

Voluntary Prekindergarten Parent Handbook



Office of
Early Learning

Learn Early. Learn for Life.

What is Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK)?



Voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) is a legislatively mandated program designed to prepare every 4-year-old in Florida for kindergarten and build the foundation for their educational success. VPK gives each child an opportunity to perform better in school and throughout life with quality programs that include high literacy standards, accountability, appropriate curricula, substantial instruction periods, manageable class sizes and qualified instructors. All eligible 4-year-olds are entitled to participate in one of three VPK program options.

VPK Vision

That Florida's children are eager to learn and ready to succeed when they enter kindergarten.

VPK Mission

To ensure that all children are intellectually, socially, emotionally and physically ready to enter school and ready to learn, fully recognizing the crucial role of parents as their child's first teacher.

Highlights of the VPK program

- High quality educational program with an early literacy focus.
- **Free** for all children age 4 years old on or before September 1 who reside in Florida.
- Parent choice is a priority; so both private and public providers participate.

Parents' Rights



As a parent, you have the right to make an informed VPK choice using one of the following methods:

- If you have Internet access, visit the Department of Children and Families (DCF) website dcfsanswrite.state.fl.us/childcare/provider to review VPK profiles of each private provider and public school you are considering.
- Contact your early learning coalition (ELC). ELCs work within all communities in Florida to implement early learning support services. Your ELC has additional information about the VPK program and application process. ELC contact information can be found at www.floridaearlylearning.com or by calling 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).
- If you do not have Internet access, you may view a copy of the profiles of each VPK provider and school in your county at your local ELC.
- You may also contact your local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) office to receive a customized list of VPK providers in your area that meet the needs of your family, as well as information about other community resources. CCR&R services are free to anyone residing in or seeking early learning services in Florida. For the number of your local CCR&R, please call the Office of Early Learning toll free: 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

Parent choice is a priority for the VPK program. You can choose from different educational settings and various program options. Providers must meet VPK programmatic and quality standards and include family child care homes, private centers, public schools, faith-based programs and specialized instructional services providers.

As a parent, you have the right to select one of three VPK program options to meet your needs.

- *School-year program* – provides 540 hours of instruction with class sizes of no more than 20
- *Summer program* – includes 300 instructional hours and class sizes no more than 12; children may participate in VPK the summer right before the school year in which the child is eligible for kindergarten.
- *VPK Specialized Instructional Services* – for 4-year-old children with special needs, where certified or licensed professionals provide instruction or therapy in individual or small group settings. The child must have a current individual educational plan (IEP) from a local school district.

Services vary based on the program you select. VPK providers choose the structure for the hours per day and days per week to meet the instructional hours required.

As a parent, you have the right to enroll your child in a VPK program that guarantees the following:

- An approved VPK program with no cost to you for the VPK hours of operation.
- Participation in the school-year, summer or specialized instructional services program.
- The choice of paying for extended day services or “wraparound” care if the VPK provider you select offers it. Wraparound care is any care the provider offers in addition to regular VPK hours.

VPK is **free** for eligible children. Providers are not permitted to charge a registration fee or require you to agree to any additional services or wraparound services as a condition of enrolling in VPK. State law does not, however, prohibit a provider from charging fees for programs or care that is not part of the VPK program (e.g., late charges, meals/snacks, field trips, extended care, or wraparound care). If field trips are part of a VPK day, providers may request that a parent contribute, but not require them to do so. The provider must also have an alternative activity for a child who does not attend a field trip. Before finalizing your selection, review the VPK provider’s discipline and attendance policies to learn about program policies and practices.

As a parent, you have the right to know that a VPK provider meets the following required standards:

- Private VPK providers must have a director with a VPK director credential.
- Private VPK providers must be licensed (child care, family child care home or large family child care home); be exempt from licensure (certain private schools or faith-based providers); or be accredited by an approved accrediting association.
- Specialized instructional services providers must be licensed or certified professionals. Check with your ELC for more detailed information.

During your selection, consider visiting the DCF website dcfsanswrite.state.fl.us/childcare/provider or calling your ELC office to confirm the program is eligible.

As a parent, you have the right to know that a VPK program employs qualified VPK instructors and meets minimum classroom requirements, including

- Every lead VPK instructor must have at a minimum a Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential for the school-year program or a bachelor's degree or higher in certain education-related programs for the summer program.
- VPK classroom ratios must be one instructor to every 11 children in the school-year program and one to 12 in the summer.
- VPK class size must not exceed 20 children in the school-year program.
- VPK class size must not exceed 12 children in the summer program.

Teacher qualifications are important to delivering high-quality instruction and VPK instructors must meet minimum education standards. Ratio and group size are also quality indicators. As part of making your decision, ask potential VPK providers about teacher qualifications and classroom requirements.

As a parent, you have the right to select a VPK program that delivers high-quality instruction including

- A curriculum that is developmentally appropriate with a focus on early literacy skills.
- A program that prepares your child to be ready for kindergarten based on the standards adopted by the State Board of Education for use in VPK.

To best meet the needs of each child and prepare them for future school success, VPK curriculum must be individually and age appropriate and aligned with state performance standards. State performance standards provide guidelines to teachers about what children should know and be able to do in order to help plan instructional activities for your child. Instructional activities involve engaging in child-initiated and teacher-directed play opportunities. When making decisions about the best VPK provider for your child, ask about curriculum and planned activities to determine if the program activities meet your expectations about quality early learning practices.

As a parent, you have the right to enroll your 4-year-old in a VPK program (subject to the provider's or school's agreement to admit your child), including families

- Who have a child with a disability. While individual educational plans (IEPs) are not required to be served in VPK, VPK providers **are** required to make their programs accessible to children with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- In the military, temporarily based in Florida.
- Who may be displaced due to a hurricane or other natural disaster or whose child or youth is experiencing homelessness.

The only residency requirement is that children live in Florida during the time they are attending VPK. This means that 4-year-old children living in Florida temporarily are eligible for services.

As a parent, you have the right to withdraw your child from VPK at any time. You may also have the right to re-enroll your 4-year-old in another VPK program under specific conditions:

- A parent may apply for an extreme hardship re-enrollment for his/her eligible child in the summer program if his/her child completed less than 70 percent of the school-year VPK hours.
- A parent may re-enroll his/her eligible child within the same program type, as long as the child has completed less than 70 percent of VPK hours.

VPK is a program in which parents of eligible 4-year-old children can voluntarily enroll their child for services. If you have any questions about eligibility, contact your ELC or the Office of Early Learning toll free: 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).

Parents' Responsibilities



As a parent, you have the responsibility to comply with *date of birth verification requirements* by providing a copy of at least one of the following approved supporting documents that show your child's name and date of birth:

- An original or certified copy of your child's birth record.
- An original or certified copy of your child's certificate of baptism accompanied by an affidavit sworn to by the child's parent that the certificate is correct.
- An insurance policy on your child's life that is in force for at least two years.
- A religious record of the child's birth accompanied by an affidavit sworn to by the child's parent that the record is correct.
- A passport or certificate of arrival in the United States.
- An immunization record signed by a health officer or doctor.
- A valid military dependent identification card.
- A parent may submit an affidavit of the child's age sworn to or affirmed by the parent.

Parents must provide documentation to prove that their child meets the VPK age requirements. A child must be 4 years of age on or before September 1 to be eligible for VPK. If you have any questions about age requirements for VPK, contact your ELC or the Office of Early Learning toll free: 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).

As a parent, you have the responsibility to comply with *residential address verification requirements* by providing a copy of at least one of the following supporting documents that show the name and residential address of the parent with whom the child resides:

1. Utility , cable or home phone bill.
2. Pay stub.
3. Residential rental agreement or receipt for rental payment.
4. Government-issued document (e.g., driver's license).
5. A military order issued to the parent, if a child's parent is a service member of the United States Armed Forces, which shows that the parent will reside in Florida when the child attends VPK.
6. An affidavit of the child's residential address sworn to by the parent, if accompanied by a letter from a landlord that confirms the child resides at the same address shown in the parent's affidavit.

7. Documentation of residency for a child or youth who is experiencing homelessness based on other documents (e.g., letter from a homeless shelter).

Parents must provide documentation to prove that their child lives in Florida during the time they will be attending VPK. A child living in Florida is eligible for VPK with the proper documentation for eligibility. If you have any questions about residency requirements, contact your ELC or Office of Early Learning toll free: 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).

As a parent, you have the responsibility to ensure your child participates in kindergarten screening.

- You have the responsibility to comply with the kindergarten screening process that will occur when your child enrolls in kindergarten.

All kindergarten students are required to participate in the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener in the first 30 days of kindergarten. Kindergarten screening is a process that helps us better understand how much your child learned in VPK. It also helps your child's kindergarten teacher understand what your child knows and can do, which will help with instructional planning.

Kindergarten students who attend public schools will be screened automatically. If your child will attend kindergarten in a non-public school, you are responsible for having your child screened. Be sure to check with your child's kindergarten to make sure your child is screened.

As a parent, you are responsible for your child's VPK transportation.

- Parents are responsible for their child's transportation to and from the VPK program.

Some VPK providers may offer transportation services at a cost. You may want to explore these options before choosing a VPK provider.

As a parent, you are responsible for complying with the VPK attendance and other program policies.

- Parents have the responsibility to comply with the attendance policies for the VPK program in which their child is enrolled.
- Parents have the responsibility to comply with all of the VPK provider's policies (e.g., discipline, late fees).

Providers have individual policies related to attendance, discipline and late fees. You should become familiar with policies that apply to children in VPK before enrolling your child in the program.



Information Resources



Early Learning Coalition (ELC)

ELCs have additional information on VPK, including application procedures and dates to apply in your county. **1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711)** www.floridaearlylearning.com

Office of Early Learning

The Office of Early Learning provides state-level support and direction for implementing the VPK program as well as other early learning programs. **1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711)** www.floridaearlylearning.com.

Department of Children & Families (DCF)

The Department of Children and Families regulates licensed child care facilities, licensed family child care homes and facilities that care for mildly ill children in 60 of Florida's 67 counties. **850-488-4900** dcfsanswrite.state.fl.us/childcare/provider.

Florida Abuse Hotline

The Florida Abuse Hotline provides a full spectrum of services, from parenting classes and respite care to transportation and child care. The goal is to keep children safe with their own families when possible. **1-800-96-ABUSE** or **1-800-962-2873** www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse.

Florida's Central Directory of Early Childhood Services

The central directory provides information and referral services on disabilities and special health care needs for families, service coordinators and other professionals who work with children with special needs. **1-800-654-4440** www.centraldirectory.org.

Florida KidCare

Florida KidCare is the health insurance program for uninsured children younger than age 19. **1-888-540-5437** www.floridakidcare.org.

2-1-1

2-1-1 is a national information and referral service that provides information and referrals to human services resources such as crisis intervention services, support groups, financial assistance and job training. **Dial 211** www.211.org.

PARENTS' RIGHTS

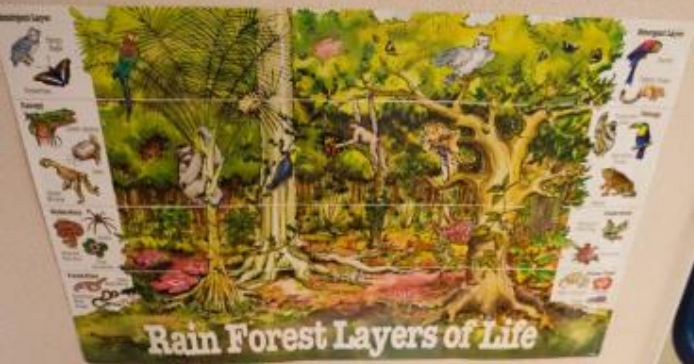
- ☑ As a parent, I have the right to enroll my 4-year-old child in a free school-year or summer VPK program.
- ☑ As a parent, I have the right to select VPK program options that meet my child's needs.
- ☑ If I have a 4-year-old with special needs who has an IEP from a local school district, my child may be eligible for VPK specialized instructional services.
- ☑ As a parent, I have the right to make an informed VPK choice.
- ☑ As a parent, I have the right to select a VPK program that employs VPK instructors and meets minimum classroom requirements.
- ☑ As a parent, I have the right to select a VPK program that follows approved VPK curriculum and guidelines.

PARENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

- ☑ As a parent, I am responsible for complying with date-of-birth verification requirements.
- ☑ As a parent, I am responsible for complying with residential address verification requirements.
- ☑ As a parent, I am responsible for ensuring my child participates in kindergarten screening.
- ☑ As a parent, I am responsible for my child's VPK transportation.
- ☑ As a parent, I am responsible for complying with the provider's attendance and other program policies.



Writing



OFFICE OF
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Form OEL-VPK 07 (August 2014)
Rule 6M-8.201, F.A.C.