

Head Start & Early Head Start: Free Early Education for Young Children

A Step-by-Step Guide for Families – 2026 Edition

AssistanceGuides.com | This guide is for informational purposes only. Head Start is managed locally — services, enrollment availability, and waitlists vary by program. Always contact your local Head Start program for current information.



What Is Head Start?

Head Start is a federally funded program that provides **free, comprehensive early education and child development services** to low-income children and their families. It's much more than preschool — it also covers health screenings, dental and vision care, nutrition, mental health services, and family support.

Two Programs – Different Age Groups:

Program	Ages Served	What It Offers
Head Start (Preschool)	Children ages 3–4 (entering kindergarten next year)	Center-based or home-based preschool education
Early Head Start	Children birth through age 3 , and pregnant women	Infant/toddler care, home visits, prenatal support

- **Completely free** to qualifying families — no tuition, no fees
- Typically offered as **center-based** (classroom setting) or **home-based** (weekly home visits from an educator)
- Programs run throughout the school year; some offer year-round or extended-day options
- **Children with disabilities are always welcome** — federal rules require that at least 10% of enrollment be children with disabilities or IEPs



Important: Program Disruptions in 2025–2026

Head Start has faced significant operational challenges that families need to know about:

Regional Office Closures

Five regional HHS offices closed (Chicago, Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco) — causing grant processing delays and reduced federal oversight

Funding Delays

Funding delays throughout 2025 caused some programs to temporarily close or reduce hours

Administrative Disruptions

Administrative disruptions have increased wait times and paperwork burdens for programs

FY2026 Funding

FY2026 funding maintained at \$12.27 billion — the program was level-funded (no cuts enacted), but earlier budget proposals to eliminate Head Start were widely reported

New Enrollment Restrictions

New enrollment restrictions: Undocumented immigrants are being blocked from enrolling in federally funded programs

⚠ Bottom line: Head Start remains funded and available, but **contact your local program directly** to confirm it is operating normally, accepting applications, and has openings.

Who Qualifies?

Automatic Eligibility (Regardless of Income):

Children qualify **automatically** — income does not matter — if:

- Child is in **foster care**
- Family receives **TANF** (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)
- Child or parent receives **SSI** (Supplemental Security Income)
- Family is **experiencing homelessness** (under the McKinney-Vento Act)
- Child lives in a **Tribal program's service area** (for Tribal Head Start)
- Family member's **primary income is from agricultural work** (Migrant or Seasonal Head Start)

Income-Based Eligibility:

Standard threshold: At or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)

2026 Income Limits at 100% FPL (48 contiguous states + DC):

Household Size	Annual	Monthly
1	\$15,960	\$1,330
2	\$21,640	\$1,803
3	\$27,320	\$2,277
4	\$33,000	\$2,750
5	\$38,680	\$3,223
6	\$44,360	\$3,697
7	\$50,040	\$4,170
8	\$55,720	\$4,643
Each additional	+\$5,680/yr	+\$473/mo

Alaska: Limits are approximately 25% higher. **Hawaii:** Approximately 15% higher.

Flexibility Above the Income Limit:

Programs have built-in flexibility to serve families that barely exceed the income threshold:

- **Housing cost adjustment:** If your family pays **more than 30%** of gross income on housing, the excess is deducted from your income for eligibility purposes. Many families who appear "over income" qualify under this rule.
- **10% over-income slots:** Programs may fill up to **10% of their enrollment** with children from families above the income limit at their discretion.
- **100–130% FPL slots:** Under certain circumstances, programs can fill up to **35% of enrollment** with children from families earning between 100% and 130% FPL.



In practice: If you're close to the income limit, still apply — the housing adjustment and discretionary slots mean many families who don't expect to qualify actually do.

What Head Start Provides

Education & Learning

- Structured early learning curriculum aligned with school readiness goals
- Literacy, language, and math foundations
- Social-emotional development and behavioral support
- Teacher-to-child ratios capped to ensure quality

Health Services (All Free)

- Comprehensive health screening within 45 days of enrollment
- Vision and hearing screenings
- Dental screenings and referrals for treatment
- Immunization reviews and referrals
- Mental health consultation for children and families
- Nutrition guidance and healthy meals/snacks during program hours

Family Support

- Parent engagement activities and parent committees
- Connections to community resources — housing, employment, adult education
- Crisis referrals for domestic violence, substance use, food insecurity
- Help navigating other benefits (Medicaid, CHIP, SNAP)

Home-Based Option

Families who prefer it can choose the **home-based program**:

- A Head Start educator visits your home **weekly** (90-minute sessions)
- Focuses on coaching parents to be their child's first teacher
- Includes monthly group socialization sessions for children

How to Enroll

Step 1: Find Your Local Program

Head Start is **not applied for through a state agency**. You must contact your local program directly.

Find programs near you:

- **Website:** [headstart.gov](https://www.headstart.gov) → use the Center Locator
- **Enter your zip code** to see all programs in your area
- Programs run by local nonprofits, school districts, community action agencies, tribal governments, and others

Step 2: Contact the Program

Call the number listed for each program. Ask:

- Are you currently accepting applications?
- Is there a waitlist? How long is it?
- What ages are you enrolling now?
- Do you have center-based and/or home-based options?
- What is the program schedule (days/hours)?

Apply early for Head Start preschool — most programs start their school year in fall and fill quickly. For Early Head Start, apply **before your child turns 2** to secure a spot before age 3.

Step 3: Gather Documents

Document	Details
Child's proof of age	Birth certificate or hospital record
Child's immunization records	Up to date for your state's school requirements
Proof of income	Pay stubs, tax return, SSI/SNAP/TANF award letter
Proof of categorical eligibility	Foster care documentation, TANF/SSI card, or homelessness letter
Child's medical records (if any)	Special health needs, developmental records, IEP if applicable

Step 4: Complete the Application

Each program has its own application form. You'll typically complete it at the local office or online through the program's portal. Staff will review eligibility, place you on the waitlist if needed, and notify you when a slot opens.

Step 5: Enrollment & Orientation

Once accepted, you'll attend an orientation to learn about the program, meet staff, and complete health enrollment paperwork. Your child's health screening will be scheduled within 45 days of starting.



Waitlists: What to Know

About 800,000 children are enrolled nationally in Head Start and Early Head Start, but an estimated **15–20 million children are income-eligible**. Demand far exceeds supply in most areas.

Tips for Managing the Wait:

→ Apply to multiple programs

You can be on more than one waitlist

→ Apply for Early Head Start before age 2

If you also want Head Start at age 3; slots are often reserved for enrolled Early Head Start families

→ Keep your contact information current

With every program — a missed call means losing your spot

→ Ask about home-based programs

They often have shorter waitlists than center-based

Special Circumstances

Children with Disabilities

Head Start programs are required to actively recruit and enroll children with disabilities. If your child has an IEP (Individualized Education Program) or developmental delay, they are **not just welcomed — they are prioritized.**

Contact your local program to discuss specific accommodations available.

Pregnant Women

Early Head Start serves pregnant women with prenatal education, home visits, and health referrals — starting before the baby is born. You don't need to wait until the baby arrives.

Migrant & Seasonal Families

Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs serve families whose primary income comes from agricultural work. Eligibility is based on employment type, not just income. These programs often have extended hours and flexible schedules to accommodate seasonal work schedules.

Key Resources

Resource	Contact
Find your local Head Start program	headstart.gov — Center Locator
Head Start program overview	acf.hhs.gov/ohs
Early Head Start information	headstart.gov/early-head-start

Guide current as of June 2026. Income limits based on 2026 HHS Federal Poverty Guidelines. Head Start is funded through annual congressional appropriations and is subject to program availability, waitlists, and local conditions. Contact your local program directly for current enrollment status.

Important Disclaimer

Please Read Before Using This Guide

AssistanceGuides.com is an independent informational website. We are not a government agency, and we are not affiliated with, endorsed by, or operating on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), the Office of Head Start, or any local Head Start grantee or program.

This Is General Information – Not Educational, Developmental, or Professional Advice

- The content in this guide is provided for **general informational and educational purposes only**
- Nothing in this guide constitutes advice about your child's educational needs, developmental status, learning disabilities, behavioral health, or readiness for school
- Head Start programs provide services through qualified early childhood educators, health professionals, and family service staff — this guide is a summary only and does not replace their professional assessments
- **Decisions about your child's early education, developmental services, and health care should be made in consultation with your child's pediatrician, licensed educators, and qualified specialists**

Enrollment Is Not Guaranteed – Waitlists Are Long

- **Meeting the eligibility criteria does not guarantee enrollment.** Head Start slots are limited by federal funding, and demand far exceeds supply in most areas.
- An estimated 800,000 children are enrolled nationally, but 15–20 million are income-eligible — the vast majority of eligible children are not served
- This guide cannot tell you whether your local program has open slots or how long a waitlist is — **contact your local program directly**
- Do not make childcare arrangements, employment plans, or other decisions based on an expectation of Head Start enrollment until you have a confirmed placement

Program Disruptions and Funding Uncertainty (2025–2026)

- This guide notes significant operational disruptions to Head Start in 2025–2026, including regional office closures, funding delays, and administrative changes
- While Head Start was funded at \$12.27 billion for FY2026 (no cuts enacted), **individual programs have experienced temporary closures, staffing reductions, and delayed grant processing**
- We cannot guarantee any specific local program is currently operating normally, accepting applications, or has its full complement of services available
- **Always contact your local program directly** to verify current operational status before making any plans that depend on Head Start enrollment

This Is Not an Official Eligibility Determination

- Only your **local Head Start program** can determine whether your child qualifies, based on their review of your documentation, household circumstances, and available slots
- Income limits listed in this guide are federal guidelines — programs may apply housing cost adjustments, discretionary slots, and other flexibilities that are not fully captured here
- "Automatically eligible" categories (foster care, homelessness, TANF, SSI) still require documentation and local program verification

Child Development and Educational Outcomes

- This guide does not make claims about what any individual child will experience, learn, or achieve through Head Start
- Research on Head Start's effectiveness refers to program-level or population-level outcomes and does not predict results for any specific child
- Quality and services vary across the thousands of locally operated Head Start programs nationwide

Immigration – This Is Not Immigration Legal Advice

- This guide discusses immigration-related enrollment restrictions in general terms only — **this is not legal advice**
- As of 2026, undocumented immigrants are being blocked from enrolling in federally funded Head Start programs; this policy is subject to legal challenge and change
- For children of mixed-status families, eligibility may depend on the child's own status — consult the local program and, if needed, a qualified immigration attorney
- We make no representations or warranties about the immigration consequences of applying for Head Start

Local Programs Are Independent

- Head Start is operated by thousands of independent local grantees — the quality, curriculum, hours, services, and experience vary significantly from program to program
- This guide describes the federal program framework; your local program may offer more or fewer services than described here
- AssistanceGuides.com has no affiliation with, oversight of, or knowledge of the operations of any specific local Head Start program

Information May Be Outdated

- Head Start funding levels, eligibility rules, and operational conditions are subject to annual congressional action and ongoing administrative policy changes
- This guide reflects program structure and conditions as of June 2026; the situation for Head Start has been volatile and may have changed

No Warranties – Use at Your Own Risk

- This guide is provided **"as is"** without any warranty of accuracy, completeness, or timeliness
- **You assume full responsibility** for any decisions made based on information in this guide
- AssistanceGuides.com, its owners, editors, and contributors shall not be liable for any damages of any kind arising from your use of this guide — including any damages resulting from childcare or employment plans made in anticipation of Head Start enrollment that does not materialize

Your Rights Are Not Affected

- Nothing in this guide waives your right to apply for Head Start, appeal a denial, file a complaint about a program's operations, or access any other right provided by law
- Complaints about Head Start programs can be submitted to the Office of Head Start at acf.hhs.gov/ohs

If You Are in Crisis

- This guide is an informational resource — **it is not a substitute for emergency childcare or family assistance**
- If you need emergency childcare, contact your local Child Care Resource and Referral agency or call **2-1-1**
- If your family is experiencing a crisis (domestic violence, homelessness, food insecurity), call **2-1-1** to be connected to local resources

Data and Privacy

- AssistanceGuides.com may collect anonymized, aggregate data through the eligibility screening tool on our website
- We do not collect or store personally identifiable information through the screening tool
- Please review our full Privacy Policy at AssistanceGuides.com for details

Guide last reviewed: June 2026 | Income limits: 2026 HHS Federal Poverty Guidelines | Head Start funded at \$12.27B for FY2026 per congressional appropriation | Program operational status as of June 2026 — contact your local program for current information | AssistanceGuides.com