Early Head Start Program Strategies:

Socializations for Infants and Toddlers in the Early Head Start Home-Based Program Option

Prepared by Early Head Start National Resource Center @ ZERO TO THREE
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Washington, D.C.
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This document was developed by the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC) @ ZERO TO THREE in collaboration with the Head Start Bureau. The contents of this paper are not intended to be an interpretation of policy. The information is offered to assist programs in the effort to develop and implement high-quality services for pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers.

Cover photos: Monongalia county EHS; Morgantown, WV; Laconia EHS, Laconia, NH; and Cesa 11 EHS, Turtle Lake, WI

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Funded by contract #105-98-2055
U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth, and Families
Head Start Bureau

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Printed in the United States of America
First Printing, January 2001
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Early Head Start National Resource Center gratefully acknowledges the staff at the Early Head Start grantees who responded to our questionnaire on socializations for infants and toddlers. While we were not able to include all of the programs that responded to the questionnaire in this publication, we recognize and appreciate their effort and interest in participating in this project.

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INTRODUCTION

Each year the Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC) invites Early Head Start (EHS) grantees to share their experiences in meeting the challenges of planning and implementing high-quality services to expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers. This report highlights the experiences of 12 EHS programs as they plan and implement group socialization experiences for infants and toddlers. Each of the programs featured in this publication responded to a questionnaire (see Appendix A) that was mailed to every EHS grantee. The programs were selected based on the depth and breadth of their response, and to illustrate the diversity of EHS programs as they strive to meet the unique needs of families in many different communities.

This document opens with a definition of group socialization experiences from the Head Start Program Performance Standards, and a discussion of socialization experiences for infants and toddlers in contrast to preschool socialization experiences. In the next section, we identify five principles of high-quality socialization experiences for infants and toddlers. Each principle is followed by excerpts from several EHS programs illustrating how they have implemented the principles in their socialization experiences. The publication concludes with some questions to consider as EHS grantees plan and implement socialization experiences; a list of selected resources; and a copy of the EHS NRC questionnaire on socializations for infants and toddlers.

This publication is the second volume in the Early Head Start Program Strategies series of reports illustrating the diverse and unique approaches of EHS programs around the country. The EHS NRC provides this unique opportunity for EHS programs to learn from each other on an annual basis. Each publication in this series focuses on a different aspect of high-quality programming for expectant parents and families with infants and toddlers. For more information and to download additional copies of this and other EHS NRC publications, please visit the EHS NRC Web site at www.ehsnrc.org.
Principles Guiding the Socialization Experience

What Are Socializations?

*Group socialization activities* means the sessions in which children and parents enrolled in the home-based or combination program option interact with other home-based or combination children and parents in a Head Start classroom, community facility, home, or on a field trip. 45 CFR 1306.3(f)

The phrase “group socialization activities” was originally used to define the group experience of preschool children enrolled in the Home-Based Program Option of the Head Start Program. The goal of socializations for preschool children is to emphasize peer group interaction through age-appropriate activities. Thus, the “socialization” focus is on the relationships that children are building with each other.

In sharp contrast, infants and toddlers are only beginning to build the first and most important relationship in their new lives: the relationship with their parents. Therefore, “socializations” for infants and toddlers are concerned with the relationship between very young children and their primary caregivers, as opposed to the relationships between infants and toddlers and their peers. Socializations for infants and toddlers have a very distinct purpose: to support child development by strengthening the relationship between parent and child. This relationship will provide the foundation from which children will then be able to develop close, trusting, and respectful relationships with peers and other adults later in life.

Five Principles

The following five principles are reflected in the *Head Start Program Performance Standards and Guidance*, and are based on best practices in the field of infant and family programming. Following each principle, a number of Early Head Start programs illustrate how they have incorporated these ideas into their approach to socializations with infants and toddlers.

I. There is something that is particularly unique about the group experience that makes it a valuable strategy for delivering EHS services.

The benefits of focusing on the parent-child relationship in the context of the group experience occur on many levels:

- **Children:** The group setting provides children with new learning opportunities and experiences that they wouldn’t otherwise have. For young infants, new sights, sounds, textures, and sensory experiences provide numerous learning opportunities. Older infants and toddlers gain access to novel equipment, crafts, foods, or experiences that build upon their emerging developmental capacities. Infants are interested in each other and as early as 4 months of age observe and learn from their peers. For example, a child may observe another child pulling on a mobile and then try pulling on one herself. Infants also exchange smiles and vocalizations. The “play group” aspect of socializations emerge during simple activities such as sharing a busy box or clapping hands in unison. Older infants and toddlers take pleasure in each other as they sing songs, build structures with blocks together, and begin to engage in pretend play.

- **Families:** Parents may benefit in numerous ways. For some families, simply getting out of the house and decreasing their isolation is of tremendous value. Many parents appreciate the opportunity to develop
Early Head Start Program Strategies:

friendships with other parents and broaden their system of social support. Families also have the opportunity to learn new ideas about parenting from other parents, EHS staff, and community partners. Parents learn from each other as they see other adults take pleasure in their own and other infants and toddlers. This quality of “admiring” is a significant element of successful group experiences.

- **Staff:** By bringing families together, EHS staff gain new perspectives on the families outside of the home environment. As a result, staff are better prepared to understand and address family strengths and needs. Home visitors are able to gain the support of their colleagues, share insights into family strengths and challenges, and find opportunities to build on the work they do in the home setting.

- **Program:** The EHS program benefits as a whole through team building opportunities that occur when staff come together to support each others’ work with families. The socializations also provide opportunities to increase collaboration with other community organizations and programs, and increase the visibility of the EHS program in the community.

The following EHS programs share how they have developed group experiences to enhance the services they offer to families in the home-based program option. These ideas range from something as simple as the title of the experience, to the complex notion of an “emotional tone” that a program strives to create.

**Astor Early Head Start:**
We use the title of “playgroups” for our socialization experiences to emphasize our philosophy that the experience is child-focused, supports each child’s development, and enhances the parent-child relationship. Socializations last for 90 minutes and a maximum of six parents and children attend. Socializations are staffed by two home visitors.

**Bear River Early Head Start:**
The focus of our socializations is on the parent/child relationship. We call our socialization experiences Baby Buddy Groups. For each group we have two Baby Buddy Group leaders and a Male Involvement Specialist. We are able to offer Baby Buddy Groups with facilitators who speak fluent Spanish for our Hispanic families. Spanish-speaking families have the choice of attending groups that are offered exclusively in Spanish.

**Community Action Program Belknap-Marrimack Counties, Laconia Early Head Start:**
We have been strongly influenced by the key principles of the schools of Reggio Emilia, and high-quality infant/toddler programs in Milan, Pistoia, and San Miniato, Italy. Specifically, these principles include documentation, collaboration, utilizing the environment (home and center), and understanding the role of social relationships in learning and development. During socializations, parents are encouraged to be involved in journaling, videotaping, and photographing their child as they are interacting and learning. This allows parents to actively participate in documenting

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2 The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education refers to the early care and education practices in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Visit the Web site of the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at http://ericeece.org for a variety of articles, multimedia resources, and reports on the unique aspects of this approach to educating young children. ERIC can also be reached by phone at 1-800-583-4135 or by email at ericeece@uiuc.edu.
their child’s growth and development. The photographs are used to create portfolios or scrapbooks illustrating the learning and growth that has taken place for both the child and the parent(s). These documentation procedures have proven to enhance the parent-child-staff relationship and increase the understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate practices.

**Mid-Cumberland Community Action Agency Early Head Start:**
Infant and toddler socializations build on the goals and objectives of responsive home visitation. Socializations offer greater opportunities for parents and children to build relationships in group settings. Socialization experiences focus on both parents and children. The staff person becomes the coach and facilitator, nurturing and empowering parents, which will ultimately bring out the best in their children. The staff uses “teachable moments” to support family and child development. Creating socialization experiences that are developmentally appropriate for newborn to 3-year-olds requires staff who are able to create a setting that is responsive to each child and who will allow infants and toddlers to develop through natural play experiences. One of our main goals is to help parents see how special they are to their children.

**Rosemount Center Early Head Start:**
The philosophy that guides our approach to socializations is that the parents are a child’s first teacher and that the family is integral to the child’s success and growth. Therefore, our group socializations offer a forum where families can learn from interacting, training, modeling, and support from others. We create group socializations that are comfortable and supportive for the entire family. To reflect our supportive approach, we refer to our socializations as “family day.”

**Southern Oregon Child and Family Council Early Head Start:**
A sense of belonging is an important need we have identified and addressed in our environment. Having a feeling of belonging in a place and/or with a group of people takes time. Facilitating this requires careful attention to details in our space, actions, and attitudes. What creates a feeling of belonging? Being welcomed warmly. Being accepted and understood. Being visually represented in some way. To encourage a feeling of belonging and a sense of community we have integrated the following practices:

- We personally greet each parent and child as they arrive for group.
- We practice using and repeating names both verbally and in writing as much as possible in various places in the building. Using names represents to parents and children that they are known and that they are part of a group. We use name tags when new staff or visitors or families are in the center to assure that parents and children are addressed by their names by everyone. Recently, we created felt stars with each child’s name, and hung them in our entry. As soon as parents arrived, they looked for the star with their child’s name on it, and pointed it out to their child. One excited parent said, “look, everyone’s here!” Each of our five groups has a version of a name song, where everyone is greeted by name. We make a point to mention the names of anyone who is not present as well.
- We plan our schedule to allow unhurried time for personal connections between parents, children and staff to occur.
- We set up the physical space to allow for closeness and conversation.
Early Head Start Program Strategies:

- We display photos of the families who belong here. We started this as an alternative to the standard purchased posters of kids. One parent was so thrilled when she came in to discover an 11” x 13” color copy of a photo on the wall of herself and her child at play. “Look at us,” she said. During that group, she kept going back to look at it. Her response encouraged us and we began displaying more and more photos of parents and kids. Now parents come with their own cameras and also with photos from home that they ask us to display.
- We have created a visual space to celebrate new babies.
- We welcome parent’s donations of items to the center.
- Parents of children who are experiencing difficulties or who have special needs are supported and welcomed. Their place in the group is not jeopardized.

Southwest Community Action Program

Early Head Start:

We call our socializations “play groups.” Our four broad goals for the play groups are to:
- foster a strong attachment between parent and child;
- further the parents’ understanding of their child’s development;
- help parents better read their children’s cues;
- and allow children an opportunity to practice emerging skills in a stimulating and safe play environment.

The four basic premises guiding our socializations are:
1) intervention is guided by the family;
2) parent-child interactions are the heart of early intervention;
3) family rituals, play, and daily routines are the medium into which intervention is embedded; and
4) recorded, ongoing observations and conversations are the bases for intervention decisions.

II. Socialization experiences address the needs of both children and parents and build on the experiences and goals that are addressed during the home visit.

Early Head Start is a child development program that supports parents so that they in turn can provide the best possible support for their child. Thus, socialization experiences, like home visits, focus on parents as they engage their children in their first and most important relationships, and through the parents, on the needs of the children. The Family Partnership Agreement provides a foundation on which to strengthen and support families. The Performance Standards require that the Family Partnership Agreement identify the specific roles of parents in home visits and socializations. This ensures that each family’s goals are clearly articulated and provides a mechanism for assessing progress toward goals. It is important to individualize the socialization experiences so that they are meaningful for families and help them reach their goals.

The following EHS programs describe the roles of parents in planning and implementing socializations; special incentives for families and efforts to involve fathers; and how socialization experiences and home visits build upon each other to meet family goals.

Astor Early Head Start:

Socializations are for parents in their role as a parent. Parents learn from observing their own children interact with the environment and with other children. They build positive supportive social relationships with other parents. Parents assist the home visitors in organizing activities, assembling materials, and preparing snacks. Parents participate with their child in reading books, doing finger-plays, singing songs, rolling balls, etc. Parents appreciate this experience as a time for their children to experience a safe, predictable,
enriching environment. The group develops trusting relationships and reinforces what the home visitor is working on in the home. Our goal for parents is to support them in understanding and appreciating their child and their child’s behavior, and to increase parents’ confidence and self-esteem as parents who support their child in all areas of development.

During socializations, the role of the parent is to focus on the child and develop trusting relationships with other participants in the group. Consequently, other adult needs are met through other center activities such as parent meetings, family dinners, craft nights, or field trips. This allows the socialization time to be fully devoted to the parent-child relationship.

**Bear River Early Head Start:**
The goals for socializations are completely intertwined with the overall goals of the home-based program. Our main goals at Bear River EHS are to encourage positive parent/child interaction and to help our families to develop a strong support network for when they transition out of our program. Through open communication we work closely with parents and home visitors to meet family needs. We are able to organize group activities around topics that coincide with what the home visitors are doing on home visits.

**CESA #11 Early Head Start:**
Our program strives to provide an environment that is set up to meet the needs of both young children and their parents. Each parent and child is accepted and respected. The main focus is always the parent-child relationship. We have the expectation that each parent will find support in working out a balance between his or her own needs and the child’s needs. To do this we share experiences, ideas, and observation times. Parents sort out what works for them and what doesn’t work. Parents also feel free to share problems because they know it’s okay to have problems in the big job of parenting. Our approach is to care for children with respect, allowing them to grow as individuals, providing many opportunities for problem-solving and discovery within a safe environment.

**Community Action Program Belknap-Merrimack Counties, Laconia Early Head Start:**
We recently hired a Male Involvement Consultant to look at ways of increasing the involvement of the fathers and male caregivers in the lives of the children we’re working with. Through the use of questionnaires, information is actively solicited from fathers regarding activities of interest and convenient times for participation.
Socialization activities focus on the optimal development of the child, the parent-child relationship, and the parent. Development of respectful, reciprocal relationships with the families is crucial. We provide families with the opportunity for both the adults and children to develop relationships within the context of a social environment. It is important for parents to see their children in a social environment in addition to their home environment. Children benefit greatly from being able to interact with other infants and toddlers in a comfortable, stable, learning environment. Parents are able to share common experiences and challenges and can exchange ideas and learn from each other. They are able to build networks outside of the Center and form friendships, which can be the source of a great deal of support. What is included in the socializations is very much parent driven.

At Early Head Start, we seek to help parents enjoy their children and strengthen their parenting skills through education and support. We recognize that communication and problem-solving skills and an understanding of child development are keys to good parenting. These skills, therefore, are the focus of the education that we provide to parents in our program. During the socializations, we provide opportunities for the parents to learn through presentations done by the staff as well as inviting outside agencies or educators to present information the parents help to identify as being important in increasing their knowledge about their parenting and about their child.

**Community Improvement Council Early Head Start:**

Parents are active participants in socializations. They are involved in the planning and preparation, such as generating ideas for activities, setting up the environment, or ordering supplies. Goals for parents include: facilitating developmentally appropriate play; one-on-one attention to their child; socializing with other parents; and a safe place to discuss their concerns, fears, and challenges as a parent. An integral part of the socialization is to encourage parents to network. This setting has allowed relationships to form that otherwise would never have existed.

**Gum Springs Children’s Center:**

Our overall goals for our home-based services are to build on family strengths and to recognize and encourage parents to be the first and most important educator of their children. Our goals for socialization are integrated into the overall goals of our home-based services by focusing on the nature of the parent-child interaction as the key to the healthy development of their child(ren). Most importantly, we meet our goals for children by helping, encouraging, modeling, and supporting parents in responding to their child(ren) in ways that will build positive and trusting relationships.

**Mid-Cumberland Community Action Agency Early Head Start:**

Planning socialization experiences with the parents is the key to the effectiveness of these experiences. Planning is an ongoing process in which parents, staff, and community members participate. During weekly home visits, parents and the family support visitor explore: What new experiences do we want for our babies? How are we going to implement those experiences? What supplies, materials, resources do we need? What needs do the parents have? Is there some specific information that would be helpful? Does the parent need help with transportation to the socialization?
What nutritional meal or snack will be served? What did the parent learn about their child from the last socialization? How is their infant/toddler relating to the other children in the group experience?

**Monongalia County Early Head Start:**
Parents are expected to be active participants in the socialization experience. The goals for parents involved in the infant-toddler socialization include: 1) to share with parents developmentally appropriate activities for their child; 2) to reinforce positive parent and child interaction; 3) to provide parents the opportunity to socialize with other parents and share ideas; and 4) to provide parents information on safety and nutrition. During infant-toddler socializations parents serve as the teachers of their children and staff serve as coaches to the parents. These goals are posted in the family resource room. The staff addresses these goals by offering a variety of socialization opportunities and having program staff actively interacting and communicating with parents during a socialization.

**Rosemount Center Early Head Start:**
Rosemount Center is located in Washington, D.C., in the historic district of Mount Pleasant which is known for its diverse population. A unique feature of our program is the bilingual (English/Spanish) approach to providing services which is also reflected in both program options. Being culturally responsive is a also a goal in planning. Since our staff is 50% bilingual in English/Spanish, “family days” are planned to meet the primary language of each family. For example, some “family days” may be designated for Spanish-speaking families with bilingual staff while others are planned with English-speaking staff. There are also opportunities for bilingual groups so families can practice new English language skills.

Goals are met by designing the environment to be developmentally appropriate and by planning the activities to support the child and family in the goals established in the Child Development Plan and Family Partnership Agreement. Goals for socializations are integrated into the overall home-based service goals by including the “family day” as an activity in our service plans. For example, one service area plan objective is to support the achievement of individual goals. A Family Partnership Agreement goal may be to help the parent learn more about nutrition and feeding skills. A “family day” may then include a nutritionist who will talk about the importance of nutrition, finger feeding, utensils, and serving sizes; include a hands on recipe; serve a nutritious meal for parents to practice feeding; provide measuring cups; and provide hand outs for the family to use at home. The parents can continue to build on their individual goals by using the measuring cups at home and practicing feeding techniques plus discuss these issues each week during a home visit.
Southern Oregon Child and Family Council
Early Head Start:
In using the Family Partnership Agreements for planning socializations we begin by assessing the strengths and interests of the parents. A primary goal is to strengthen and build family relationships. We use their input to build upon. We try to encourage parents with strong interactive skills to partner with less socially experienced parents for esteem building. Several of our family’s goals are to meet new people. We ask parents if they would like to exchange phone numbers. Those who sign a list stating that they would like other parents’ numbers and to share their own, are given a list with all the numbers. They can then build peer relationships. Children are grouped according to ages at our center so all parents have that commonality.

III. Socializations provide an opportunity to address all of the services required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards:
- medical, dental, mental health, and nutrition;
- child development and education;
- family involvement;
- community partners; and
- effective management systems, such as planning, record-keeping, and self-assessment.

Socialization experiences are a service delivery mechanism in the same way that home visits are a method for delivering EHS services. Thus, socialization groups provide a venue through which EHS staff can address, based on family needs, any of the service areas identified in the Performance Standards through experiences such as discussion, targeted activities, or community involvement. The content of the socialization experiences should be determined by family goals, and incorporate the EHS services areas in a meaningful way.

Management systems ensure that the socialization experiences are meeting the Performance Standards and achieving the goals of the program. Socialization experiences are strengthened by the quality of the planning, as well as the ongoing evaluation of the experiences. Record-keeping provides essential information to track progress and effectiveness.

The following EHS programs describe some unique community collaborations; challenges and approaches to planning; and self-assessment techniques.

Bear River Early Head Start:
We have a number of ways in which we evaluate our socializations in order to continually meet family needs. We are continually being evaluated by our research department. We routinely provide questionnaires for families to fill out anonymously and place in a designated spot called the “birdhouse.” We have a yearly continuous improvement program report that assesses the goals of our program and how well we have met them. We have regular debriefing and
feedback sessions among parents and staff to evaluate the Baby Buddy Groups and what we can do to improve them. The coordinators and group leaders must fill out check lists and lesson plans before and after each Baby Buddy Group to ensure that all identified areas are being addressed. We also regularly videotape groups in order to continually evaluate what positive areas there are and what we can do to better serve our families.

**Gum Springs Children’s Center:**
Community partners participate in socializations by providing training on topics of interest to our families. Socializations are also a time when community partners can provide services to our families. For example, therapists have provided early intervention services to children with special needs during socializations, and mental health consultants have observed children to determine the need for referral for further assessment or services.

**Mid-Cumberland Community Action Agency Early Head Start:**
Mid-Cumberland Early Head Start is part of the Mid-Cumberland Head Start program under the umbrella of Mid-Cumberland Community Action Agency. In the more rural counties, we offer a home-based program where four family support workers each serve five children. In one county we have a unique linkage with a local early intervention program (WAVES) where we collaborate for group socializations. Socializations are held weekly and last approximately 2-3 hours depending on the site and age of the children. The EHS family support visitor, other EHS staff, and EHS families participate. At the site where EHS and WAVES jointly offer the socialization, the WAVES teacher and Jump Start teacher also participate. The WAVES program serves as a resource for children with special needs. We invite community partners, such as the Health Department, to participate and share resources with parents.

**Monongalia County Early Head Start:**
Each week there is an infant socialization experience for children under 18 months and a toddler socialization for children between 18 months and 3 years that allows for staff to plan and to offer age-appropriate activities. Each of these sessions has established learning objectives with activities designed to increase parents’ knowledge and understanding of the developmental experiences that enhance the child’s potential for learning. The family resource worker coordinates activities at each site. She is responsible for the planning and implementation of socializations and works with the family service workers, the community liaison, the family literacy coordinator, and early childhood students to develop monthly plans for these groups. Each socialization follows a scheduled routine and offers a series of activities to meet specific session learning objectives related to enhancing a child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills.

Because each infant-toddler socialization offers activities planned to meet specific developmental tasks, it is easily adapted to meet the needs of children with special needs. This experience also offers a “natural environment” for children with special needs. At the site located in Jakes Run, Early Head Start staff and the local Birth to Three early intervention program staff cofacilitate this experience to ensure that children and their parents receive special support and attention. This shared programming eases accessibility problems for families with children who have special needs and live in rural areas.
Shasta Early Head Start:
The challenges associated with providing developmentally appropriate socializations have been minimized following changes that occurred as a result of West Ed training. Environmental changes, such as dividing the rooms into separate activity areas, having rooms divided visually with bookshelves, risers, and couches to give visual separation of areas, have made a huge difference. The most significant positive shift in our socialization philosophy was when our program director facilitated a meeting with home-based staff. Socialization goals and needs of children were brainstormed and identified by the group, and we began to change the socialization structure accordingly. Prior to that, we had tried to fit the mold of “traditional Head Start” parent meetings with separate child care. The parents and the children were glad with the change, and we found that we were glad, too. If parents want information about a topic such as childhood illness, a nurse consultant or other speaker will come into the socialization and give information on the topic and answer questions while children are present. In the past, socializations lasted 3 hours, but we found that it is just too long for babies and toddlers. They would burn out after about 1.5 hours. This encouraged us to provide opportunities for more frequent 2 hour socializations, which includes clean up.

Southern Oregon Child and Family Council Early Head Start:
In Southern Oregon Early Head Start we utilize many community partners in group socializations. We educate parents during group on a varying degree of topics from health and safety, nutrition, to child development. Our Community Health Nurse Partners, Mental Health Consultants, Lamaze/CBEs, and many other key community partners provide this continuous education to parents. Many times, informally, these partners take part in the total group socialization experience and through this they are able to educate parents more informally through key “teachable moments.” Our partnerships with individuals in the community have increased the education of both families and staff.

An integrated approach to child and family development guides our process in which developmentally appropriate socialization is a priority. In gathering the informal and formal information that we use in our planning, this integrated approach links:

- discussions with family;
- observations;
- parent education group;
- results of screenings and assessments;
- goal-setting sessions;
- ongoing curriculum planning; and
- effective strategies in interacting with parents and children.

Rather than separate elements, all of these parts of the integrated model flow in a purposeful way to ensure that each child and parent are receiving a content-rich individualized program within the EHS service settings of center, home, and community.

Shortly after the families leave the center, the team of staff meet for a very detailed debrief session. It is during this session that observations of the children and what happened during the socialization group are detailed in a notebook specific for that group. Detailed notes are taken about the course and the happenings of the entire group, as well as very

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3 This training, developed by WestEd in collaboration with the California State Department of Education, is called the Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers (PITC). PITC consists of intensive training sessions on four module content areas. The PITC intensive for EHS grantees is held twice each year. Each intensive is one week long and covers two of the four training modules. For additional information, contact WestEd at 415-331-5277 or visit the Web site at www.pitc.org.
detailed notes about each of the children in the group. Using all the information shared during this debrief session, as well as the goals for each individual child, the team then makes notes of curriculum, activities, setup of the environment, toys to add or to take away, and materials to use for the next socialization. A great deal of time and effort is put into this portion of the day. It is critical that the observations made during the socialization be noted, used in the planning, and carefully detailed and documented.

IV. It is expected that the goals and outcomes for socialization experiences will vary depending on the developmental level of the child, and will change as a child’s development progresses.

Socialization experiences for very young infants will be different from socialization experiences for older toddlers. The developmental level of each child, as well as family strengths, needs, and priorities, should drive individual goals and will change over time. Some EHS programs have grouped children of the same developmental level together for socializations (i.e., young infants, mobile infants, and toddlers). Other programs have designed mixed-age groups that provide experiences designed to meet the needs of multiple age groups in one setting. While socialization experiences have an overarching purpose to strengthen the parent-child relationship, the individual goals of parents and children will naturally evolve as the child progresses through new developmental stages. Socializations also provide an inclusive environment for children with special needs.

The EHS programs in this section share how they approach the process of individualizing socialization experiences and highlight their observations of infants and toddlers interacting with each other.

Astor Early Head Start:
Many activities can be open-ended enough to include children who span the birth-to-3 age range. A standard space in our socialization is a mat in front of a mirror with sensory toys for infants and parents to explore together. Moving to soft music, with parents holding young babies, is a group activity everyone can enjoy, as are simple songs and water play.

Cesa #11 Early Head Start:
Our gatherings focus on play as an important element of developing language, coordination, creativity, problem solving, and competence. We allow for lots of exploring and moving which infants and toddlers need to do. We design our environments to be safe enough that the children can have lots of uninterrupted play time with as few “no’s” as possible so we can say “yes” to their learning. Information from our developmental screenings help to determine individual areas of strengths and needs.

Cesa #11 EHS, Turtle Lake, WI
Community Action Program
Belknap-Marrimack Counties, Laconia
Early Head Start:
We provide a high-quality environment with a variety of spaces, equipment and materials. A variety of experiences are facilitated through the exploration of natural materials, creative materials, puzzles, blocks, books, textures, musical instruments, and other age-appropriate materials. All equipment is safe, age appropriate, and varied to meet the many different activities we provide. Areas for floor time, exploration of space, crawling, climbing, hiding, playing alone, and playing together are arranged to meet each group’s needs and each child’s needs taking into consideration age and skill level. A variety of spaces provide for messy play, table activities, building, and riding toys as well. There is a sleeping room that offers a quiet place for sleeping infants and nursing mothers. There is lots of room for infants to experience floor time on cushions and blankets. There are comfortable rocking chairs and couches for adults to cuddle babies, read stories, and hold children while interacting with their children and each other. Families have access to different areas to experience a variety of activities including mirrors, climbing frames, tunnels, and water and sand tables. There are dress-up areas, a cooking/kitchen area, and reading areas. We also have a fenced-in outside play area where children and families have access to swings, slides, climbing equipment, sandboxes, and a picnic table.

Early Head Start parents are encouraged to work together with the staff to decide what kinds of learning experiences they want their children to have. Parents, as primary caregivers, bring knowledge about their child and their goals for that child to the program, as they will be the ones who will have continuing involvement in the child’s life. We encourage following the child’s lead and observing what the child is interested in and building upon that information. This “emergent curriculum” focus also teaches children that they can impact their world.

Community Improvement Council
Early Head Start:
Our primary goal for infants and toddlers is to introduce them to new and developmentally appropriate activities. At socializations, parents and children may cook, bake, make a craft, or participate in movement and music class. We encourage parents to actively participate with their child by staying nearby and talking about the activity. Family workers model how to do the activity with their child, rather than for their child. There is always unstructured play time for children to interact with each other. It is not unusual to see a 8-to-10 month old baby pointing to a child of similar age and laughing; toddlers are involved in parallel play and are beginning to share; 2 and 3 year old children play peek-a-boo or build sand castles together.
We are able to create developmentally appropriate experiences for children who span the birth-to-3 age range in several ways. For example, we arrange the room in “stations” according to developmental level. A carpeted area with infant toys is available for young infants. They can interact or observe the world around them. We have another area for mobile infants where they can freely explore. Our toddler area has climbing equipment and other activities for their developmental level.

**Rosemount Center Early Head Start:**
Our “Family Day” offers the child with special needs and their parent or family the opportunity to be included in a natural environment with same age peers. Often a therapist attends the socializations and assists the home visitors with group activities which offers an opportunity for facilitating various areas of development.

**Shasta Early Head Start:**
Creating developmentally appropriate activities for infants, as well as 3-year-olds, is always tricky. Sometimes it is impossible to adapt one activity to meet everyone’s needs so often more than one activity will be provided at a time. Many activities can be adapted. At the socialization sites the environment is divided into a quiet/soft area with chairs so that parents can hold infants and enjoy safe and free exploration of the environment with their infants. On the other side of the room are areas where toddlers can have more active play including dramatic play area. A favorite activity at socials is videotaping and taking Polaroid pictures of the parents and children. Fathers often enjoy operating the cameras as well as posing for pictures with their babies. Although planned activities and trainings do occur, free-play and exploration is an important part of every socialization as are routine activities such as finger-plays, songs, hand-washing, and mealtime.

**Southwest Community Action Program Early Head Start:**
Perhaps the most important aspect of infant and toddler development is their emotional development. How children feel about themselves as they relate to others and learn who they are affects every area of development. Young infants have physical needs: to be fed when they are hungry; changed when soiled or wet; and allowed to sleep when tired. They also have emotional needs: to be comforted when upset; to have someone to talk with and interesting things to explore; and to be held and loved. When you meet these needs consistently, promptly, and lovingly, you help infants learn to trust themselves and their world.

**V. Socializations experiences and activities are based on a curriculum which:**
- articulates goals for children and parents;
- identifies the experiences through which they will achieve these goals;
- determines appropriate roles for EHS staff and parents;
- provides the necessary materials to carry out the plan;
- includes all areas of child development – cognitive, motor, language, social, emotional; and
- considers each child’s cultural, ethnic, and linguistic heritage and experience.
Early Head Start Program Strategies:

The curriculum that guides the socialization experiences reflects the curriculum approach required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards [45 CFR 1304.3(a)(5)]. This framework allows EHS programs tremendous flexibility to develop an approach that is responsive to program philosophy, community and family needs, and individual child and parent goals. Early Head Start programs draw from many resources to create the most effective approach for their families.

The following EHS programs describe particular resources that enabled them to develop a philosophy to guide their approach to socializations. Other programs describe how the physical and emotional environment has been designed to support their curricular approach.

**Cesa #11 Early Head Start:**
The main focus of our socializations is the parent-child relationship. The philosophy of Magda Gerber and Resources for Infant Educators has influenced our approach. Magda Gerber describes a “way of being with children” which is at the core of our activities and experiences. As we plan activities for the gathering we ask: Is it safe? Is it respectful of self? Is it respectful of others? Is it respectful of the environment? Is it child centered or adult directed? What kind of learning is taking place? Parents play an integral part of the planning process. Each socialization lasts 2 1/2 hours and consists of eight children and their parents.

**Community Improvement Council Early Head Start:**
Our socializations are held in the Family Room of the Early Head Start building. This setting is licensed by the New York Department of Social Services and meets all child care licensing requirements. The Family Room has several features that help to ensure that the space meets the needs of both adults and children. There are both child- and adult-sized tables and chairs in the room. Children have access to bikes, indoor climbing equipment, balls, and toys. Their room is arranged so that adult spaces and child spaces are integrated and the children never have to be out of eyesight of their parents. Children can always come for a hug, kiss, or encouraging word. Parents can interact with their child and still feel connected to the other adults in the room.

**Gum Springs Children’s Center:**
Our approach to socializations revolves around enhancing relationships. To ensure that we are meeting the developmental needs of infants and toddlers, we have turned to The Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers as the philosophical foundation of our curriculum and have used materials from ZERO TO THREE, along with Head Start Program Performance Standards, to guide developmentally appropriate practices.

We have a classroom, equipped with developmentally appropriate materials, that is used solely for socializations. Since we believe that the environment affects building relationships, we have arranged the space to be both a comfortable environment for adults, and a safe and secure environment for children to explore. However, we know that a comfortable, safe, and secure environment for parents and children extends beyond the physical environment. Therefore, our home visitors and parents work collaboratively to know each child’s experiences in learning, temperament, interests, learning styles, and physical needs. Much of this information is gathered during home visitations and is then shared during socialization time. Our socialization schedule is structured in such a manner that allows for parents to share experiences, and to plan for the next week’s socialization activities. Our philosophy is that parents and children should guide the content of each socialization.

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4 Educator and infant specialist Magda Gerber and Tom Forrest, a specialist in developmental and behavioral pediatrics, have developed a philosophy and methodology for working with infants, built upon the pioneering work of the late Hungarian pediatrician, Dr. Emmi Pikler. Together Mrs. Gerber and Dr. Forrest originated and conducted the Demonstration Infant Program in Palo Alto, California (1972-1977), and in 1978 founded Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE) to continue educating parents and professionals in their approach. For more information, visit the RIE Web site at http://www.rie.org/.
**Monongalia County Early Head Start:**
Our foundation for planning and implementing socializations has grown from staff development and training experiences which include: the Program for Infant-Toddler Caregivers from WestEd, Parents As Teachers' training, and the Creative Curriculum for Infant and Toddlers.

**Shasta Early Head Start:**
Shasta EHS offers socializations in four different sites that each have unique features and challenges. Two socialization sites are in Shasta County, one in Trinity County, and one in Siskiyou County. Each socialization site is divided into age-appropriate activity areas. For instance, there is an area for dramatic play, gross motor, quiet area, fine motor, and infant area. While carpet and risers give the room warmth and a variety of levels and surfaces for children to play on, linoleum areas are also provided and maintained for wet activities. Socialization sites have climbers against the wall with a mirror behind them so children can look at themselves while climbing up the equipment. One of the larger socialization sites is shared by three home visitors, and is equipped with a toddler loft that includes a slide and room under the loft for toddlers to quietly explore. Although the furniture and equipment at each of the sites is neutral in color, each site has a character of its own.

**Southern Oregon Child and Family Council Early Head Start:**
When designing, planning and settling into our facilities, we discussed the question of how the space would best meet the need of both adults and children. In order to “meet the needs of adults and children,” as a staff we needed to have a shared vision of what those needs were. Through our discussions with each other, dialog with parents and observations of children, we have found that parents’ and children’s greatest needs in regard to our socialization groups are to feel physically and emotionally safe, to experience a sense of belonging, and to have a sense of meaning and purpose about their experience. To meet these needs, we have addressed both our physical environment and the emotional environment that we create by our actions, policies, materials, room arrangements, etc.

We place a high value on toys made from found objects, and attempt to have 50% or more of the items in use be made of found object materials. Parents are often intrigued with creative ways in which cans, boxes, and plastic bottles are used in the center. This encourages them to replicate these items at home, and to participate in their child’s play. We bring in natural materials as often as possible for the children to explore. Parents are much less likely to insist that their children use these kinds of materials in certain,

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Parents as Teachers (PAT) is a national program for families with young children that provides home visits, group meetings, developmental screenings, and linkages with other services. The Parents as Teachers National Center offers a training program that leads to a PAT credential as a Parent Educator. The PAT National Center can be reached at 314-432-4330 or on the Internet at www.patnc.org.
Early Head Start Program Strategies:

prescribed ways. The play and the interaction tends to be more relaxed. It demonstrates for parents that the process of the play is much more important than the specific materials being played with. We have also learned that too much “stuff” detracts from the children’s play and from parent’s interactions with their child. Having fewer toys and materials available, and displaying in interesting ways encourages children to use objects in new ways and keeps them from being overstimulated.

After we ensure that the materials, equipment, etc., in our center are safe, “appropriateness” is determined by a combination of developmental appropriateness, space considerations, and creativity in our thinking about the use and placement of our furnishings and materials. We keep our focus on facilitating the parent-child interaction. As we make our plans, we ask ourselves, “Will this item enhance or detract from the parent-child interaction?” We consider child goals and developmental stages as well as individual emergent interests and skills in assessing which materials will be used (or removed). Our carefully recorded observations after each group also assist with this process.

After ensuring that our families consistently feel physically and emotionally safe, we focus on how to ensure that parents and children have a sense of belonging and a meaningful experience in the Parent Child Groups. This need must be addressed first. Physical safety is addressed on daily, weekly and monthly bases. Each day, before and after Parent Child Group, the center is cleaned, sanitized and checked for hazards. Even more thorough cleaning is done at the end of each week, and a variety of safety features are checked monthly (such as the fire extinguishers and smoke alarms). Additionally, we are visited by the County Sanitarian, the Fire Department, and the Early Head Start Health Supervisor periodically to ensure that our center is in compliance with all local regulations and Head Start Program Performance Standards. Only safe and age-appropriate materials are used. Groups are well staffed to provide adequate supervision of children at all times.

Parents feelings of trust and safety are encouraged when they observe the steps we have taken to assure their physical comfort and the comfort and safety of their children. These are small things, but they do send an important message to families. A few examples:

• We provide a combination of child- and adult-sized furnishings and materials;

• We provide a quiet area for parents to nurse or bottle feed their babies, or rock them to sleep with rocking chairs, cribs, soft lights, and soft music;

• We offer comfortable places to sit for adults who prefer not to be on the floor which enables them to be in close proximity with their children as they play;

• We incorporate natural lighting and materials into the environment;

Bear River EHS, Logan, UT
• We maintain an atmosphere that is as calm and relaxed as possible; and
• We maintain a policy prohibiting the use of any kind of corporal punishment as well as harsh, derogatory, or inappropriate language in the center.

The steps we have taken to create an emotionally safe climate for parents and children in our center may be less obvious but are equally important. Parents or children who feel anxious or fearful are not going to be able to enjoy or participate fully in the group experience. Sometimes we have observed parents that are withdrawn or combative and/or children that are irritable, extremely shy, or have great difficulty separating from their parent. Our task then is to see what we may be able to do to increase their feeling of security and trust. We do not assume that this is just the parent’s or the child's problem. Our actions, attitudes, and policies greatly influence whether or not families will experience a sense of safety and build trust with us and other parents. Some examples of how this is addressed:

• We have unconditional positive regard and respect of each person here, under all circumstances;
• We accept each parent’s unique way of interacting with and caring for their child;
• We are responsive to parents when they express concerns or make suggestions, and utilize input whenever possible;
• We give clear written and verbal guidelines for families about center policies and practices;
• We keep confidential what parents share with us;
• We provide written materials in both English and Spanish;

• We provide places for privacy;
• We support parents without judging when they are having a difficult time with their child; and
• We are as flexible as possible during the group time.

The third need we attempt to meet for families is to help them have a sense of meaning and purpose in their experience in Parent Child Groups. Why are they here? Why do they keep coming back? Parents have fun with their child and enjoy getting to know other parents, but we have found in talking with them over the past few years that many of our parents are here for something more. In their words, they have told us “I want to be a better mother.” “I want to understand my child more.” “I want my child to have a better childhood than I did.” “This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.” We believe that they are telling us that they want their relationships with their children to be stronger, and they want to feel capable and confident in their role as a parent. They want to know and connect with their child in a meaningful way. Our attitudes and actions, and the emotional environment we create supports this:

• We share with parents the ways in which we see their child being nurtured and supported by them;
• We share with parents the enormous impact their relationship with their child has on their child’s development;
• We assist parents in articulating observations about their child on increasingly deeper levels;
• We share information with parents about how children develop in ways that are understandable and meaningful to them, and specific to their own child;
Early Head Start Program Strategies:

- We ask parents to share with us what they know and understand about their child;
- We speak for the child when helpful, to encourage feelings of empathy;
- We encourage parents’ feeling of pride and confidence in themselves;
- We allow time and space for parents to talk and listen to each other;
- We don’t “take over” or dictate the parents experience here; and
- We are fortunate to have large and well-equipped outdoor areas. During group time, when the weather allows, the outside is always accessible to children. We encourage parents to participate with their child as they run and climb and dig, etc. We create safe areas for infants and crawlers outside by blocking off special areas for them and bringing out age-appropriate materials and equipment for them.

Southwest Community Action Program Early Head Start:
Our approach to socializations is guided by the “responsive approach” as outlined by The Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers. We believe that the most essential part of curriculum and lesson planning is the context for learning. The learning environment is more important than lesson plans or activities. The socialization experience for infants and toddlers should be safe and interesting, materials should be appropriate to the age group, the groups should be small, the child’s sense of security should be maximized, as strong family connections should occur, and appropriate cognitive, social, and emotional topics should be emphasized. With this approach in mind, we use the Creative Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers to plan socialization experiences.

Putting it All Together

The five principles of effective socializations discussed above provide a framework for developing an approach to socializations with families of infants and toddlers. The excerpts from the EHS grantees illustrate how each program has its own unique goals, program philosophy, resources, and family priorities. The following are some questions to consider as you plan and implement socialization experiences to meet the particular needs of the infants, toddlers and families in your EHS home-based program:

Questions to Consider

Setting the Tone
What kind of group experience do you want to create for the families in your home-based option? Consider how the title of the experience can attract participants and set an appealing tone. What do you want children and families to gain from participating? How will your staff and program benefit from the experience? What elements of the environment help to “set the tone” you hope to create in your socializations?

Linking Socialization Experiences to Home Visits
How can you use the Family Partnership Agreement to support parent roles in both home visits and socializations? How are parents involved in all aspects of socializations, from planning to implementation and evaluation? Are the goals and experiences of the socializations culturally sensitive and relevant to participating families? How do you ensure that the curriculum is individualized for every child? What role does screening and ongoing assessment have in socializations?

Management Systems and Procedures
Who is involved in planning socializations? How do you get family input? What kind of record-keeping mechanisms are in place? Do your self-assessment techniques include staff, family, and community
partner input? How do you use the information from the self-assessment to refine your socialization experiences?

**Developmentally Appropriate Experiences for Infants and Toddlers**
Is it feasible to offer separate socializations for young infants, mobile infants, and toddlers? How do you ensure that socialization experiences are developmentally appropriate for mixed ages? How does the environment support the developmental needs of children and facilitate parent and child interaction? How does the size of the group socialization support developmentally appropriate experiences for infants and toddlers?

**Staffing Issues**
How are your home visitors prepared to work with parents both individually and in the group setting? What kinds of professional development experiences build skills in both of those areas? Would a designated staff position for the planning and implementation of socializations be desirable for your program? How would home visitors remain involved in the socializations if there were a designated staff position for this purpose? What caseload size is manageable to ensure that home visitors have sufficient time to participate in planning and implementing socializations? How can staffing accommodations be made to ensure that older siblings of EHS participating children are safely occupied so that parents can fully devote their attention to their infant or toddler during the socialization experience?

Socialization experiences for infants and toddlers provide home-based EHS staff the unique opportunity to support child development by focusing on the parent-child relationship in the group setting. Effective socializations build on the content of the home visits and are individualized to support each child’s developmental strengths, needs, and goals. The relationship and interaction between parent and child are at the heart of each socialization experience. Strengthening the bond between infants and toddlers and their parents, their most important “social” relationship, creates the strongest foundation for social competence with peers and other adults later in life.

*Laconia EHS, Laconia, NH*
REFERENCES


SELECTED RESOURCES


APPENDIX A

Early Head Start National Resource Center Questionnaire

Early Head Start Program Strategies: GROUP SOCIALIZATIONS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

The Early Head Start National Resource Center (EHS NRC) collects and disseminates information on issues of critical importance to the EHS community. Each year the EHS NRC invites EHS grantees to participate in this unique opportunity to share their strengths with each other. As new EHS programs are being developed around the nation, the knowledge and experience of existing grantees is an invaluable resource for others to learn from.

The EHS NRC will choose, based on the depth and breadth of the responses to this survey, a selected number of EHS programs to profile in the second volume of Early Head Start Program Strategies, a series of reports illustrating the diverse and unique approaches of Early Head Start programs around the country. The first topic for this series focused on staff development. Nearly 50 EHS grantees responded to the initial survey and five programs are profiled in the first volume. To view the first volume and learn more about this project, visit the EHS NRC Web site at www.ehsnrc.org.

1. PROGRAM BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Please describe your EHS program:

• How long have you been providing services?

• Describe the families you work with.
  (i.e. teen parents, pregnant women, etc.)

• Describe the community you work in.
  (i.e. rural, urban, etc.)
• Include any other demographic information/unique features of your program.

2. APPROACH TO SOCIALIZATIONS
• What is the rationale or philosophy that guides your approach to socializations?
• How do you create socialization experiences that are developmentally appropriate for birth-to-three year olds?
• Who is involved in planning?
• Describe the planning process.

3. LOGISTICS
• How often are socializations held? How long do they last?
• Who participates in the socializations?
• Do you include community partners (i.e. maternal and child health, Lamaze, La Leche League, etc.) in socializations? How?
• How are the socializations staffed?
• How is transportation provided?
• Describe how nutrition is provided for during socialization activities? (Please note: EHS grantees are required to use USDA Child and Adult Food Program reimbursement.)

4. GOALS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS
• What are your goals for children during socializations?
• How do you meet those goals?
• How are the goals for socializations integrated into the overall goals of your home-based services?
• How do socializations meet the needs of children with special needs?

5. PARENT INVOLVEMENT
• How are parents involved in socializations?
• What are the goals for parents? How are they met?
• How do you use the Family Partnership Agreement when planning socializations?

6. ENVIRONMENTS FOR SOCIALIZATIONS
• Describe the locations or facilities for your socializations.
• How do you ensure that the space for socializations meets the Head Start Performance Standards and State child care licensing requirements?
• How does the space meet the needs of both children and adults?
• How do you utilize both indoor and outdoor areas?
• How do you ensure that appropriate equipment, materials, toys, and furniture are available?

7. EVALUATING SOCIALIZATIONS
• Please describe your evaluation or continuous improvement process for socializations.
• Describe the challenges associated with providing developmentally appropriate socializations and how you are meeting them.

Please include any other information that you feel is important to adequately convey your approach to socializations.