

Tip Sheets

Active Supervision: Free Time

What is Active Supervision?

Caregivers are responsible for keeping children safe. Active supervision requires constant vigilance, focused attention, and intentional observation of children at all times.

Through the use of active skills including looking, listening, and engaging, active supervision helps:

- Prevent injuries.
- Create a safe environment.
- Caregivers take advantage of all available learning opportunities.
- Ensure no child is left unsupervised/unattended.

Methods for Active Supervision

Active supervision is connected to safety, the prevention of injury, and maintaining quality child care. It protects children from physical injury and harm from bullying/other inappropriate behavior.

Infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children must be directly supervised at all times. This includes when children are sleeping, eating, and outdoors, as well as during diapering or bathroom use (as age appropriate). Caregivers are responsible for monitoring what children are saying and doing and intervene when necessary. With proper supervision, caregivers can quickly and efficiently remove children from any potential harm in the event of an emergency.

The following strategies are essential for successful active supervision and creating safe environments:

- Set Up the Environment
- Position Staff
- Scan and Count
- Listen
- Anticipate Children's Behavior
- Engage and Redirect

Set Up the Environment

Arrange program spaces in a way that caregivers are always accessible and have visibility that allows constant, unobtrusive adult supervision while still monitoring independent and small group play.

- Group activities together.
- Keep furniture at waist height or shorter.
- Keep small spaces clutter-free.
- Set up bigger areas with clear play spaces that are easily observed.

Position Staff

Caregivers should position themselves so they can easily see, hear, and reach each child at all times.

- Make sure there are always clear paths to children so staff can react quickly if needed.
- Stay close to children who need extra support.

Appropriate child to staff ratios should be met during all hours of operation. There should also be a plan in place to address unanticipated changes and emergencies, allowing for caregivers to receive additional help without leaving the area.

Scan and Count

Staff must account for all children in their care at all times. Regular counting reduces the chance for a child to separate from the group, especially during transitions between locations. This is best done by:

- Constantly watching, counting, and listening.
 - Staff must be able to verbally state the number of children in their care.
- Recording the count—along with any children joining/leaving the group—to ensure accuracy.
- Accounting for all children with visual name-to-face recognition, especially during transitions.

Listen

Specific sounds or the absence of them may signify reason for concern. Programs can also implement additional safeguards, such as bells on doors to alert staff when a child leaves or enters the room.

Anticipate Children’s Behavior

Caregivers who know what to expect are better able to protect children from harm. They can also recognize when children might wander, get upset, or take a dangerous risk. Anticipate behavior by using your knowledge and observations of each child’s development, abilities, and interests.

Engage and Redirect

Caregivers can use what they know about each child’s individual needs and development to offer different levels of assistance or redirection. Wait until children are unable to problem-solve on their own to get involved.

Active Supervision During Free Time

Active and positive supervision involves:

1. Knowing each child’s abilities.
2. Establishing clear and simple safety rules.
3. Being aware of/scanning for potential hazards.
4. Standing in a strategic position.
5. Scanning activities and circulating the area.
6. Focusing on the positive, rather than the negative, to teach children what is safe.
7. Teaching children how and why to appropriately use of each piece of equipment (feet first only down a slide to prevent injury).

Program Support for Active Supervision

Applying positive active supervision strategies requires planning, leadership, ongoing monitoring, and professional development for staff.

- Low teacher/child ratios, and the use of a primary caregiver system, encourage positive interactions between children and caregivers.
- Strong connections between teachers and children help staff build awareness of each child’s development and become more in-tune to a child’s needs and whereabouts.
- Communication between staff members about children’s needs/schedule changes helps the program work together to keep children safe and the classroom running smoothly.
- When everyone understands effective practices and their responsibility for child safety, there are lower rates of injury and fewer incidents.

Additional Resources

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards

<https://nrckids.org/CFOC/Database/2.2.0.1>

Head Start | ECLKC: Active Supervision

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/safety-practices/article/active-supervision>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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