

One way to foster healthy lifestyles is to encourage the development of health-promoting habits during early childhood. Preschool education about health can begin a lifelong process of learning about oneself, relationships to others, and the world. Preschool children's experiences with their health and ways to improve it, both at home and in the early childhood setting, enhance their desire and ability to make healthy decisions throughout their lives.¹



The preschool health foundations describe the health knowledge, attitudes, habits, and behaviors that set the groundwork for all preschool children to develop into healthy adults. They explain what children should know about health, and what health habits and practices should be part of their daily routines when they are provided with high-quality health education in preschool. These skills and behaviors set young children on the path toward health and healthy lifestyle choices.²

The preschool health foundations represent a vision of young children's developmental process, not an expectation. Not all children will participate in a preschool program, and those who do may enter at age three, four, or five years. Each child enters preschool with a genetic background, developmental characteristics, an individual level of knowledge and skills, and understanding of everyday routines. The differences are based not only on the child's age, but also on the child's developmental level, prior experiences, and special needs. It is the responsibility of adults to help each child to develop the knowledge, skills, and behavior that promote healthy development.

An integrated and comprehensive approach is most effective when preschool children are taught about health. Health education does not stand alone in the preschool curriculum. It is integrated with the other eight domains: social-emotional development, language and literacy, English-language development, mathematics, visual and performing arts, physical development, history-social science, and science.

Health is comprehensive. Health education involves ideas directly relevant to the child, such as "How do I grow?" Preschool teachers work with children who are naturally curious and eager to learn about their bodies and how each part



works. A developmentally appropriate curriculum promotes overall health (e.g., wellness, safety, **oral health**, nutrition) and integrates topic areas. For example, a discussion about safety rules might include nutrition and sanitation. The question, “Why do we sit at the table to eat?” allows opportunities to start conversations about the social aspects of eating together, choking hazards, and avoiding spills on the floor.

Guiding Principles

Teachers address ideas and concepts that children can grasp at their developmental level and then progressively build on what children already know and understand. This approach applies to all children, including children with various abilities, disabilities, or other special needs (such as delays in language, cognition, or physical ability).

The following principles guide the integration of health with the eight domains and provide a basis for teacher guidance in the health domain strands and sub-strands.

- ▶ **Health knowledge is individualized.** Some children arrive at preschool already demonstrating expected levels of awareness and, in some cases, using health knowledge. Other children may have less experience with basic health concepts such as handwashing or coughing and sneezing into their elbows.³ Through observation, teachers can determine where each child is on a developmental continuum of health knowledge, skill, and ability.
- ▶ **Preschool children and their families possess diverse backgrounds and cultural practices.** These differences influence the knowledge and skills that children bring to

the preschool program. For example, cultures and families differ in the level of self-help skills and independence encouraged for preschool children; some cultures may emphasize interdependence, with children learning to collaborate with adults to meet health and safety needs. It is important that teachers understand and respect how children’s health and safety needs are addressed by families in diverse ways and build on the families’ approaches that would be effective in the preschool setting. It is also important for parents to be given information regarding health in both English and their home language.

- ▶ **Learning about health practices has a language component.** Teachers integrate modeling, visual cues, props, and demonstration to enhance understanding and unfamiliar terms. When introducing new terms, they support learning both in English and other home languages used by the children, including sign language.
- ▶ **Children’s personal health status (i.e., physical, mental, emotional) affects their ability to learn and develop in all domains.** In addition to checking each child’s initial well-being when the child arrives each day, teachers observe children throughout each day and work with families to ensure that health, nutritional, and other needs are met. They are aware of ongoing health issues for children, such as growth and development, nutritional status (e.g., childhood **obesity**), asthma, special needs, social ability, emotional well-being; they pay attention to physical illness or injuries; and they work with families to access appropriate services and resources. Teachers are sensitive to needs and share information about

relevant resources while maintaining confidentiality.

- ▶ **The overall theme of health education for preschool is personal health.** Children become aware of their bodies in their entirety and begin to recognize that their behavior directly affects their development and maintenance of a healthy body. Preschool children begin to develop self-help skills and the ability to respond to their body cues, and they engage in decision making, which can relate to their health. Children also begin to recognize differences in their bodies, such as height and weight, skin color, and physical abilities. Teachers can help children to accept differences, be comfortable with themselves, and be respectful of others. For example, children's body structures will vary, as some are small-framed and slender, and others are not. Children need help to understand that differences are natural. The objective is enhanced personal health and avoidance of risk factors, such as childhood obesity.
- ▶ **Children learn through their experiences, including play, routines and scripts, modeling, and developing and sustaining relationships at preschool.** Through **scaffolding**, most children will reach an appropriate level of health



knowledge and practices within a relatively short period of time.

- ▶ **Practicing scripts, or behavioral rules, can foster development of certain health-promoting behaviors or skills.** Preschool children may not fully understand the benefits of following or the consequences of disregarding certain rules (e.g., buckling the seat belt in a vehicle); however, compliance is achieved because a trusted adult tells them, "This is what we do to stay safe."⁴
- ▶ **The preschool program provides both indoor and outdoor environments that are safe and appropriate, challenging, and inviting for all children.** Teachers model and contribute to the health and safety of children by maintaining a safe, clean, and accessible environment. This can be accomplished by appropriately engaging children in the maintenance of the classroom environment. The preschool program extends into the children's homes as teachers and families work together to support and reinforce learning through home and school experiences and daily routines.
- ▶ **Teachers help children feel secure by assuring them that there are adults who will take care of them (e.g., parents, family members, teachers, health care providers, special-needs assistants).** As children grow and seek independence, they begin to understand the actions and behaviors necessary to be healthy and safe (e.g., handwashing, toothbrushing, following safety rules). Teachers encourage and respond to positive behaviors and the development of decision-making and self-help skills by reinforcing positive choices made by



the children. When a preschool child's behavior is automatic, it sets the stage for the child to have lifelong healthy habits.

The guiding principles provide a basis for setting up the environment and selecting strategies to promote children's learning.

Environments and Materials

Children learn most effectively in a safe, inviting environment in which they can freely explore and challenge themselves. Health and safety in the preschool program, both indoors and outdoors, includes environment, supervision, and education. Environment is the first component of safety; a safe environment allows children to explore, play, and learn without unnecessary restriction. The environment should be set up and maintained to reduce the risk of injury and **disease transmission**.

Proper supervision of children is essential, and the required adult-to-child ratios must be met at all times, including periods when children play outdoors, are transported, and go on field trips.⁵ The most effective supervision includes active involvement with children's learning: teachers move around the room with children, attend to children and their interactions, make eye contact, encourage children verbally, and model appropriate voice and actions.

Education is multifaceted. Teachers promote children's learning through discussion, modeling, and daily routines through active participation. An accessible and supportive environment with appropriate facilities and items allows children to practice and demonstrate progress in learning.

The following recommendations apply to establishing the preschool environment as related to the three health domain strands: Health Habits, Safety, and Nutrition.

► **Establish a physical learning environment designed for children's initiative.**

This promotes their self-esteem and builds their skills and confidence. Arrange rooms to allow visual supervision and ease of movement throughout the indoor space. Provide child-size furnishings and low shelves with a wide variety of developmentally appropriate materials, in labeled areas, for easy return after use. Easily accessible handwashing and toothbrushing facilities allow children to initiate health-promoting behaviors. Small and sturdy plates, cups, and pitchers, as well as easy-to-grasp (and, if needed, specially adapted) serving utensils, facilitate self-help skills during mealtimes.

► **Provide safe, inviting learning environments and appropriate supervision of children.**

When the environment is free of potential hazards, the staff spends less time saying no and more time in positive interaction with the children. Furthermore, if children are allowed to explore and investigate their environment without unnecessary risk of injury, they develop a sense of security and confidence.

► **Maintain a clean, healthy, and sanitary environment.**

Incorporate **cleaning** and **sanitizing** into the daily routine. Children can practice basic cleaning (e.g., wiping tables after eating, disposing of trash, sorting recyclable materials).

Research Highlight

Cleaning and **disinfecting** is essential. Studies have shown that some **germs**, including influenza virus, can survive on surfaces for two to eight hours; rotavirus can survive up to 10 days. Cleaning with soap and water removes visible soil. After cleaning, disinfection (sanitizing) kills bacteria, viruses, and fungi (i.e., “germs”). The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** states that a bleach and water solution of one tablespoon household bleach to one quart water is effective. Wet the surface with the solution and allow to air dry. Mix fresh bleach solution each day to maintain effectiveness, and store in a clearly labeled spray bottle out of children’s reach. Research shows that other chemicals (e.g., ammonia, vinegar, baking soda, Borax) are not effective against some bacteria.⁶

- ▶ **Have supplies available and accessible to promote routine health practices.** Appropriate handwashing requires a sink with running water, liquid soap, paper towels, and a hands-free trash can, all within children’s



reach and readily accessible to children throughout the day. Supplies for toothbrushing include a water source and rinsing receptacle; child-sized, soft-bristle toothbrushes labeled with each child’s name; toothpaste (ideally, approved by the American Dental Association); disposable cups for rinsing; and a storage container that allows toothbrushes to stand upright to air dry alone.⁷ If appropriate facilities are not available in the classroom, then provide opportunities throughout the day for children to visit the sinks, with adult supervision.

- ▶ **Provide stimulating and developmentally appropriate materials in interest areas for children’s use during dramatic play.**

Materials may create awareness for one child while allowing another child to apply prior learning. Add health-related items that are familiar to children (e.g., empty containers from soap, bath, hair care, oral **hygiene**, and sunscreen products), and health-themed pictures, books, puzzles, and other materials to manipulative, block, and library interest areas. Children can imitate teachers’ cleaning practices by including disposable gloves, spray bottles of clean water, and clean rags in interest areas. Clean, empty food containers, restaurant menus, and food models enhance nutrition education. Select items that would be familiar to the families in your program, or ask families to send in clean, empty containers from home with labels written in their home language. Special-interest areas (e.g., doctor’s office, dentist’s office, market, and grocery store) can be occasionally introduced. Children also learn through pretend play with protective equipment, such as



gloves, hard hats, bike helmets, knee pads, eye-protection goggles, ear protection, pot holders, and sports safety gear. A variety of real, unconnected telephones, cell phones (with batteries removed), and model pay phones can help children practice dialing 911. Adding car seats and seat belts (available from car salvage businesses) for children to practice with and use in the dramatic play area enhances small-muscle development while reinforcing the importance of “buckling up.” Additionally, car seats can be provided for “buckling up” dolls. Belts, backpacks, shoes, and other materials with buckles encourage buckle practice. If there are children with special health care needs, it may be appropriate to include items that are part of their lives (e.g., a mask to give a stuffed animal “asthma treatment,” a doll-sized wheelchair for children to use in play).

► **Provide furnishings and utensils appropriate for children’s size and abilities.**

Child-sized tables and chairs let preschool children easily reach the table while sitting comfortably with feet touching the floor. Small and sturdy trays, plates, and cups make it easier for children to grasp, lift, and carry. There are a variety of utensils available with larger grip handles or bent angles to support children who do not yet turn their wrist. Handwashing sinks should be child-sized; if not, provide sturdy, wide-based step stools with a nonslip base and top. Teachers may consult an early childhood special education teacher or other specialist for guidance in selecting items appropriate for children with special physical needs.



► **Be creative and include a gardening space, either indoors or outdoors, where children can plant seeds, tend the garden, and watch the plants grow.**

It is helpful for preschoolers to understand where foods come from; foods do not just “appear” in a grocery store or farmers market. Gardening activities are one way to help children learn about food production.⁸ Plant fast-growing plants such as leaf lettuce, radishes, and herbs; these can easily be grown in pots in the preschool setting. Outdoor garden areas should be free of natural hazards such as insects that bite or sting or animal waste.

Summary of the Health Foundations

The preschool health foundations describe the health knowledge, skills, and behaviors that preschool children typically develop in a quality preschool

environment. Through supportive communication (e.g., **scripts**, social stories) and participation in everyday routines and activities, children begin to develop behaviors such as making food choices, engaging in physical activity, and main-



taining personal safety and oral health. These skills and behaviors set young children on the path toward health and healthy lifestyle choices.

Summary of the Strands and Substrands

Health Habits

- 1.0 Basic Hygiene
- 2.0 Oral Health
- 3.0 Knowledge of Wellness
- 4.0 Sun Safety

Safety

- 1.0 Injury Prevention

Nutrition

- 1.0 Nutrition Knowledge
- 2.0 Nutrition Choices
- 3.0 Self-Regulation of Eating

Please refer to the map of the health foundations on page 277 for a visual explanation of the terminology used in the preschool learning foundations.