

## **Safe Arrival, Departure, Transporting Children** (Excerpt from HS ACF-IM-HS-14-04)

### **Information:**

School buses are the safest form of transportation for children. They are considered to be seven times safer than a car or other private passenger vehicle.<sup>1</sup> For children and families living in poverty, transportation is often a major barrier to accessing community services, such as early care and education. Two-thirds of Head Start programs meet the needs of families by transporting more than a quarter of a million Head Start and Early Head Start children every year.<sup>2</sup>

Ensuring the safety of children is the highest priority of the Office of Head Start (OHS). Unfortunately, some programs have experienced a transportation-related incident, such as children being:

- Left on a bus
- Released to an unapproved guardian at the bus stop
- Sent home on the wrong bus
- Left alone in a car while the parent or family member is in the Head Start center

While the broader community may believe these are isolated cases of human error, these occurrences represent serious, systemic failures within a Head Start grantee's program operations. Head Start agencies providing transportation services are responsible for ensuring the safe transportation of children to and from programs and local field trips. Human error is inevitable, but grantees protect children's safety by having proactive plans and redundant systems in place.

### **Redundant (or Fail-Safe) Safety Systems**

A redundant (or fail-safe) safety system is a series of two or more specific actions staff implement to ensure children are safe. Examples of a specific action may include:

- Bus monitors use a written sign-in sheet to track children's attendance from the time a child is picked up until the child is released to the authorized adult, who also signs the sign-in sheet.
  - The monitor checks off each child's name when the child boards and exits the bus.
  - A Head Start staff member initials the sign-in sheet when meeting children at the bus to bring them to their classroom.
  - On the trip home, each parent, guardian, or authorized individual initials the sign-off sheet when his or her child gets off the bus.
- Transportation staff—monitors and drivers—conduct a walkthrough of the bus before and after each use, checking each seat and space beneath. The driver then hangs a “Bus Empty” or “All Clear” sign at the back of the bus to indicate it has been checked and there are no remaining passengers. The sign is removed before the next run begins.
- Teachers review bus attendance sheets and check classroom attendance rosters after the children have arrived to make sure all children on the sign-in sheet have joined their group.
- Transportation staff use a child-safe token system. The idea is for the bus driver or monitor to leave a token under each child's seat when a child boards and remove the token when the child exits. The staff person then compares the number of tokens collected to the bus sign-in sheet.

Programs may also purchase systems to prompt the driver to inspect the bus. Examples include an electronic child on board reminder system that requires the driver to walk to the rear of the bus or an ID card scanning system.

## Active Supervision

It is important for programs to train all staff, including transportation staff, on active supervision. Active supervision requires staff to focus their attention and intentionally observe children so that no child is left unattended. Staff position themselves so that they can watch, count, and listen to children at all times, especially during transitions when children are arriving at or leaving the center.

- Bus monitors should position themselves so they are able to see children in the front, middle, and back of the bus.
- Staff, including bus monitors, use their knowledge of early childhood development and each child's abilities to anticipate what a child may do and to provide assistance when a child needs individualized attention.
- Programs develop a system to facilitate communication among transportation staff, teaching staff, and families about individual child needs and behaviors while riding the bus.

## Additional Transportation Safety Practices

The following actions also are part of an effective transportation safety system:

- Transportation safety training for all staff, including new and returning bus drivers and monitors, to include:
  - Child boarding and exiting procedures
  - How to use appropriate height-weight child passenger safety restraint systems
  - Child pick-up and drop-off procedures, including taking attendance, pre- and post-trip vehicle checks, and emergency evacuation procedures.
- Procedures to ensure that each child leaves (or transitions) with the authorized adult.
- Utilization of bus sign-in sheets with children's photos.
- Transportation supervisors that promptly identify and address operational issues and other concerns, such as the need for child restraints or transportation waivers.
- Ongoing monitoring of drop off and pick up procedures and periodic bus inspections.
- Parent education on transportation safety to include:
  - Program safety policies
  - Proper installation of car seats
  - Use of appropriate height-weight child passenger safety restraint systems
  - Child transportation safety laws.

It is important to support families' efforts to have effective systems that ensure children are protected from being left in a parent's vehicle. Programs may consider including a policy in the parent handbook stating that staff will call the parent or guardian if a child is unexpectedly absent. Programs may also promote strategies that remind families to "look before you lock," such as placing a teddy bear in the passenger seat, to help parents be more aware when getting out of the car.

The actions mentioned above are not exhaustive and represent only a few examples of safety systems. There are many other strategies that may be effective. Each grantee must evaluate its own needs and risks and adopt appropriate strategies.