

## The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program and Head Start Performance Standards

The DECA Program screens, assesses, and strengthens social and emotional competencies in infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. At the core of the DECA Program are the assessments (the DECAs) – nationally standardized, strength-based, reliable, and valid measures of social and emotional competencies in children from four weeks of age through five years old (up to their sixth birthday). Both parents and teachers can complete a DECA, and research-based strategies can be used to guide the planning process for both home and school.

Since the first publication of the DECA in 1999, Head Start programs across the country have used DECA Program resources to meet several key Head Start Performance Standards and to improve the quality of services. This alignment tool has been created to show how the DECA Program helps meet those specific standards in the revised and updated Head Start Performance Standards that became effective in November of 2016. The DECA Program specifically meets many of the standards set forth in Part 1302 – Program Operations.

*\*Click on the standard you want to review using the links below.*

- [1302.31 Teaching and the learning environment](#)
- [1302.33 Child screenings and assessments](#)
- [1302.34 Parent and family engagement in education and child development services](#)
- [1302.45 Child mental health and social and emotional well-being](#)
- [1302.17 Suspension and expulsion](#)
- [1302.51 Parent activities to promote child learning and development](#)
- [1302.52 Family partnership services](#)
- [1302.92 Training and professional development](#)
- [1302.93 Staff health and wellness](#)
- [1302.102 Achieving program goals](#)

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## 1302.31 Teaching and the learning environment

### (b) Effective teaching practices.

(1) Teaching practices must:

(i) Emphasize nurturing and responsive practices, interactions, and environments that foster trust and emotional security; are communication and language rich; promote critical thinking and problem-solving; social, emotional, behavioral, and language development; provide supportive feedback for learning; motivate continued effort; and support all children's engagement in learning experiences and activities.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA provides strength-based, reliable, and valid information for teachers and parents about a child's social, emotional, and behavioral well-being. Standardized scores are used to guide individualized plans for a child in both the home and school setting. Group data is also provided for educators to plan universal strategies for the promotion of the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of all children in the group.

Research-based strategies to strengthen children's attachment/relationships, initiative, and self-regulation are found in several of the DECA Program strategy resources, including: the [DECA Preschool Strategies Guide](#); the [DECA Infant/Toddler Strategies Guide](#); the *Promoting Resilience For Now and Forever* family guides ([infant/toddler](#), [preschool](#)); and on the web-based assessment and planning system, the [e-DECA](#). These strategy resources also include information to help reduce children's use of challenging behaviors.

Reflective Checklists are available for educators to reflect upon their teaching practices and program quality. The [Devereux Reflective Checklist for Teaching Practices in preschool settings](#), and the [CARE Reflective Checklists for infant and toddler settings](#), are valuable tools that help educators understand the critical connection between the quality of their teaching practices and children's use of both positive social and emotional skills as well as challenging behaviors.

(iii) Integrate child assessment data in individual and group planning.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

In the DECA Program, assessment information is gathered from multiple sources to guide individual and group planning. Observations are essential and are used to guide the process of completing a DECA on a child. The assessment and planning process ensures that a child's assessment results guide the creation of individualized plans for both home and school. Educators also learn how to interpret a DECA classroom profile, which is a visual display of the DECA results for the group. This data is used to inform group planning and implementation of universal strategies that are designed to strengthen

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the attachment/relationships, initiative, and self-regulation of all children in the group, as well as to reduce behavioral concerns.

(iv) Include developmentally appropriate learning experiences in language, literacy, social and emotional development, math, science, social studies, creative arts, and physical development that are focused toward achieving progress outlined in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

Teachers who complete the DECA on the web-based [e-DECA](#) platform have access to research-based strategies that can be easily implemented in daily learning experiences at school and home. These research-informed strategies are designed to strengthen each child's attachment, initiative, and self-regulation. All the strategies align with one or more goals in each domain in the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five. Strategies were obtained from the DECA Program print resources, including: the [DECA Preschool Strategies Guide](#); the [DECA Infant/Toddler Strategies Guide](#); and the *Promoting Resilience For Now and Forever* family guides ([infant/toddler](#), [preschool](#)).

**(c) Learning environment.** A program must ensure teachers implement well-organized learning environments with developmentally appropriate schedules, lesson plans, and indoor and outdoor learning experiences that provide adequate opportunities for choice, play, exploration, and experimentation among a variety of learning, sensory, and motor experiences and:

(1) For infants and toddlers, promote relational learning and include individualized and small group activities that integrate appropriate daily routines into a flexible schedule of learning experiences; and,

(2) For preschool age children, teacher-directed and child-initiated activities, active and quiet learning activities, and opportunities for individual, small group, and large group learning activities.

**(d) Materials and space for learning.** To support implementation of the curriculum and the requirements described in paragraphs (a), (b), (c), and (e) of this section, a program must provide age-appropriate equipment, materials, supplies, and physical space for indoor and outdoor learning environments, including functional space. The equipment, materials, and supplies must include any necessary accommodation and the space must be accessible to children with disabilities. Programs must change materials intentionally and periodically to support children's interests, development, and learning.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA Program offers research-based strategies that support teachers in creating developmentally appropriate, well-organized learning environments. The strategy guides are organized into chapters that focus on key elements of high-quality care. For infants and toddlers, the strategies are organized into the following areas: Connecting with Families; Activities and Routines; Responsive Caregiving; and the Environment. For preschoolers, the strategies are organized into the following

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areas: Daily Routines; Environment; Caring Connections; Activities and Experiences; and Partnerships between Teachers and Families.

The unique and important element of the DECA Program strategy resources is the way that the resources guide teachers in seeing the critical connection between a high-quality learning environment that includes things like individualized and small group learning; teacher and child-initiated activities; age-appropriate materials and supplies, etc., and a child's ability and opportunity to use and strengthen key social and emotional skills. When teachers learn to make this important connection, they begin to see each moment of the day as an opportunity to support the social and emotional development of individual children as well as the group.

### 1302.33 Child screenings and assessments

#### (a) Screening.

(1) In collaboration with each child's parent and with parental consent, a program must complete or obtain a current developmental screening to identify concerns regarding a child's developmental, behavioral, motor, language, social, cognitive, and emotional skills within 45 calendar days of when the child first attends the program or, for the home-based program option, receives a home visit. A program that operates for 90 days or less must complete or obtain a current developmental screening within 30 calendar days of when the child first attends the program.

(2) A program must use one or more research-based developmental standardized screening tools to complete the screening. A program must use as part of the screening additional information from family members, teachers, and relevant staff familiar with the child's typical behavior.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

*Screening for social, emotional strengths and concerns; Screening for behavioral concerns:*

The DECA is a strength-based, standardized, valid, and reliable tool that Head Start programs can use with confidence to screen and better understand a child's strengths and needs related to social, emotional, and behavioral issues.

The DECA Preschool form (DECA-P2) is appropriate for children ages 3 through 5 years. This tool measures three protective factors, including attachment/relationships, initiative, and self-regulation. The DECA-P2 also includes an 11-item behavioral concerns screener.

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The DECA Infant/Toddler (DECA-I and DECA-T) is appropriate for children ages 4 weeks to 3 years. The infant version of the tool measures two key child protective factors, attachment/relationships, and initiative. The toddler version measures attachment/relationships, initiative, and self-regulation.

In best practice, both staff and parents complete the DECA, providing a valuable communication tool to optimize a child's social and emotional development. The tools have been normed on a representative sample of children in the United States, including children in Head Start. The instruments are available in English and Spanish and in paper and electronic platforms.

#### **(b) Assessment for individualization.**

(1) A program must conduct standardized and structured assessments, which may be observation-based or direct, for each child that provide ongoing information to evaluate the child's developmental level and progress in outcomes aligned to the goals described in the Head Start Early Learning Child Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five. Such assessments must result in usable information for teachers, home visitors, and parents, and be conducted with sufficient frequency to allow for individualization within the program year.

(2) A program must regularly use information from paragraph (b)(1) of this section along with informal teacher observations and additional information from family and staff, as relevant, to determine a child's strengths and needs, inform and adjust strategies to better support individualized learning and improve teaching practices in center-based and family childcare settings, and improve home visit strategies in home-based models.

#### **Using DECA Program resources...**

The DECA for Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers can all be used as progress-monitoring tools that allow for ongoing evaluation of a child's social and emotional strengths and needs. Parents and educators can rate a child on the age-appropriate version of the tool at the beginning of the year, to determine if a child has areas of need as well as to identify whether a child has areas of strength that can be leveraged to assist in meeting identified goals. Once strategies and plans are in place and have been implemented for a sufficient length of time, a second rating can be conducted to determine whether progress is being made or if the plans and strategies should be revised. Lastly, a third rating can be completed closer to the end of the programming year to look at the overall progress for the year at the individual child level as well as the classroom and program levels.

#### **(c) Characteristics of screenings and assessments.**

(1) Screenings and assessments must be valid and reliable for the population and purpose for which they will be used, including being conducted by qualified and trained personnel, and being age, developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and appropriate for children with disabilities, as needed.

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### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA for Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers are all nationally standardized, reliable and valid measures. The tools meet or exceed all standards set forth by the American Psychological Association for high-quality instruments. The national standardization process included procedures to ensure that the tools would be culturally and linguistically appropriate. Children in Head Start were represented in the national standardization process to ensure that the tools would be appropriate for children attending Head Start programs across the country. English and Spanish versions of the tools are available.

## 1302.34 Parent and family engagement in education and child development services

**(a) Purpose.** Center-based and family childcare programs must structure education and child development services to recognize parents' roles as children's lifelong educators, and to encourage parents to engage in their child's education.

**(b) Engaging parents and family members.** A program must offer opportunities for parents and family members to be involved in the program's education services.

### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA for Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers emphasizes the need to partner with families and engage parents in the assessment and planning process. Following are several ways that the DECA Program engages families:

- Parents are invited and strongly encouraged to complete a DECA on their child.
- Teachers learn how to share results with families so that parents gain an appreciation for their child's social and emotional skills around attachment/relationships, self-regulation, and initiative.
- Plans for both school and the home are developed so that children receive consistent strategies to promote the use of social and emotional skills and to reduce their use of any challenging behaviors.

*Promoting Resilience For Now and Forever* ([infant/toddler](#), [preschool](#)) is a family guide that can be provided to parents so that they have their own strategy resource to guide their efforts to better understand resilience and build social and emotional skills within the context of their daily routines.

## 1302.45 Child mental health and social and emotional well-being.

**(a) Wellness promotion.** To support a program-wide culture that promotes children's mental health, social and emotional well-being, and overall health, a program must:

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(1) Provide supports for effective classroom management and positive learning environments; supportive teacher practices; and strategies for supporting children with challenging behaviors and other social, emotional, and mental health concerns.

**(b) Mental health consultants.** A program must ensure mental health consultants assist:

(1) The program to implement strategies to identify and support children with mental health and social and emotional concerns;

(2) Teachers, including family childcare providers, to improve classroom management and teacher practices through strategies that include using classroom observations and consultations to address teacher and individual child needs and creating physical and cultural environments that promote positive mental health and social and emotional functioning;

(3) Other staff, including home visitors, to meet children's mental health and social and emotional needs through strategies that include observation and consultation;

(4) Staff to address prevalent child mental health concerns, including internalizing problems such as appearing withdrawn and externalizing problems such as challenging behaviors.

### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA Program takes a universal approach, emphasizing that all children need strong social and emotional competencies. To best support children using challenging behaviors, DECA Program strategies can be used with greater frequency and duration, and may be modified to meet the targeted needs of a child who is already displaying behavioral concerns.

The [DECA Clinical form \(DECA-C\)](#) is another resource that many Head Start programs use to meet the needs of children with more significant challenging behaviors. The DECA-C allows programs to continue emphasizing the need to honor a child's social and emotional strengths, while also acknowledging the need to gather more information and plan to address specific challenges such as attention problems; aggression; emotional control problems; and withdrawal/depression.

Both the DECA-P2 and the DECA-C include items that provide information about both internalizing and externalizing behavioral concerns. The strategy guides offered emphasize the need to understand why a child is using a challenging behavior and to use that information to guide the positive guidance planning process.

The DECA Program encourages mental health consultants to work in partnership with educators and parents, so that a team approach guides the entire planning process. Educators and parents are empowered by the mental health consultant to better understand a child's behaviors and to understand how their home and school environments, their daily activities and routines, and their interactions with a child can positively influence a child's use of appropriate behaviors.

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## 1302.17 Suspension and expulsion

### (b) Prohibition on expulsion.

(1) A program cannot expel or un-enroll a child from Head Start because of a child's behavior.

(2) When a child exhibits persistent and serious challenging behaviors, a program must explore all possible steps and document all steps taken to address such problems and facilitate the child's safe participation in the program. Such steps must include, at a minimum, engaging a mental health consultant, considering the appropriateness of providing appropriate services and supports under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to ensure that the child who satisfies the definition of disability in 29 U.S.C. 705(9)(b) of the Rehabilitation Act is not excluded from the program on the basis of disability, and consulting with the parents and the child's teacher.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

For children who are engaging in challenging behaviors, an entire chapter of the teacher strategy guide, *Promoting Resilience in Preschoolers* (the [DECA Preschool Strategies Guide](#)), helps guide teachers to better understand why a child may be using a negative behavior as well as a process for developing a positive guidance plan.

All the strategies and supports offered by the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC) to address children's challenging behaviors are research-informed and evidence-based.

In addition to the DECA Program resources, DCRC also offers an additional resource that is specifically designed to provide educators and parents with practical resources to address the needs of children who are engaging in extremely challenging behaviors, including:

[FLIP IT!® Transforming Challenging Behavior](#). FLIP IT is a strategy that offers a simple, kind, strength-based, commonsense, and effective four-step process to address children's day-to-day challenging behavior. The four steps are embodied in the FLIP mnemonic, which stands for F – Feelings, L – Limits, I – Inquiries, and P – Prompts. FLIP IT is evidence-based and transforms best practice into a strategy that is easy to remember, applicable in a variety of challenging situations, and portable.

## 1302.51 Parent activities to promote child learning and development

(b) A program must, at minimum, offer opportunities for parents to participate in a research-based parenting curriculum that builds on parents' knowledge and offers parents the opportunity to practice parenting skills to promote children's learning and development.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

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[Your Journey Together](#), DCRC's resilience-building parenting curriculum and DECA Program resource, is designed to promote the resilience of young children and their adult caregivers/parents. This research-based curriculum offers flexible lessons for coaches to implement with parents in individual or group workshop experiences and includes significant opportunities for parents to practice new parenting skills to promote their own protective factors and resilience, and the protective factors and resilience of their young children.

## 1302.52 Family partnership services

### (a) Family partnership process.

A program must implement a family partnership process that includes a family partnership agreement and the activities described in this section to support family well-being, including family safety, health, and economic stability, to support child learning and development, to provide, if applicable, services and supports for children with disabilities, and to foster parental confidence and skills that promote the early learning and development of their children.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

Building strong partnerships with families is one of the underlying principles that guides the DECA Program social and emotional assessment and planning process. Opportunities to engage families are embedded throughout the process and include activities such as the following:

- Parents are invited and strongly encouraged to complete a DECA on their child.
- Teachers learn how to share results with families so that parents gain an appreciation for their child's social and emotional skills around attachment/relationships, self-regulation, and initiative.
- Plans for both school and the home are developed so that children receive consistent strategies to promote the use of social and emotional skills and to reduce their use of any challenging behaviors.

*Promoting Resilience For Now and Forever* ([infant/toddler](#), [preschool](#)) is a family guide that can be provided to parents so that they have their own strategy resource to guide their efforts to better understand resilience and how to build social and emotional skills within the context of their daily routines.

## 1302.92 Training and professional development

### (c) A program must implement a research-based, coordinated coaching strategy for education staff that:

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- (1) Assesses all education staff to identify strengths, areas of needed support, and which staff would benefit most from intensive coaching;
- (2) At a minimum, provides opportunities for intensive coaching to those education staff identified through the process in paragraph (c)(1) of this section, including opportunities to be observed and receive feedback and modeling of effective teacher practices directly related to program performance goals.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

DCRC offers a variety of training and professional development opportunities to support programs in their effective implementation of the DECA Program. All the professional development options offered are informed by research and are designed to build capacity within a program to support ongoing coaching and technical assistance throughout the implementation process. The following training emphasizes coordinated coaching and ongoing support:

**DECA Program Coaching:** This training is intended for those team members whose role includes supporting teachers in the classroom. Participants learn strategies and skills that they can use with teachers to keep the social and emotional assessment and planning process alive throughout the school year.

### 1302.93 Staff health and wellness

**(b) A program must make mental health and wellness information available to staff regarding health issues that may affect their job performance, and must provide regularly scheduled opportunities to learn about mental health, wellness, and health education.**

#### Using DECA Program resources...

The DECA Program reflects an understanding that the social and emotional health and resilience of staff is connected to the health and well-being of children. As such, adult resilience is a core element of the DECA Program and is built into the DECA Program implementation process as well as the training options offered. [\*Building Your Bounce: Simple Strategies for a Resilient You\*](#) is a published guide that serves as a resource for teachers to reflect on their own protective factors and to put plans into place that strengthen their personal well-being. The [\*Devereux Adult Resilience Survey \(DARS\)\*](#) serves as the core of the guide and is a reliable and valid tool that measures four adult protective factors including relationships, internal beliefs, initiative, and self-control. DCRC offers both virtual and in-person professional development events to help programs embed and prioritize adult wellness into their overall program design.

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## 1302.102 Achieving program goals

### (c) Using data for continuous improvement.

(2) This process must:

(ii) Ensure child-level assessment data is aggregated and analyzed at least three times a year.

#### Using DECA Program resources...

Programs are encouraged to use parent and teacher rating results from the DECA to monitor progress and guide continuous quality improvements. DECA data can be analyzed to determine if a child has made statistically significant improvements at the individual child level, and data can be aggregated at the group, site, and program levels. This data analysis process is made significantly easier for programs who use the web-based platform for the DECA. The [e-DECA](#) allows for DECA ratings to be entered online and then completes all scoring, generates reports, and stores the data in a secure database. The system also offers strategies for school/program and home to help plan for individual children. Immediate access to reports, including individual ratings, rater comparisons, strategies reports, pre- and post-comparisons, parent letter, and group profiles are available. Users can also generate a report that provides aggregate information across an entire program or download and export the data.

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