

August 31, 2022



Dear Head Start grant recipients and delegate agencies,

I am proud of Head Start programs and the incredible work our staff do with infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and expectant families every day. We know programs continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing shortages, and enrollment challenges with strength and resolve. The Office of Head Start (OHS) is approaching this program year as a season of ongoing recovery, response, and renewal.

As we enter the 2022-2023 program year, I am committed to prioritizing child safety in all Head Start programs, centers, and classrooms. The vigilance and commitment of grant recipients to keep all children safe and secure is foundational to Head Start services. However, every year we see several serious incidents that violate our [Head Start Program Performance Standards \(HSPPS\)](#), staff standards of conduct, and put children at risk.

I know that, overall, Head Start programs do a good job keeping children safe in their facilities. Only a minority of programs see adverse child safety incidents each year and most incidents are dealt with swiftly. However, OHS's review of child safety data shows that adverse child safety incidents can be higher at the beginning of the program year and are more likely to occur when staff are stressed and classrooms are understaffed. Staff may experience that stress exponentially when they are new and when they do not have appropriate supports for mental health and wellness, including the ability to take regular classroom breaks. I encourage program staff and managers to develop strategies to mitigate the potential for violations of supervision, unauthorized release, or inappropriate discipline.

When child safety incidents do occur, the importance of reporting them to OHS cannot be overstated. Grant recipients should report all significant incidents affecting the health and safety of children to the appropriate state licensing or child welfare agencies and their OHS Regional Office immediately. Reporting to OHS should be completed within three to seven calendar days from the time the incident occurred ([45 CFR §1302.102](#)). This includes any violations of supervision, unauthorized release, or inappropriate discipline. Programs should not wait for state licensing or child welfare agencies to determine if the incidents are founded or unfounded. Head Start grant recipients are held to the HSPPS, so all incidents must be reported regardless of state findings.

OHS has a zero tolerance policy for any situation that harms or endangers a child and for lack of reporting those incidents to OHS. Grant recipients who do not report to OHS situations which endanger the health or safety of children will have monitoring findings as a result. I encourage leaders to make sure every staff person, from the bus drivers to teachers and everyone in between, has learned their responsibilities for [active supervision](#) and [mandated reporting](#). All staff in Head Start programs are mandated reporters and are legally obligated to report suspected child abuse or neglect to the appropriate child protection agency. Programs must have internal procedures in place when a staff member or volunteer causes an incident or suspected incident. Staff may benefit from completing [iLookOut](#), a free online professional development course focused on protecting child safety and preventing and identifying child abuse.

One important part of preventing incidents that pose a risk to children is a stable and well-trained workforce. We understand programs are facing particular challenges right now, but I encourage the leadership of every Head Start program to create and foster a program culture that supports staff well-being and maintains high standards of conduct. OHS has made available training and technical assistance (TTA) resources on creating a [culture of safety](#), building [positive learning](#)

environments, addressing behaviors staff find challenging, promoting empathy and understanding trauma, and fostering organizational and staff wellness. Your program specialist or regional TTA staff are available to help you navigate these resources as you continue to do this critical work.

With a strong focus on ensuring all Head Start children are safe, and proper reporting of child incidents to OHS when they do occur, together we can provide our children and families with the highest quality Head Start services.

Thank you for the work you do for children and families.

/ Katie Hamm /

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