for 2.7 million at-risk preschoolers and their families.

[Music]

Children: ♪ The itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the water spout ♪  
♪ Down come the rain and washed the spider out ♪  
♪ Out come the sun and dried up all the rain ♪  
♪ And the itsy-bitsy spider climbed up the spout again ♪

Narrator: Over 12 million at-risk and handicapped children and their families have benefitted from Project Head Start since 1965. A preschool program, rooted in a great society legislation of the '60s and 80 percent funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start today is as dynamic and diverse as the 2,000 communities in which it serves. The comprehensive nature of Head Start incorporates early childhood education, health and nutrition components, social services, and the cornerstone of programming, parent involvement.

Man: The parents are the backbone of any Head Start program. Once we have our children in the classroom, we need to work with the total family. That's where the parents play an important role.

Narrator: Parent involvement permeates almost every aspect of Head Start. All programs have a decision-making Parent Policy Council, responsible for program decisions affecting children and families.

Woman 1: They encourage parents to try new things. They encourage them to work towards building ways of helping not only themselves and their families, but to look forward in being able to seek opportunities for better employment, to seek opportunities in going to school. And all of this is simply going to be able to put them in a position to better contribute to the community.

Narrator: Much of Head Start's success with parents lies in providing them incremental successes upon which to build their own self-esteem. Showing parents opportunities and resources available to them is much easier once they believe in themselves.

Parent 1: If it hadn't been for Head Start, I wouldn't be here at all. I'd probably still be at home until Clayton was like 5 years old in kindergarten, and then I probably would've gotten a job that meant nothing, going nowhere. But this way, I'm going somewhere. And I thank Head Start for it.

[Music]

Narrator: In the Head Start classroom, children learn and become confident through success. Sharing, cooperation, coordination, patience, as well as independence, are encouraged -- skills which help later age-appropriate concept development.

Woman 2: Our whole objective is to provide children with many experiences to give them a well-rounded education.

Narrator: In more than 25,000 Head Start classrooms, qualified early childhood staff provide developmentally appropriate classroom and home experiences, which focus on self-esteem and self-worth. The unbridled enthusiasm and love which emanates from children's faces is testimony that Head Start's loving approach works.

Woman 3: So, to me it was wonderful because sometimes I would go in and I'd help out and I'd see how the teachers just showed these kids love and taught these kids and took time to sit with them. I -- I recommend it highly. It's just too bad you have to be low-income to be eligible.

[Music]

Narrator: An historical strength of Head Start has been its health component. The program seeks to acquaint and connect parents with a community-based health system on a permanent basis.

Woman 4: Of course it's better if our children come into the classroom and they're healthy; they learn more. They can interact better. We have a lot of single parents. You know, the majority of our parents in our program are low-income. A lot of times there's not that extended family there to help them, so we try to step in and give them what they need.

Narrator: Programs screen and assess the health of each and every enrolled child. All immunizations and appropriate shots are assured. Routine physical and dental examinations and necessary treatments are received by all children. Inconspicuous daily classroom monitoring occurs to help detect any health abnormality. And the teaching staff make sure that personal hygiene, like brushing teeth, becomes part of children's routine.

Woman 5: If a child gets a good beginning, then it's going to follow him all the way through his life. If a child has health problems and they're not taken care of, that reflects all the way through his life. So by a good health program, these children are off to a really -- a head start from the time they enter our schools.

[Music]

Narrator: Realizing that many disadvantaged children in America wake up without much food in the house and go to bed hungry, Head Start programs participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's child care feeding program.

Woman 6: Studies do show that the nutritional status of a child will influence their learning abilities. In most cases, we provide training to the parents to meet the nutritional needs of their children at home as well as in the center. They're involved in what the children are required to have and we hope that they provide these needs to them when they go home. But in some instances, we have had children who do come to the center hungry and it's our responsibility to make sure that their nutritional needs are met.

Narrator: Depending on the length of the classroom day, children receive at least one-third of their daily nutritional requirements from meals and snacks served family-style.

Woman 6: Along with their -- their nutritional needs, we also try to meet their cultural and ethnic needs by providing foods that -- from different cultures on the menu.

Narrator: Completing the nutritional cycle of Head Start activities are classroom food experiences, which give children a hands-on appreciation for creating their own haute cuisine.

[Music]

Social services components of Head Start programs usually serve as the glue to keep much of the family focus in the program. Social services staff coordinate closely with other Head Start components and community resources to arrange training for parents; secure community-based services, which family members may need; and when the severity of the situation demands, intervene directly in a problem, like inadequate housing or child neglect.

Woman 7: People were available to talk to you; you know, it wasn't the type of thing that was like, "Oh, wait a minute," and you get put on hold. There's so many other things. There was somebody there that you could talk to, you know? And if they didn't have the answer, they helped you find the answer. It doesn't matter, you know, what your background is. You realize that it -- you know, there are a lot of people from a lot of different backgrounds. It doesn't matter whether you -- this is hard for me -- you know, whether you had a job that was good and your lifestyle just really went downhill, totally deteriorated, you felt like you were bottomed out, you know, and that you weren't going to be able to turn around. And it -- it -- it gave me the time and the support that I needed to realize, okay, it is bad, it is hard, but it doesn't have to stay that way. They helped me turn around.

♪ [Music and singing] ♪

Narrator: A special jewel of the Head Start population are the special needs children which the program serves. Head Start is the largest mainstreamer of handicapped preschool children in the nation. Consistently, over 10 percent of the total national enrollment has been these special preschoolers, who are placed in the least restrictive learning environment to promote their growth and development.

Woman 4: Children need to learn at an early age to get along, to adjust with -- with those who might be a little bit different from themselves. Our handicapped children, they have a right to get along in the world and -- just like everyone else. There's no reason why they should be isolated or separated.

[Music]

Narrator: Whether saving a Native American pueblo in Santa Ana, New Mexico or a homeless family in Salem, Massachusetts, Head Start programs follow established federal quality standards. As the 1990s progress, it is evident that problems faced by at-risk families in America can only be constructively addressed in a family-focused way by the creative collaboration and collective wisdom of community-based services, the business community, and governments.

A national laboratory of early childhood development, Project Head Start has led the way in quality, comprehensive services for over 25 years. It continues to be the pride of a nation which cares about its children, especially less fortunate children and families, but it is a program which reaches less than 20 percent of the disadvantaged preschool children in America. Head Start needs community and state help and support to remain a viable option against despair and unfulfilled dreams for another generation of at-risk preschool children and their families.

Parent 2: I felt worth something. This is real hard for me. I really felt I didn't have much without Head Start. I think because it helped me so much that I like being here to be able to help the kids and the families. That's it.

♪ [Music and singing] ♪