



**Janie Sailors, RN, BSN, NCSN
Paula Mydlenski, MS, RD, CDN
Harry W. Bickel, DMD, MPH**

Managing Health & Nutrition in Head Start & Early Head Start

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Mental Health

Mental Health

It's all about relationships! From our very first encounter with a family, mental health is a partner. Mental Health in Head Start and Early Head Start emphasizes the interconnectedness of mental wellness and social competence, and recognizes the key role mental wellness plays in educational success. Mental Health in Head Start and Early Head Start includes mandates that address the mental wellness of children, families, and staff.

It is impossible to separate mental health from health in general. This belief is supported by the way mental health services and expectations are interwoven throughout the Head Start Performance Standards. Do not be misled into believing one can find all one needs to know about Head Start and Early Head Start Mental Health by reviewing the standards with Mental Health in their title—1304.24. It is also found, to name only a few, in 1304.20, 1304.40, 1304.52, and more.

The stigma attached to “Mental Health” persists even though we struggle to remove it. Staff working to describe Mental Health Services may find the conversation flows more smoothly if they use alternate terminology, such as “socio-emotional”. To date, “socio-emotional” health does not seem to evoke the same hesitancy as does “mental” health.



History and Screening

All programs should include some questions regarding socio-emotional development in their health histories. Do not limit questions to deficits or concerns, but include such items as “Describe what your child does well” or “What makes your child excited?” Remember that, as we already established, it's all about relationships. Until families truly believe we are to be trusted, we probably will not get a true picture of mental health concerns or challenges. Periodically revisit socio-emotional development for further glimpses into areas of concern.

Socio-emotional screening must be completed in 45 calendar days. The performance standards do not require a particular instrument, but programs must be certain that the tool used is appropriate for the age being screened. Some programs utilize a developmental screening tool that also addresses socio-emotional areas, while others feel a separate socio-emotional screening tool is more accurate. Discuss screening options with your Mental Health Professional as well as your Health Services Advisory Committee. Programs must also ensure staff understand their specific process for obtaining direct guidance from the Mental Health Professional regarding findings from developmental, sensory, or behavioral screenings.