



Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: What Is the Policy Council?

Parents and family members often have questions about their program’s Policy Council. Explore this tip sheet to learn answers to common questions about the Policy Council.

As a parent, you may wonder what the Policy Council is and about its role in Head Start and Early Head Start. You may have questions about how to join, serve on, or leave the Policy Council.

We encourage you to discuss your questions with your child’s teacher, your family service worker, the program director, or other staff. They can partner with you to make your Policy Council experience the best it can be.

What is the Policy Council?

The Policy Council is a group of Head Start and Early Head Start parents and community members who help lead and make decisions about their program. Policy Council members are elected by the parents of children enrolled in the program. Parents often join the Policy Council after serving on a parent committee.

The Policy Council meets regularly as a group. Members can serve for one year at a time, and for up to five years. They work closely with the program’s management team and Governing Body to provide overall direction for the program.

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Why Do Head Start and Early Head Start Programs Have a Policy Council?

When Head Start began in 1965, its founders understood that parents are essential partners in educating young children. They felt that parents should help decide how Head Start services can most benefit their family and other families in the community.

Head Start created the Policy Council as a formal leadership and policy-making role for parents. Today, every Head Start and Early Head Start program must have a Policy Council as part of its leadership structure. Through the Policy Council, parents have a voice in decisions about how the program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how the program works with community partners.

Children, parents, and the program benefit when parents take on leadership roles. Children learn more and experience healthier development at school and at home. Parents can become more confident, gain skills, and connect with other parents and staff. Program staff learn about the strengths, interests, and needs of the children, families, and community they serve.

Want to learn more? Explore the other tip sheets in the Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families Series:

- [Joining the Policy Council](#)
- [Serving on the Policy Council](#)
- [Leaving the Policy Council](#)

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Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Joining the Policy Council

Wondering about joining the Policy Council? Explore this tip sheet to help you decide whether to join your program’s Policy Council.

Joining the Policy Council

Parents have many reasons for joining the Policy Council. Sometimes staff may ask if they are interested. Other times, parents might want to join after being on a parent committee. Let’s explore how to make the decision to join the Policy Council.

Read the scenario below.

Scenario

Yesterday, when Richie dropped off his daughter Celine at her classroom, Sandra, a family service worker, asked if he would like to serve on the program’s Policy Council.

When he asked why, Sandra answered, “You seem to be very involved in your daughter’s life. I wondered if you might be interested. Also, it would be great to have a father on the Council. You could help all of the children in the program. Think about it. Let me know next week.”

Richie is flattered by the offer but a little confused. He has heard about the Policy Council. He doesn’t know much about it. He isn’t sure what he can offer. Richie feels nervous. He has a lot of questions to ask Sandra.

Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Joining the Policy Council

Like Richie, many parents have questions about joining the Policy Council. See some common questions below. You may have other questions. Remember, every question is important. Talk with program staff to help you learn about the Policy Council.

Common Questions about Joining the Policy Council



Why are you asking me to consider joining the Policy Council? What can I offer?

The Policy Council represents parents' voices and perspectives to guide decisions about the program. Policy Councils welcome parents and family members from all backgrounds and family structures. They may be mothers and fathers of all ages, grandparents, foster or adoptive parents, or other important adults in a child's life. You are being asked because you are the most important teacher in your child's life. Staff value your ideas about how to best serve all the children in the program.



What do I need to know before I join?

What's most important is that you want to help your program provide a positive learning experience for your child and other children. Once you are elected, you will receive training about how your Policy Council works. Some things that the group may discuss in Policy Council meetings are decisions about program policy, budgets, center activities, and hiring staff.



When and where do the meetings take place?

Policy Councils typically meet monthly at the program. When they meet varies. Some programs hold meetings during the day. Others hold them in the evenings. Meals are usually provided. Child care is offered. Some programs assist with transportation or arrange for members who live far away to attend remotely.

Programs also can provide interpretation services. Be sure to let your program know of anything you need to make it easier to attend meetings.

Reflections

Take a moment to reflect on each question:

- What questions or concerns do you have about joining the Policy Council?
- Who can you talk with to help answer your questions?
- What else can your program do to help you decide whether to join the Policy Council?

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Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Serving on the Policy Council

Wondering what it is like to serve on the Policy Council? Explore this tip sheet to learn more about being a member.

Serving on the Policy Council

Congratulations! You have been elected to the Policy Council. Let's explore what it's like to be a member.

Read the scenario below.

Scenario

Yvonne is excited to attend her first Policy Council meeting. Her family service worker, Maria, has explained what to expect. She also offered to attend Yvonne's first meeting with her. She introduced Yvonne to Susan, a former parent member. Susan agreed to become her mentor and answer any questions.

At the first meeting, the Policy Council chairperson welcomes new members. Maria introduces Yvonne to the group. During the meeting, a policy document is handed out for review. It will be voted on at the next meeting.

The next morning, Yvonne calls Susan to ask about the policy document. She tells Susan she does not understand what she needs to vote on. She felt too shy to ask questions at the meeting. Susan explains the proposed policy change and why it is being discussed. Yvonne now understands the proposal and the different opinions to consider. Yvonne feels more confident about speaking up at the next meeting.

Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Serving on the Policy Council

Like Yvonne, many parents have questions after they join the Policy Council. See some common questions below. You may have other questions. Every program is unique. Be sure to talk with program staff about specific questions you have.

Common Questions about Serving on the Policy Council



What happens after the Policy Council training if I am still not sure what to do?

You can connect with program leadership for more support. Go to the program director, family services manager, or parent engagement coordinator to talk about your questions and concerns. Work with a staff member to discover together how you can feel successful and confident as a member of the Policy Council.



Can I make suggestions about proposed policies?

As a Policy Council member, you can make suggestions or ask questions about any matters that are brought to the Council. It is your right and responsibility as a Council member to help with decision-making. Ask program staff for more information if you need it.

You can ask the Council to delay a vote while you learn more.

Reflections

Take a moment to reflect on each question:

- What questions or concerns do you have about serving on the Policy Council?
- Who can you talk with to help answer your questions?
- What else can your program do to help as you serve as a Policy Council member?

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Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Leaving the Policy Council

You have served on the Policy Council. Now it is time for other parents to have the opportunity to serve. Explore this tip sheet to learn more about leaving the Policy Council.

Leaving the Policy Council

As a member of the Policy Council, you have contributed to the success of your Head Start and Early Head Start program. Now, the time has come for you to step down. Let's explore what might happen as you prepare to leave.

Read the scenario below.

Scenario

Shanice is in her last year on the Policy Council. She has served for five years, years. She was chairperson for the past two years. Her youngest child will leave Head Start and enter kindergarten in a few months. She is finding it hard to imagine leaving the Council. She will miss the support of the Head Start community.

Shanice wants to stay connected to other parents. She also wants to continue to support the program. She remembers how unsure she felt the day she was first elected to the Policy Council. She has learned so much since then. She would like to share what she has learned with others. She decides to speak to the program director, Michelle, about becoming a mentor to parents who are new members of the Policy Council.

Head Start Policy Council—Tips for Parents and Families: Leaving the Policy Council

Parents can have mixed feelings about leaving the Policy Council. You may feel proud. You may feel sad. You may feel excited about what you might do next. See some common questions that parents have below. You may have others. Talk with program staff about your specific questions.

Common Questions about Leaving the Policy Council



Why can't I stay on the Policy Council?

All Head Start and Early Head Start programs follow regulations called the Head Start Program Performance Standards. The standards state that Policy Council members can serve no more than five terms. Each term is one year.



How can I continue to support my program after I leave the Policy Council?

You can still attend Policy Council general meetings even if you are not a voting member. You can also volunteer in your program in many other ways. You can help in a classroom, organize family events, or raise money for the program. You can keep volunteering even if your child is in a new program or school.



How can I use my leadership skills in other places?

You have developed important leadership skills by serving on the Policy Council. You can listen carefully to others, delegate and complete tasks, and make decisions. You can bring these skills to your child's future school, or to a new job or volunteer opportunity.

Reflections

Take a moment to reflect on each question:

- What questions or concerns do you have about leaving the Policy Council?
- Who can you talk with to help answer your questions?
- What else can your program do to help as you leave the Policy Council?

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