

Head Start, Parents, and Doctors: A Partnership for Healthy Children

For Head Start Staff:

Helping parents advocate for their child's medical care

We have all had the experience of trying to get medical care for ourselves or a family member. It is challenging to figure out what services insurance policies cover or how to request and obtain services that you feel you or your family members need. Meeting these needs is even more difficult for families who have no health insurance, speak languages other than English, have limited literacy skills, or otherwise experience difficulty working their way through the health care system.

WE ARE ALL PARTNERS

Parents and caregivers want the best for their children. Head Start staff are committed to assisting families to find a "medical home" as a source of the highest quality of health care for their children and themselves. Medical providers (e.g., doctors, nurse-practitioners, and others) and their staff are committed to providing the best medical care as they meet the health care needs of children and families. **We are all in this together.**

KEY TIPS FOR STAFF WORKING WITH PARENTS

Assist in finding a "medical home."

It is important for children and families to find a good medical home. The American Academy of Pediatrics describes a medical home as an "accessible, continuous, comprehensive, family-centered, coordinated, compassionate, and culturally effective" form of medical care. A good medical home allows parents and medical providers to build relationships that develop trust and mutual understanding and allows the medical provider to be aware of the child's health and development over time by getting to know the family. This allows the medical provider to recognize important changes in a child's health and to communicate with the family in a way that is respectful and responsive to the family's needs. Head Start staff can assist parents in understanding the importance of a medical home and in finding a good medical home for their child and family.

Encourage clear communication.

Effective parent-doctor relationships maintain clear communication to achieve the best health outcomes for each child. A complete Well Child

Visit may leave the parent and doctor with the appearance of little time for questions. The stress of a sick or injured child can strain communication. Even in difficult or stressful circumstances, parents must still be encouraged to ask questions. Head Start can assist parents who may need help in managing these relationships.

- **Parents must ask questions.** Visiting the doctor's office can be overwhelming. It is helpful to take a list of questions or concerns to discuss to the doctor's office. The best way to do this is to make a list, put it away for a bit, and then re-read the questions. It is also helpful to rank the questions in order of those that are the most important for the parent. This way, if time is limited, those questions may be answered during the visit and the rest answered later in a telephone call, note, or follow-up visit.
- **Parents should not nod or say "ok" unless they are certain that they understand.** If a parent nods or says "yes" or "ok," the doctor will assume the parent understood what was said. If parents need information explained again or in a different way, they must ask even if they feel embarrassed. If the parent does not understand or feel comfortable with the plan of care they may not follow through with the agreed next steps. As a result, the child may not get the care he/she needs and the parent may be viewed as uncooperative by the provider.
- **Trust is an important part of the relationship.** It is important that parents trust their child's doctor. Parents should feel that the doctor understands them and is making decisions, diagnoses, and plans of care that will best for the health of their child. If parents are not comfortable, they should talk with the doctor about what they need to feel more confident in the care received. Parents, who have talked to the doctor and still do not feel comfortable, may need to look for a new doctor. Head Start staff can help them find a new doctor.

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Help parents prepare for the doctor's visit.

Parents need to be ready to ask questions and share concerns. The more parents prepare ahead of time, the more parents and children get out of each visit. Head Start staff can assist parents in preparing for these visits. **Role-play** can be a useful tool to help parents develop these skills.

- Prepare parents for Well Child Visits by reviewing the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) schedule, including immunizations, screenings, and blood tests.
- Encourage parents to write down key questions or concerns before the appointment. Parents should mention if they are worried about a child's symptoms or behavior and not wait for the doctor to bring up an issue.
- Be specific. Advise parents to be ready to provide information about important details on the child's condition. For instance, how long the child has been sick, symptoms such as pain, cough, fever, vomiting, or diarrhea and a description of severity, frequency, or amount may be extremely important. Accurate and detailed information can help the doctor to assess and treat the child's condition more readily and accurately.
- Parents should tell the doctor what they used to try to relieve the child's symptoms and if these attempts did or did not work. If the parents are unsure, urge them to bring the medications, including traditional remedies or herbal treatments to the office with them.

Make the child's health a priority.

Head Start staff can help parents understand the important role parents play and to provide support.

- **Parents need to make time for each visit.** It is essential that the child's guardian attend the doctor visits. Relying on someone else, such as a friend or relative, may result in incomplete, inaccurate, misunderstood or miscommunicated information.

- **Parents need to be focused during the visit.**

Parents should focus their full attention on answering the doctor's questions and getting their own questions answered. Parents should turn off cell phones and if possible leave other children with friends or relatives.

Encourage parental responsibility.

Head Start staff can assist parents in understanding how to maintain a positive relationship with their child's doctor and the medical office staff by understanding and following office policies. Parents need to respect the doctor's time by arriving for appointments on time or calling if they are unavoidably late. Cancellations should be made according to the policy of the office. If an interpreter is needed, be sure to inform the office in advance.

Support parents to follow the plan of care.

In order to follow a plan of care effectively, parents must clearly understand what is involved. Follow-up may include: scheduling another appointment; going for lab or blood tests; going for x-rays or other imaging; obtaining and giving medication; or making an appointment with a specialist. Ideally, the medical office should provide the parent with a written plan of care, as well as with any paperwork such as lab slips, x-ray referrals or referrals to specialists. When the family is asked to get services outside of the medical office, the office should provide directions to those locations or contact numbers for the parent to call. Encourage parents to ask the nurse or doctor if they do not understand the next steps before leaving the doctor's office. If parents return home and are confused about what was discussed, they should notify the doctor's office immediately.

We are fortunate to live in a time when advances in preventive health and diagnosis and treatment of disease have improved the quality of life for many children and families. Head Start, through the hard work of dedicated and skilled staff, will work to assure that the children and families served experience the best health and wellness outcomes possible.