



# PARENT HAND BOOK



illinois  
action for  
children

★ Early Learning Programs

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## OUR MISSION

Illinois Action for Children is a catalyst for organizing, developing and supporting strong families and powerful communities where children matter most.

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## About Illinois Action for Children

Illinois Action for Children was founded in 1969 by a group of child advocates led by activist Sylvia Cotton. For nearly 50 years, IAFC has been at the forefront as a state and national leader in the early care and education community. Our Early Learning Programs serve more than 1,000 children in the west and south suburbs of Cook County.

IAFC is the Child Care Resource and Referral Agency for all of Cook County. We administer the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) for families and provide training and resources to home and center-based child care providers. In addition, we support community collaborations statewide and advocate for local, state and national policies that benefit children, families, and early childhood providers.

# Introduction to Early Learning Programs

Illinois Action for Children serves pregnant women and families with children under the age of five in the west and south suburbs of Cook County. We serve families in center-based and home-based program options:



## Early Learning Centers

Early Learning Centers in Dolton, Harvey-South Holland, Chicago Heights, and Ford Heights provide a full school day of early childhood education for young children.

The Dolton center serves children ages six weeks to five years old.

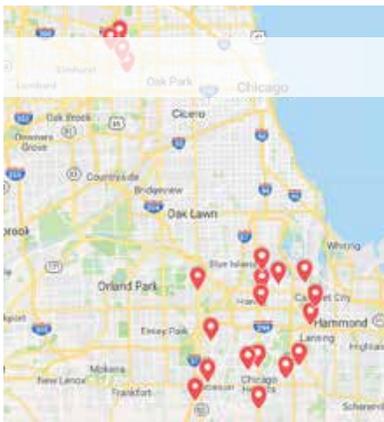
The Ford Heights center serves children ages two to five years old.

Harvey-South Holland and Chicago Heights centers serve children ages three to five years old.



## Home Visiting

Home Visiting serves pregnant women and families of infants, toddlers, and twos. Parent Educator visits parents/guardians and brings activities and supports to help them as the first teachers of their children. Families of children under age three in our Early Learning Centers and Early Learning Partners also receive Home Visiting services.



## Early Learning Partners

Early Learning Partners are child care centers in the west and south suburbs who partner with IAFC to provide a high-quality early childhood program.

All IAFC Early Learning Programs are free for eligible families. Our programs are supported by state funding from the Illinois State Board of Education and federal funding from the Office of Head Start.



## Curriculum and School Readiness

Illinois Action for Children uses two research-based curricula in our Early Learning Programs:

- The Parents as Teachers Curriculum is used for planning home visits. This curriculum focuses on child centered parenting, parent-child interaction and family well-being. Parent Educators plan visits in partnership with families.
- The Creative Curriculum is a play-based curriculum that allows children to learn through their interests. Teachers create a classroom environment with interest areas that promote learning. Children select projects throughout the year and Teachers plan activities around these projects.

Children are assessed three times a year using the Teaching Strategies GOLD assessment system. This assessment measures child growth in 10 areas:

- Social-emotional
- Language
- Physical
- Cognitive
- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Science and Technology
- Social Studies
- The Arts
- English Language Acquisition

Teachers and Parent Educators use observation of children and samples of the children's work to determine a child's progress in each domain. Results are shared with families during parent-teacher conferences. These conferences are also a time for parents to set and discuss goals for their children.

# Guidance and Discipline

Illinois Action for Children's Early Learning Programs use a positive approach to help children manage their behavior and learn social-emotional skills.

You will receive a full copy of our Guidance and Discipline policy during enrollment.

Educators in IAFC's programs will support children's social and emotional growth and development. They will use feeling charts, posted classroom rules, and other plans to create a positive classroom climate.

All staff, consultants and volunteers in IAFC programs are prohibited from using negative or harmful behaviors towards children, including:

- Physical punishment, including hitting, spanking, swatting, beating, shaking, pinching, and other actions intended to bring about physical pain or fear;
- Threatened or actual removal of food, rest or use of the bathroom;
- Abusive or profane language;
- Any form of public or private shaming, including threats of physical punishment; and
- Any form of emotional abuse, including shaming, rejecting, terrorizing, or isolating a child.

Parents, guardians, or others allowed to pick up children from the program are also not allowed to use any of these approaches in IAFC program facilities or while participating in program activities.





## Mandated Reporting

All Illinois Action for Children staff and all staff at our Early Learning Partner sites are mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect. This means that we are required by law to call the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) hotline if we believe that a child has been abused or neglected.

If we make a call to the hotline to report suspected child abuse or neglect, DCFS will investigate to ensure that the child is safe. We encourage all adults who suspect that a child has been abused or neglected to call the DCFS Hotline at 1-800-252-2873 or 1-800-25ABUSE.

Staff must report all incidents to their Supervisor immediately upon suspecting any incidence of abuse or neglect. The Supervisor will immediately notify the Director of Early Learning or the VP of Early Learning, who will also inform the SVP of the Programs.

If the incident occurs at a partner site, the Site Director or Owner must also be notified, along with the Director of Early Learning or the VP of Early Learning.

The Supervisor may accompany the reporting staff to report child abuse or neglect, as way of providing support, but the mandated reporter (staff) will be the primary person that provides the information to the DCFS representative

# Family Engagement

Family Engagement is a key part of all our Early Learning Programs. Our goal is to support all parents and guardians as the primary educator and advocate for your child. We partner with families, providing support to meet your needs and achieve your goals and including your input in all areas of the program. There are a number of ways for families to be involved in our Early Learning Programs.

**Socializations:** Families in our home-based programs are invited to participate in regular socialization activities. These are an opportunity to meet other families and engage with your child in a fun and supportive setting.

**Family Meetings:** Our center-based programs have monthly family activities. These include family workshops, father/male-figure activities, family fun nights, Parent Cafes, and literacy nights.

**Parent Advisory Board and Policy Council:** Depending on which program you enroll in, you have an opportunity to make your voice heard as a member of either the Policy Council or Parent Advisory Board. Each group meets regularly and provides important family input into the program.

**Volunteer:** Parents, guardians and other family members are always welcome as volunteers. We invite you to spend time assisting in the classroom, chaperoning on field trips or helping plan family events. If you have a hobby or talent to share, such as music, art or cooking, we invite you to come and share it with the children, families and staff in the program. Talk with your Parent Educator, Family Engagement Specialist or child's Teacher about opportunities to volunteer.

Regular volunteers must comply with health and DCFS requirements, including a physical exam with Tuberculosis and results, fingerprinting receipt, and DCFS cleared background check.





## Holidays, Birthdays, and Cultural Celebrations

We recognize that families may celebrate a variety of holidays – or may not celebrate at all. For that reason, our programs will not promote or celebrate specific holidays. Instead, we partner with families to teach children about holidays and cultural traditions.

We encourage you to talk with your Parent Educator or your child's Teacher about cultural traditions, history and holidays that are special for your family. There are many opportunities to engage children through food experiences, field trips, classroom books or program activities that will help bring these cultural traditions into the program.

We know that food is central to many holidays and cultural celebrations. While we can't permit families to bring in outside food, food experiences are a part of the program.

Each program has a budget for food experiences and families are invited to recommend ideas and assist with these activities.

Finally, if your child celebrates a birthday during the program year, your Parent Educator or your child's Teacher can help you plan a special activity. There are a number of child-focused ways to celebrate birthdays in the program, such as parents/guardians joining the class to read the child's favorite story or lead a special activity. We recognize that some families may not celebrate birthdays and our program will never create activities that exclude children.

## Field Trips

Field trips provide an opportunity to extend learning beyond the classroom. All of IAFC's Early Learning Programs provide field trip opportunities. For children under age two, or during winter months, field trips may be "in-house" visits from an aquarium, petting zoo or storyteller. Children over age two or families in our home visiting programs will have opportunities to participate in external field trips to museums, libraries, farms and other locations.

Teachers and Parent Educators select field trip locations that fit with the project being studied and children's interests. We encourage you to share field trip ideas with your Parent Educators or child's Teacher.

All field trips for home visiting families are family field trips, with the parent or guardian and child. In our center-based programs, we encourage you or a member of your family to attend field trips as a chaperone.

Please remember:

- If a child arrives at the site after the buses have left for the field trip, they cannot stay at school that day since there are no Teachers at the site.
- Children riding the bus to and from field trips must have parent- or guardian-signed permission slips.
- There is a limited number of parents per site who can ride the school bus to field trips.
- Parents who would like to chaperone but are not able to ride the school bus can drive themselves and meet the program at the field trip destination.
- All children must ride on the bus to the location even if their parent, who is chaperoning, is driving.
- Chaperones are not allowed to bring or purchase food or gifts for their own children while on the field trip, cannot bring siblings or other family members to a field trip, and will not be reimbursed for mileage, parking, tolls, etc.
- IAFC is not be liable for any parents who choose to drive themselves to a field trip.

## Transportation

IAFC provides transportation services to a limited number of families enrolled in our Early Learning Centers. This assistance is prioritized by family need. Transportation is provided by a contracted transportation vendor. Family Engagement Specialists can connect your family to transportation support if you are not able to transport your child to our program.

Some IAFC Early Learning Partner sites may provide transportation. This transportation is provided by the partner site, rather than IAFC.

For families receiving home visiting services, transportation assistance is available to participate in family socialization activities. Please speak with your family's assigned Parent Educator if you need help with transportation to participate in socialization activities.

Please remember that riding the bus is a privilege—violation of the transportation agreement could result in loss of bus privileges. Please follow up with their Family Engagement Specialist for additional information:

- Please have your child at the bus stop five minutes prior to the scheduled pick up time and be available to receive your child prior minutes prior to the drop off time.
- No food, drinks, or glass objects are allowed on the bus
- Only authorized individuals can sign a child off the bus.
- If you or other authorized adults are not at the stop to sign your child off the bus, your child will be taken back to the Early Learning Center and you will be required to pick up your child.

Please follow up with their Family Engagement Specialist for additional information.



## Emergency Preparedness and Safety

IAFC's Early Learning Programs have developed an Emergency Preparedness Plan. The plan guides our staff in preparing for any emergency and keeping children safe. All staff are responsible for implementing the Emergency Preparedness Plan and receive training on the plan every year. Our center-based programs prepare children for emergency situations through regular drills, including monthly fire drills and regular tornado drills.

Please also ensure that your child has a set of clothing and shoes at the center/partner at all times for emergency/accident situations.

In addition, we ensure the safety of children through strict security procedures at each of our center-based locations. All center-based locations have controlled access to the building through locked doors.

Parents or guardians must sign emergency contact cards that include any individual who is authorized to pick up their child. Anyone picking up a child from an IAFC Early Learning Program must be at least 16 years old and

must present a photo ID that matches the name on the authorized pick up list. If someone arrives to pick up a child who is not on the list, site staff will contact the parent or guardian by phone and they must confirm that this person is authorized to pick up the child.

Obey parking regulations at your location such as:

- Do not park in/block bus areas and handicapped spots
- Obey the speed limit
- Hold your child's hand
- Carry infants and toddlers into the building

To drop off children safety:

- Take your child into the classroom and sign him/her in.

To pick up children safety:

- Only authorized persons with valid ID will be able to pick up a child from the Early Learning Centers.
- If a noticeably intoxicated or impaired parent or guardian comes to pick up the child, staff will follow these steps:
  - Attempt to delay departure until you can call the other parent or another authorized person from the Emergency Release Card list to pick up the child.
  - If the person refuses to cooperate or behaves in a threatening manner, staff should contact law enforcement immediately, and then notify the Site Director and Director of Early Learning

## Attendance

Our goal is for every child to attend school regularly (by meeting our minimum attendance threshold of 85 percent) and for every family in our home visiting programs to participate in regular visits and socializations. For children, regular attendance has a huge impact on their academic success starting in preschool and continuing through high school. Even as children grow older and more independent, families play a key role in making sure students get to school safely every day and understanding why attendance is so important for success in school and in life.

We realize some absences are unavoidable due to health problems or other circumstances. We also know that when students miss too much school — regardless of the reason — it can cause them to fall behind academically.

For this reason, parents are encouraged to maintain communication with Early Learning Program staff regarding student absences. When absences occur for consecutive days with no specific absence reason received from the parent or guardian, our program staff will initiate appropriate family support procedures, including:

- Calling the Parent/Guardian each day of absence (if we have not heard from you),
- Scheduling a meeting with the family to discuss attendance barriers, and/or
- Drafting an Attendance Plan with you to support your child's regular attendance.

Teachers, Family Engagement Specialist and Parent Educators are here to support you with ensuring that your child attends school regularly and that your family can participate fully in the home visiting program. Let us know what barriers you are facing and what supports you might need.

If you expect that your child will be late or absent from our program, please contact the site as soon as possible. If you need to cancel a home visit or socialization, please call your Parent Educator. If your child is absent or if you do not attend a visit, our team will follow-up with you to make sure that your family is safe and to find out if your family needs any support.





## Child Nutrition

IAFC promotes children's wellness by providing nutritious meals in our programs and sharing information about nutrition. We partner with families to meet each child's nutrition needs and to establish good eating habits that nurture healthy development and promote lifelong well-being.

In our center-based programs, children receive breakfast, lunch and a snack during the day. Meals follow federal Child and Adult Care Food Program guidelines to make sure that they are healthy for children and contain the right amount of fruits, grains, vegetables, proteins and other food groups. Children always have access to drinking water during the day.

Infants and toddlers are fed according to their individual developmental readiness and feeding skills. Infants and toddlers are fed on demand. Bottle fed infants are never placed in a crib or resting position with a bottle. Sites also provide a safe refrigerator for breast milk for infants and toddlers, as needed. In our home visiting programs, families are provided with a healthy snack or meal during socialization activities.

# Child Illness and Medication

Keeping your child healthy is a priority for IAFC's Early Learning Programs. When your child arrives, teachers perform a visual health check to make sure that they appear to be feeling well. If your child appears to be sick, Teachers may ask a Family Engagement Specialist or Site Director to come to the classroom and determine if your child is well enough for school.

Most illnesses do not require exclusion. Here are a few conditions that could temporarily exclude children:

- Need for care that is greater than the staff can provide without compromising the health and safety of other children.
- Poses a risk of spread of harmful diseases to others.
- Severely ill appearance (lethargic).
- Fever
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting more than two times in the previous 24 hours
- Abdominal pain that continues for more than two hours

Contagious illnesses will result in children being sent home. Please follow up with your Early Learning site staff for further details.

Physician's note prior to returning will be required based on illness.

All decisions of exclusion will be made on individual child cases.

If your child becomes ill during the day, Teachers and program staff will make sure that they are comfortable and, if needed, have a quiet place to rest. If the Site Director or Family Engagement Specialist believes that your child may have a seriously contagious illness or needs medical treatment, they will contact you and ask you to pick up your child early. Depending on your child's symptoms, program staff may ask you to bring a doctor's note or proof of treatment when your child returns to school.

If your child needs doctor-prescribed medication during the day, please bring the medication in the original container from the pharmacy to the site director or Family Engagement Specialist. For medication to be administered, your physician must sign the medication administration form. Medication will be stored securely in the classroom and administered by designated staff. If students leave the classroom for a neighborhood walk or field trip, medication will be taken with the group.





## Children with Special Needs

All IAFC Early Learning Programs actively enroll and welcome children with special needs. Teachers, administrators and other program staff work together with parents to develop a plan that ensures that we can meet the unique needs of each child.

We work with Early Intervention and with local school districts to make sure that children continue to receive all services that they need, while also benefiting fully from our programs. Teachers and Parent Educators individualize for children based on their Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individual Education Plan (IEP).

In addition, children participating in IAFC's Early Learning Programs receive an age-appropriate developmental screening within 45 days of enrollment. We use the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) to screen children under the age of three and the Early Screening Inventory – Revised (ESI-R) to screen children ages 3-5 years.

The results of these screenings indicate if a child may benefit from an evaluation by Early Intervention or the local school district to receive additional services. If we believe that your child may need to be referred, we will discuss the screening results with you and, if you choose, support you through the full referral process.

## Weather

If the weather creates safety hazards for children, families and staff traveling to our programs, IAFC's Early Learning Programs may close.

Our Early Learning Centers will close whenever **South Holland School District 151** announces that they will close due to weather. This closure will also apply to any home visits or socialization activities scheduled for the day.

We also participate in the Emergency Closing Center system. You can verify if any of our Early Learning Centers are closed by visiting <http://www.emergencyclosingcenter.com/ecc/search.jsp>. This information may also be shared with radio and television stations.

If a center is closed due to an unexpended emergency while in session, families will be called to pick up their children from the center.

Early Learning Partners will set their own guidelines for closure and will communicate these to families.

## Transition

IAFC's Early Learning Programs work to ensure smooth transitions into our program, throughout the program, and out of the program. We do this in several key ways:

- When transitioning into our center-based programs, families are invited to stay with their child until the child feels comfortable.
- The transition process for children who will turn three begins at least six months prior to their third birthday. Staff discuss transition options with the family and develop a plan. Children who will transition to preschool-age classrooms have an opportunity to visit a classroom to learn about the new environment.
- For children preparing to transition to kindergarten, program staff provide opportunities for parents to meet Teachers and administrators from their local school and learn about the transition to kindergarten. Staff share registration dates and help parents with school enrollment requirements.





## Communication with Families

Our program goal is to meet the needs of your child and your family through high-quality early learning programs. All our programs have an open, door approach to communication with families. In addition, program staff communicate with families in multiple ways, including newsletters, messages sent home, phone calls or text messages, home visits, parent-teacher conferences and parent meetings.

We encourage you to communicate with your child's Teacher, Parent Educator or your Family Engagement Specialist if you have any questions about the program.

If you have concerns or additional questions, please contact the Site Director at your child's site, or the Home Visiting Supervisor if your family is a part of our home visiting program.

If you identify areas of interests or concerns in your family, contact your Family Engagement Staff/partner staff. Your information and documentation will be kept confidential.

Finally, if you have a concern or dispute that has not been resolved at the site or program level, you should contact our Director of Early Learning.

Appropriate contact information for your program option is provided at the end of this handbook.