



# It Takes a Family

A Parent's Guide to the  
Sure Start Program





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# WELCOME TO SURE START: A HANDBOOK FOR PARENTS

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As a parent or guardian of a child enrolled in Sure Start, you probably already have a good idea of what Sure Start is about. You probably also have a number of questions still waiting to be answered. That's where this handbook comes in. We want you to know exactly what Sure Start is and what Sure Start isn't. Let's begin with the beginning of Sure Start.

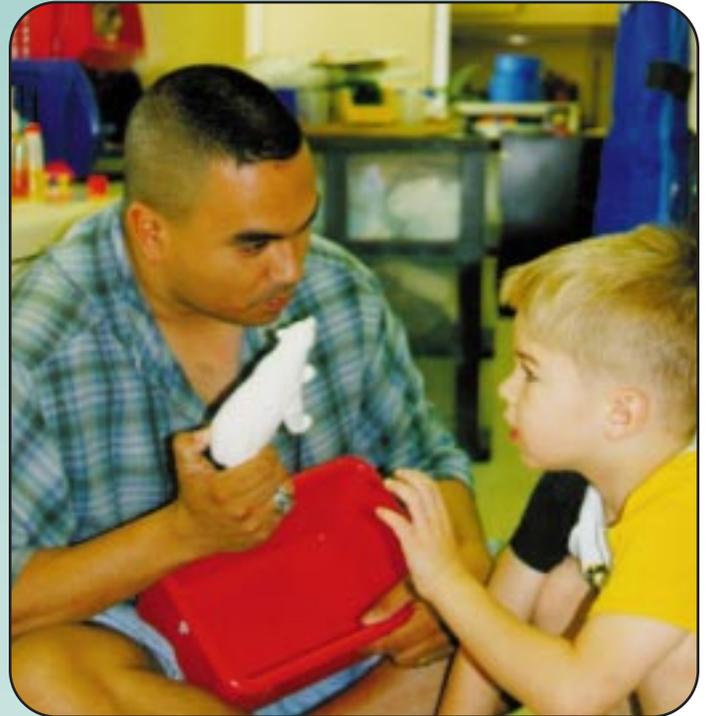


## BACKGROUND

The Sure Start program was inaugurated in 1991 by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). From its very beginning, Sure Start was designed to be a model school readiness program for families living and working at military installations overseas. Based on the very successful and popular Head Start program, Sure Start, like Head Start, offers a comprehensive approach to early childhood education that involves both children and families.

In December of 1991, a pilot Sure Start program was set up at RAF Lakenheath, England, to test the viability of the Sure Start model. From an extensive evaluation of that pilot program, it was concluded that Sure Start did indeed benefit participating children and families. In fact, every one of Sure Start's goals was successfully met. These goals were as follows:

- To provide each participating child with a high quality, developmentally appropriate education that would prepare children for school;
- To fully involve parents in the education of their children;
- To increase the availability of child care spaces; and,
- To increase cooperation between military programs governing the education of young children, namely Child Development Programs (CDP) and the Department of Defense Dependent Schools (DoDDS).

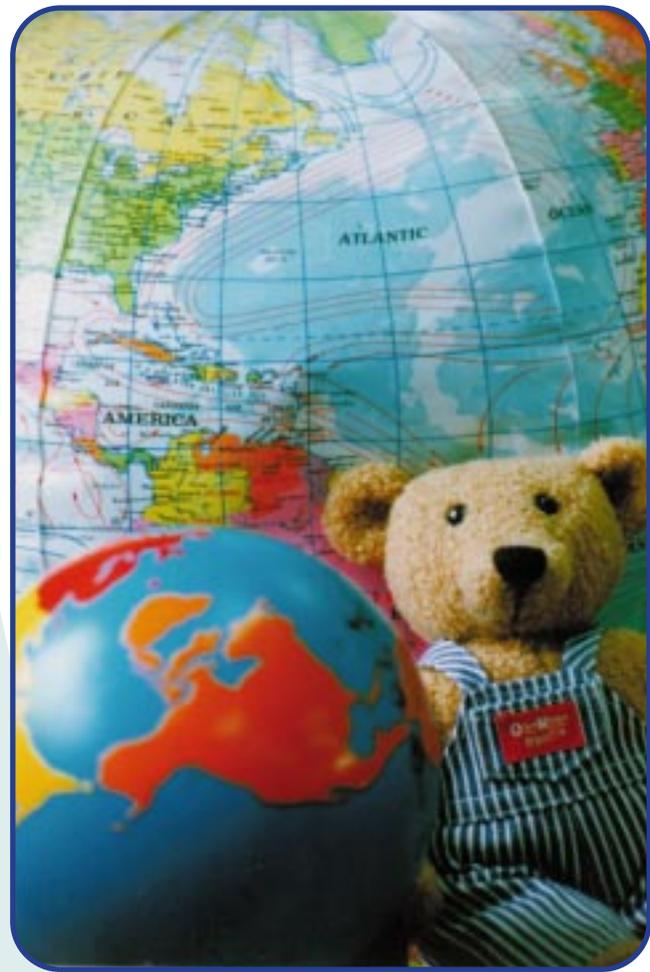


Participating parents enthusiastically endorsed Sure Start. Everyone involved in the pilot program felt that it was, by all measures, a resounding success. Boosted by the results of this pilot test, Sure Start programs were begun at military installations throughout Europe and the Pacific—including yours. Our goal is to ensure that the success of the pilot program is mirrored at every Sure Start site year after year. Part of this effort includes keeping Sure Start parents informed and active members of the Sure Start community.

# THE SURE START COMPONENTS

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As parents, it's important for you to know that Sure Start is made up of four equally important components. The education component offers children a variety of learning activities that encourage their socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical growth. The health component provides children with comprehensive medical, dental, mental health, and special needs services. The social services component extends outwards to families, providing referrals and linkages with all of the community resources on an installation. The parent involvement component is based on the philosophy that children benefit most when parents become partners with teachers in their children's education. Let's take a closer look at each of these components and see how they affect your child and your family as a whole.



## The Education Component

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When you walk into your child's Sure Start classroom, you should be struck by several things: children are involved in a variety of activities, there is a lot of play going on, and there is a sense of excitement in the air. This is as it should be. In good early childhood programs you won't see children sitting at desks or tables listening to teachers instructing them on the "right" thing to do. Instead you'll see that the room is arranged into learning centers—places where children can look at books; play with blocks and table toys; pretend that they are mommies and daddies going to work; create art; prepare healthy snacks; or work on computer programs. You'll see children playing together with a friend, working one-on-one with the teachers, or engaged in activity on their own.

If you observe closely, you should see children experimenting, problem-solving and exploring. This is how children learn. Every Sure Start classroom should be a laboratory for learning.

In Sure Start, teachers have a planned approach to what they teach children. Within each learning center, there are specific goals to promote children's growth and learning. Teachers follow a curriculum that helps them set objectives for meeting the developmental needs of each and every child enrolled in Sure Start. Each child has an individual plan that teachers use to address these specified goals. Teachers ask children lots of questions so that they can reflect on what they are doing. Sure Start staff also help children to apply skills they've already mastered to new situations.

When you visit a Sure Start classroom, you'll also probably notice that the room is filled with children's art work hung at the children's eye level, that there are both picture and print labels on the shelves and that there are lots of signs such as "Sand and Water Area" or "Our Trip to the Farm."

Art work is everywhere in the Sure Start classroom because we want children to be as proud of their creations as we are. We let the children decide which of their art work they'd like displayed, and then we hang them at a height where all of the children can admire them. You're not likely to see colored-in dittos or 18 identical pictures of Pilgrims hanging in a Sure Start classroom. This is because we value children's creativity. Besides, we know that preschool children become easily frustrated when asked to color drawings without going over the lines. In Sure Start, we believe that the process of creating is what's important. So what if a child paints a pumpkin purple? It is the feeling and the process of creating that are important—not our adult ideas of what art should look like.



The reason you see lots of print and picture labels in the Sure Start classroom is because we want children to learn that clean-up is an integral part of their play. We want children from an early age to learn to be responsible for their actions. By using labels, we facilitate clean-up in an organized manner. Children very quickly learn that the long, rectangular blocks should be neatly stacked on the shelves with colored contact paper outlines of these blocks. Children thus learn to put their blocks away when they're finished playing without having to ask the teacher for assistance. At the same time, by matching the real block to its picture label, children are also learning to classify according to shape.

In the Sure Start classroom, you'll find lots of written signs, in big printed letters. All of the learning centers, for example, are labeled: blocks, art, sand and water, table toys, and so on. You'll also see on some of the children's art work that teachers have written descriptions of what the child has created, as dictated to the teacher by the child. In the library area, you'll find a great many picture books that children can look at alone or have read to them. There's a writing area, too, where children can experiment with pencils, markers, and crayons and a variety of papers. Sure Start has what we call a "print rich" environment because we

want children to be exposed to the written word so that they can build a foundation for reading and writing skills. We don't teach children to memorize the alphabet or numbers because research in reading and math has shown us that this type of rote learning is not helpful to children in the long run. While most every child can learn to memorize letters and numbers, this skill is far removed from the ones your child needs to be successful in reading, writing, and math. Moreover, children who are instructed this way tend to "burn out" in the later elementary years.

Rather, to become good readers, children need to see the printed word, to see what letters look like when a teacher writes down their stories, to be familiar with the direction that a sentence flows in a book, and to be a part of a literate environment—like the one found in a Sure Start classroom. So while some parents may at first be disappointed to find out that Sure Start doesn't teach children to recite the alphabet song, we think you'll be happy to know that Sure Start does indeed help



children learn their ABC's—in a meaningful way that prepares children to read and write. And we do it in a way that early childhood experts agree is most likely to lead to future success in school.

## The Health Component

Sure Start's health component ensures that all participating children are fed nutritious meals and have all of their health-related concerns addressed—so that when children arrive at Sure Start each day they are primed for learning. All Sure Start children receive a nutritious lunch and snacks that are prepared in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines to provide one-third of a preschool child's daily nutritional requirements. These meals are also designed to recognize children's individual differences, cultural backgrounds, food allergies and health requirements.

In addition to being nutritious, one of the hallmark's of Sure Start's nutritional program is what we call "family style dining." As the name implies, in family style dining children and staff sit together at tables and eat as a group, much as you would in your own home. We value this time together as an opportunity for children to relax and chat with one another and their teachers, perhaps reviewing the day's activities and discussing scheduled plans. The warm atmosphere generated by family style dining helps children learn to associate good nutrition with pleasant times.

While it may at first seem somewhat surprising, family style dining also provides important learning experiences. To illustrate, as children assist in setting the table, passing plates of food, wiping spills, and cleaning up after themselves, they are learning self-help skills and taking responsibility for their own needs and actions. Children also learn directionality when they pass food



clockwise, cause and effect when they heap more peas onto a ladle than can be held, fine motor coordination when they butter bread, vocabulary words when there are cucumbers in their salad, cultural appreciation when they dine on ethnic foods made from recipes parents have provided, and table manners when they wait until everyone is served before eating.

While all lunches and many snacks are served family style, sometimes children are invited to have snacks at the cooking center. We do this for several reasons. First of all, we want children to have an opportunity to learn to prepare and serve themselves a snack of their own making by giving them some strawberries to hull or peanut butter to spread on celery stalks. We also believe that children benefit from being able to help themselves to a snack when they are hungry and having a chance to choose whom they want to have their snack with—even if it's occasionally by themselves in solitude. Helping themselves to a snack in the cooking center also provides children with an opportunity to take on adult behavior, something rarely afforded children, but one which most relish.

In addition to offering children nutritious meals and snacks, Sure Start's health component makes sure that all participating children receive medical, dental, and developmental screenings. We strongly believe that by screening children at this early point in their education, we can be of great help to children and families. Even with the military's extensive health care program, we know that many problems would not surface until a later age were we not to specifically screen children now. That is why we have made parental consent for these screenings a precondition for enrolling your child in Sure Start.

One of the major benefits of Sure Start's approach is that many problems can be remedied if detected early. A real life example illustrates this point quite dramatically. One newly enrolled child at a Sure Start program had a severe problem controlling his anger- frequent outbursts and aggressive behaviors such as hitting, biting, and scratching others. With the advice of the school psychologist, the teacher worked daily with the child on appropriate anger expression strategies such as verbalizing anger, giving the child a sock tied in knots to untie, and hitting a pillow to release anger.



In addition, the teacher, the school nurse, and special education teacher worked with the boy's parents to assist them in using the same anger control methods at home. Through the efforts of both home and school, within three months' time, the child learned to express his anger appropriately.

This early intervention changed the child's behavior and made his school experience a successful and promising one. Had his problem gone untreated, we can only assume that this young boy's educational future would not hold the same promise it does today.

To ensure that the health component is ongoing, Sure Start teachers monitor children's health on a daily basis. Children are checked each morning for any signs of illness or other-health related problems. The classroom and outdoor areas are also checked daily for any potential safety hazards. Strict policies govern hand washing for both children and adults to halt the spread of disease. Toys and play materials are regularly cleaned with a bleach solution to keep them germ-free. These and many other practices enable Sure Start staff to provide a healthy environment in which learning can be maximized.



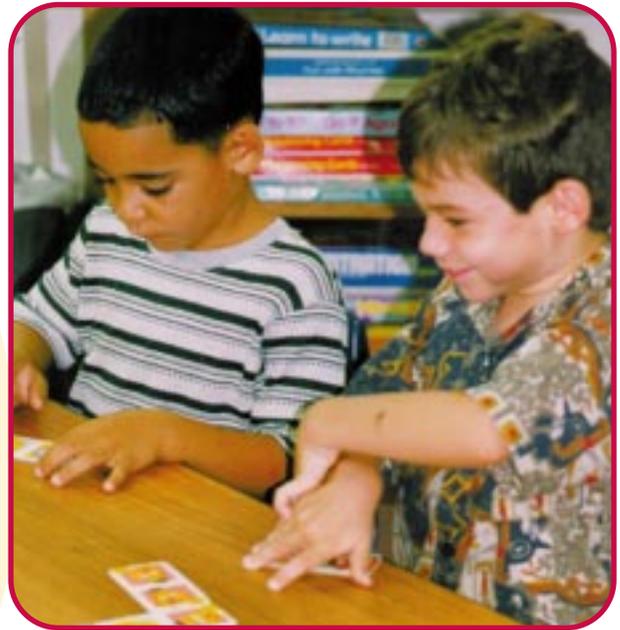
## Social Services Component

Whereas the education and the health components focus primarily on the child, the social services component extends Sure Start's services to the family as a whole. Sure Start is based on the belief that children's needs do not exist in a vacuum. If we were to serve only the child—without including other family members—we would not be fully serving the child. For this reason Sure Start offers a full array of family services.

What does this mean to you as a Sure Start family? First and foremost, it means that Sure Start teachers are there to serve as your link with other community agencies. Suppose, for example, you are feeling overex-

tended without the support of your deployed spouse? Sure Start teachers can refer you to organizations such as Hearts Apart which are dedicated to helping families deal with such separations. Or, if you'd prefer to speak with a counselor, the Sure Start teacher can set up an appointment for you at the Family Support Center.

What if you want to obtain your GED or take some college courses? Again, Sure Start staff will assist you in obtaining the necessary paperwork. Sure Start is there to help you, to refer you to trained professionals, and to make sure that the services you receive are indeed what you were seeking. We are your partners in finding the community assistance you want and need.



## Parent Involvement Component

This component is your assurance that your rights and responsibilities as your child's first and most important teacher are recognized. Sure Start is firmly rooted in the principle that children do best when parents and teachers unite in common support of children. Because we so highly value parent participation, we have, in fact, made it a prerequisite for enrollment. As you know, every child's parents must volunteer 40-60 hours of time per year (depending on whether you are a single or dual parent family). We have made this participation mandatory because we know how beneficial this experience can be for children and parents alike. It has been our experience that even the most reluctant of parent volunteers very quickly become converted to the need for parent participation once they see how proud it makes their children to have them in the classroom. Once they start, we find that most parents are so taken with the experience that they volunteer their time far in excess of the requirement. The pleasures of reading a story to children, leading a cooking activity of a favorite



family recipe or accompanying the children to select library books can be very beguiling indeed. The joy children take in their parents' active participation goes a long way in convincing most parents that this is a valuable activity—not just a Sure Start rule.

While we strongly encourage Sure Start parents to spend as much time as they can in the classroom interacting with their children, we are of course aware that there are circumstances where this is just not possible. If this should be your situation, don't be discouraged. There are any number of things you can do to contribute to Sure Start. For example, past Sure Start parents have given their time and talents to Sure Start by designing a logo for their program, by making dramatic play prop boxes, by keeping a class scrapbook, and by coordinating logistics for study trips. Let your imagination run free. Perhaps you will come up with an idea that we can share with future Sure Start parents.

Sure Start also builds in parent involvement in the form of parent education. At monthly meetings, parents gather to discuss issues and hear invited experts speak on child-related or parenting concerns. As a Sure Start

parent, you'll want to ensure that these meetings focus on topics of importance to you and your child.

In addition, a select group of parents take a more active role in overseeing the Sure Start program through their participation on the Sure Start Advisory Committee. By design, 51% of this committee is made up of Sure Start parents. This proportion of parent membership was deliberately set to ensure that parents have the deciding influence when it comes to making recommendations about the Sure Start program.

The other members of the Advisory Committee are composed of community representatives such as the installation Pediatrician and the Family Center Director, plus representatives from DoDDS, such as the Elementary School Principal, the Sure Start Teacher, and the Program Assistant. The Advisory Committee is an active voice for all parents. Its mission is to review the various component plans, to serve as a link between Sure Start and the installation community, and to suggest changes to the program, as appropriate.



Sure Start staff are also committed to working with individual parents to refine their parenting skills. Should you want to know more about appropriate discipline techniques, dealing with sibling rivalry, or how to assess if your child will be ready for kindergarten, speak to the Sure Start staff. They will be happy to meet with you one-on-one, to hold an evening workshop, or to invite a specialist to speak on a topic of your choice at a parent meeting.

The parent-Sure Start bond is further endorsed through the home visits that the Sure Start teachers make to each participating family's home. By the time you read this, you may have already even had a first visit from the Sure Start teachers. During this initial visit, the Sure Start staff got acquainted with you and your family. They wanted to learn what your expectations are for Sure Start and how they might assist you in realizing these expectations. They wanted you to get acquainted with them so that over the coming year you'll feel free to talk with them, to share your thoughts, and to openly express both what you like and what you are concerned about in Sure Start.

In the other home visits you can expect to receive, teachers will work with you on skills and activities that you can do with your child at home to support what your child is learning at Sure Start. For example, teachers might work with you in making books from your children's drawings or family photographs that can be "read" over and over again. Or, teachers might show you how to make blocks out of empty milk cartons that you can then use to teach your child math concepts. Teachers will work closely with you in developing strategies you can use to not only reinforce what your child is learning at Sure Start, but to extend your child's learning to the next higher step. By working directly with parents, Sure Start makes parents true partners in the education of their children.



## HOW IT ALL COMES TOGETHER

We have discussed each of the component areas at some length because we want you to be aware of the philosophy behind Sure Start and to have a clear understanding of how this philosophy has been translated into action. As a Sure Start parent, we want you to be confident that the services we've described in this handbook are being offered at your Sure Start program—and being offered in such a way that you feel Sure Start is making a difference in the lives of your child and your family:

You will want to observe first-hand that your child's Sure Start classroom is abuzz with activity and excitement and constant learning...

You will want to know that your child has been screened and that if any problems were uncovered that a course of action has been outlined and put into place...

You will want to observe your child eating nutritious meals and snacks and participating in family style dining as well as occasionally preparing a recipe in the cooking area...

You may want to consult with the Sure Start Teacher about possible referrals for your family's needs and parenting information you'd like to receive...

And finally, you should feel encouraged to take an active role in your child's education by serving as a classroom volunteer and a member of the Sure Start team.

Without your participation, your vigilance, and your support, Sure Start cannot live up to its potential. We need you to be a constant in your child's education. To provide your child with an early childhood education of the highest quality, we must band together in support of children. Only then, can we indeed guarantee our children a SURE START in life.



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