

Active Supervision

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All Head Start educators are responsible for making sure that no child is left unsupervised. Active supervision is a strategy that works. It can be used in classrooms, family child care, playgrounds, and buses. It can also be shared with families as a tool to use at home. This fact sheet explains what active supervision is and how to use it in your program.

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Introduction

Keeping children safe is a top priority for all Head Start and Early Head Start programs!^[1] The Head Start Program Performance Standards require that programs “ensure no child is left alone or unsupervised by staff, consultants, contractors, or volunteers while under their care.”^[2] But what is active supervision and how will it benefit children and staff?

Active Supervision is the most effective strategy for creating a safe environment and preventing injuries in young children. It transforms supervision from a passive approach to an active skill. Staff use this strategy to make sure that children of all ages explore their environments safely. Each program can keep children safe by teaching all staff how to look, listen, and engage.

What is Active Supervision?

Active supervision requires focused attention and intentional observation of children at all times. Staff position themselves so that they can observe all of the children: watching, counting, and listening at all times. During transitions, staff account for all children with name-to-face recognition by visually identifying each child. They also use their knowledge of each child’s development and abilities to anticipate what they will do, then get involved and redirect

them when necessary. This constant vigilance helps children learn safely.

Strategies to Put Active Supervision in Place

The following strategies allow children to explore their environments safely. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers must be directly supervised at all times. This includes daily routines such as sleeping, eating, and diapering or bathroom use. Programs that use active supervision take advantage of all available learning opportunities and never leave children unattended.

Set Up the Environment

Staff set up the environment so that they can supervise children and be accessible at all times. When activities are grouped together and furniture is at waist height or shorter, adults are always able to see and hear children.^[3] Small spaces are kept clutter-free and big spaces are set up so that children have clear play spaces that staff can observe.

Position Staff

Staff carefully plan where they will position themselves in the environment to prevent children from harm. They place themselves so that they can see and hear all of the children in their care.^[4] They make sure there are always clear paths to where children are playing, sleeping, and eating so they can react quickly when necessary. Staff stay close to children who may need additional support. Their location helps them provide support, if necessary.

Scan and Count

Staff are always able to account for the children in their care. They continuously scan the entire environment to know where everyone is and what they are doing. They count the children frequently. This is especially important during transitions when children are moving from one location to another.

Listen

Specific sounds or the absence of them may signify reason for concern. Staff who are listening closely to children immediately identify signs of potential danger. Programs that think systemically implement additional strategies to safeguard children. For example, bells added to doors help alert staff when a child leaves or enters the room.

Anticipate Children's Behavior

Staff use what they know about each child's individual interests and skills to predict what he/she will do. They create challenges that children are ready for and support them in succeeding. But, they also recognize when children might wander, get upset, or take a dangerous risk. Information from the daily health check (e.g., illness, allergies, lack of sleep or food, etc.) informs staff's observations and helps them anticipate children's behavior. Staff who know what to expect are better able to protect children from harm.



Engage and Redirect

Staff use what they know about each child's individual needs and development to offer support. Staff wait until children are unable to problem-solve on their own to get involved. They may offer different levels of assistance or redirection depending on each individual child's needs.

What Does Active Supervision Look Like?

To understand what active supervision might look like in your program, consider the following example. As you read the vignette, identify the specific strategies used in the bolded text.

Maria and Yasmin have taken their three-year-old classroom out to the playground for outdoor playtime. The 15-foot square playground has a plastic climber, a water/sand table and a swing set. **Maria and Yasmin stand at opposite corners of the playground to be able to move quickly to a child who might need assistance.**¹ The children scatter through the playground to various areas. Some prefer the climber, while others like the swings. Many of the children play with the sand table because it is new. **Maria and Yasmin have agreed on a supervision plan for which children they will observe**² and are always **counting the children in the areas closest to them, occasionally raising their fingers to show each other how many children are close to them**³. This helps them keep track of where the children are, and to make sure no one is missing. **If one child moves to a different area of the playground, they signal each other so that they are both aware of the child's change in location.**⁴

Maria has noticed that Felicity loves to play in the sand table. She **hears children scolding each other⁵** and notices that Felicity throws the toys without looking. As Maria sees Felicity and Ahmed playing at the sand table, **Maria stands behind Felicity and suggests she put the toy back in the basket when she is done with it⁶**. By remaining close, she is also able to **redirect Ahmed who has never seen a sand table before and throws sand at his classmates⁷**. Kellan has been experimenting with some of the climbing equipment and is **trying to jump off of the third step onto the ground**. While he is able to do this, some of the other children whose motor skills are not as advanced also try to do this. To help them build these skills, Yasmin stands close to the steps on the climbing structure.⁸ She offers a hand or suggests a lower step to those who are not developmentally ready.⁹



Maria and Yasmin signal to each other five minutes before playtime is over, then tell the children they have 5 minutes left to play. **When the children have one minute left, Maria begins to hand out colors that match color squares they have painted on the ground.¹⁰** She asks Beto, a child who has trouble coming inside from play time, to help her.¹¹ When the children are handed a colored circle, they move to stand on the colored spot on the playground. **As the children move to the line, Maria guides them to the right spot.¹²** When all children are in line, both Maria and Yasmin count the children again. They scan the playground to make sure everyone is in place, then move the children back into the classroom.¹³ They also listen to be sure that they do not hear any of the children still on the playground.¹⁴ Yasmin heads the line and Maria takes the back end, holding Beto's hand.¹⁵ When they return to the classroom, there are spots on the floor with the same colors that were on the playground. The children move to stand on their matching color in the classroom.¹⁶ Maria and Yasmin take a final count, then collect the circles and begin the next activity.¹⁷

Both Yasmin and Maria are actively engaged with the children and each other, supporting the children's learning and growth while ensuring their safety. They use systems and strategies to make sure they know where children are at all times, and that support developmentally appropriate child risk-taking and learning.

- 1Position staff
- 2Set up the environment
- 3Scan & count
- 4Scan & count
- 5Listen
- 6Anticipate
- 7Engage & redirect
- 8Anticipate
- 9Engage & redirect
- 10Set up the environment
- 11Engage & redirect
- 12Engage & redirect
- 13Scan & count
- 14Listen
- 15Engage & redirect
- 16Set up the environment
- 17Scan & count

Self-Reflection Tool

Questions to Help You Assess Active Supervision Practices

- How do we teach active supervision strategies and support staff to apply these skills in everyday practice?
- How do we arrange the space to create a safe environment in classrooms, playgrounds, and family child care so that it is easy for staff to observe children?
- How do we make sure that staff position themselves to be able to see and hear the children at all times and get to children quickly who need assistance?
- How do we ensure that staff continuously scan and count children during both indoor and outdoor play?
- How do staff assess individual children’s skills and abilities, adapt activities in order to avoid potential injuries, and use their observational skills to anticipate times when a child may need closer supervision?
- How do staff engage and redirect children who need additional support?

To understand how this approach will work for you, consider the following tool.

Active Supervision Implementation Plan		
Key Strategy	Current Practice	Action Steps
Set up the environment		
Position staff		
Scan and count		

Active Supervision Implementation Plan

Key Strategy	Current Practice	Action Steps
Listen		
Anticipate children's behavior		
Engage and redirect		

Resources to Learn More

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd Edition <http://cfoc.nrckids.org/StandardView/2.2.0.1>
Standard 2.2.0.1: Methods of Supervision of Children.

Caring for Our Children Basics: Health and Safety Foundations for Early Care and Education http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ecd/caring_for_our_children_basics.pdf [PDF, 932KB] Standard 2.2.0.1 Methods of Supervision of Children.

National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness: Keep Children Safe Using Active Supervision <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/safety-injury-prevention/safe-healthy-environments/active-supervision.html>

Northern Health: "Supervision of Children" (2011)
http://www.northernhealth.ca/Portals/0/Your_Health/Programs/Community%20Care%20Licensing/Supervision%20of%20Children%2010-410-6024.pdf [PDF, 406KB]

National Association for the Education of Young Children: Program Administrator Guide to Evaluating Child Supervision Practices (2016)
http://www.naeyc.org/academy/files/academy/Supervision%20Resource_0.pdf [PDF, 311KB]

Tanah Merah Child Care Centre (Australia): Supervision Policy (2011)
http://www.tanahmerahchildcare.com.au/uploads/supervision_policy.pdf [PDF, 194KB]

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