

VOLUNTARY PREKINDERGARTEN HANDBOOK

What Parents Need to
Know and Understand about

Florida VPK



OFFICE OF
Early Learning

LEARN EARLY. LEARN FOR LIFE.



FAMILY PORTAL QUICK TIPS

Applying for VPK...

has never been easier. You can do it online from a computer, cell phone or other smart device. Go to <https://familyservices.floridaearlylearning.com>. You will need a valid email address to begin.



Then...

1. Click **Apply for Voluntary Prekindergarten**.
2. Create a user name and password.
3. Follow email instructions to validate your account.
4. Fill out an application.

You'll need these.

1. Proof of Florida residence.
2. Proof of child's age.
3. If you're enrolling your child in VPK Specialized Instructional Services, an individual educational plan (IEP) from your local school district.



Next?



Your local early learning coalition will review your application and email additional instructions.

If your application is approved, you'll get a Certificate of Eligibility to take to any VPK provider. Need help? Contact your local early learning coalition.

VPK Handbook

What is Voluntary Prekindergarten?

Voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) is a state program designed to prepare every child 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 children are entitled to participate in one of three VPK program options. The VPK mission is 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.

Program Highlights

- High-quality educational program with an early literacy focus.
- Free for all children 4 years old on or before Sept. 1 who reside in Florida.
- Parents whose children are born from Feb. 2 through Sept. 1 of a calendar year may choose to enroll their child in VPK either that year or the next when their child is 5.
- Parent choice is a priority, so both private providers and public schools participate.



Choosing a VPK Program

Parent choice is a VPK priority. There are different program options and educational settings such as family child care homes, private centers, public schools, faith-based programs and specialized instructional services providers. All providers must meet VPK program and quality standards. Parents choose the program and setting that best fit the needs of their family.

Parent choice is a VPK priority.

Program Options

Parents may choose one of three VPK program options.

- School-year program – 540 hours of instruction with class sizes of no more than 20.
- Summer program – 300 instructional hours and class sizes no more than 12; children may participate in VPK the summer before the school year the child will attend kindergarten.
- VPK Specialized Instructional Services – Certified or licensed professionals provide instruction or therapy in individual or small group settings for eligible children with special needs. The child must have a current individualized 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.

Finding a VPK Program

Resources to help you decide which is the best program



1. Visit the Department of Children and Families (DCF) website <https://cares.myflfamilies.com/PublicSearch> to view profiles for each VPK provider you are considering.
2. Contact your local early learning coalition. Coalitions work in all Florida communities to implement early learning support services and have more information about VPK. You can find coalition contact information on the Office of Early Learning website FloridaEarlyLearning.com on the map or by calling 866-357-3239 (TTY:711).
3. View a copy of the profiles of each VPK provider and school in your county at your local early learning coalition.
4. Contact your local Child Care Resource and Referral office to receive a customized list of VPK providers in your area that meet the needs of your family. You can also get 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 at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711).

What to Expect from VPK

Program Guarantees

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, field trips, extended care or wraparound care). If field trips are part of a VPK day, providers may request that a parent contribute, but cannot require them to do so. The provider must also have an alternative activity for a child who does not attend a field trip.

VPK programs guarantee the following:



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

Before finalizing your selection, review the VPK provider's discipline and attendance policies to learn about program policies and practices.





VPK Provider Standards

VPK providers are required to meet the following standards:

- Private providers must have a director with a VPK director credential.
- Private 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 local early learning coalition for more detail.

Parents may contact the coalition to confirm if a provider offers VPK.



VPK Class Standards

Teacher qualifications are important for delivering high-quality instruction. VPK instructors must meet minimum education standards. The ratio of instructor to children also indicates quality. When deciding, parents should ask potential providers about teacher qualifications and classroom requirements.

VPK programs must employ qualified VPK instructors and meet minimum classroom requirements, including

- Every lead VPK instructor must at a minimum have a Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential for the school-year program or a bachelor's degree or higher in certain education-related fields 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.

Quality Instruction

VPK programs must deliver high-quality instruction including

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

To best meet children's needs and prepare them for future school success, VPK curriculum must be age-appropriate and align with state performance standards. Performance standards provide guidelines to teachers about what children should know and be able to do so they can plan instructional activities for young children. The activities involve engaging in child-initiated and teacher-directed play opportunities. When deciding about the best VPK provider for their children, parents should ask about curriculum and planned activities to determine if the program activities meet the guidelines for quality early learning practices.

Changing VPK Providers

Parents may withdraw their children from VPK at any time. They may reenroll their child in another VPK program under specific conditions:

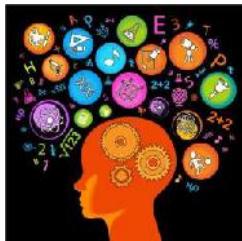
- Parents may apply for extreme hardship reenrollment for eligible children in the summer program if the children have not completed more than 70 percent of the school-year VPK hours.
- Parents may reenroll their children within the same program type as long as the children have not completed more than 70 percent of VPK hours.

If you have any questions about reenrolling your child, contact your local early learning coalition or the Office of Early Learning toll free at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).

Did You Know?

Parents have the right to enroll their child in a VPK program (subject to the provider's or school's agreement to admit the child), including families

Unique Abilities



Who have a child with a disability. While 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.

Military Dependents



In the military, temporarily based in Florida.

Displaced or Homeless



Who may be displaced due to a hurricane or other natural disaster or are experiencing homelessness.

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

Applying for VPK

Parents apply for their child to attend VPK online on the Family Portal at <https://familyservices.floridaearlylearning.com/>.

In the application parents must provide documentation to prove their child meets the VPK age and Florida residency requirements.



Age Requirements

A child must be 4 years of age on or before Sept. 1 to be eligible for VPK. Parents whose children are born from Feb. 2 through Sept. 1 in a calendar year may choose to enroll their child in VPK that year or the next, when they are 5 as long as they do not enroll in kindergarten. You will have to submit one of the following approved supporting documents that shows the child's name and date of birth:



- Original or certified copy of the child's birth record.
- Original or certified copy of the child's certificate of baptism or other religious record accompanied by an affidavit sworn to by the child's parent that the certificate is correct.
- Insurance policy on the child's life in force for at least two years.
- Passport or certificate of arrival in the United States.
- Immunization record signed by a health officer or doctor.
- Valid military dependent identification card or federal, state or local government identification card.
- If none of the documents listed above are available, a parent may submit a notarized affidavit of the child's age accompanied by a letter on official letterhead signed by a public health officer or physician stating that the child's age shown in the affidavit is true and correct.

Residency Requirements

Parents must provide documentation to prove their child lives in Florida when they complete the VPK application. A child living in Florida is eligible for VPK with the proper documentation.

You have to submit one of the following supporting documents showing the name and residential address of the parent with whom the child resides:

- Utility, cable or home phone bill dated within 12 months of the child application.
- Pay stub dated within 12 months of the child application.
- Residential rental agreement or receipt for rental payment dated within 12 months of the child application.
- Government-issued document (e.g., driver's license).
- Military order issued to the parent, if the parent is a service member of the United States Armed Forces, showing that the parent will reside in Florida when the child attends VPK.
- Federal government order showing that the child's parent is a federal employee assigned to work in Florida when the child attends the VPK program.
- Florida Migrant Education Program Certificate of Eligibility (COE) form.
- COE form from the Florida Department of Education.
- Notarized affidavit by the parent of the child's residential address accompanied by a letter from landlord, property owner or property lessee confirming the child resides at the same address shown in the parent's affidavit.
- Documentation of residency for a homeless child based on other documents (e.g., letter from a homeless shelter).



If you have questions about VPK age or residency requirements, contact your local early learning coalition or the Office of Early Learning toll free at 1-866-447-1159.

Parent Responsibilities

What you need to know.

Transportation

Parents are responsible for their child's transportation to and from VPK. Some VPK providers may offer transportation services at a cost. You may want to explore these options before choosing a VPK provider.



VPK Provider Policies

VPK providers have individual policies related to attendance, discipline and late fees. Parents should become familiar with policies that apply to children in VPK before enrolling their child. Ask questions about any policies you do not understand before enrolling your child.

- Parents have the responsibility to make sure their child attends the VPK program on a regular basis.
- Parents have the responsibility to understand and agree to all of the VPK provider's policies (e.g., discipline, late fees).

Gardiner Scholarship

Parents should understand how the VPK program interacts with the Gardiner Scholarship.

- Participating in the Gardiner Scholarship program (formerly PLSA) cancels a child's eligibility for VPK, including VPK specialized instructional services.

Parents considering the Gardiner Scholarship should weigh the effect on VPK eligibility before accepting the scholarship. More information about the scholarship is available at <http://bit.ly/2jJRYf>.

Information and Resources

Early Learning Coalition

Early learning coalitions have more information about VPK, including application procedures and dates to apply in your county.

1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711) or <http://bit.ly/2gmZFJ3>

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)

- VPK Information: FloridaEarlyLearning.com/vpk.aspx
- Family Resources: <http://bit.ly/2fliOXa>

Department of Children and Families (DCF)

DCF 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.

- DCF Provider Search:
<https://cares.myflfamilies.com/PublicSearch>



Florida Abuse Hotline



Florida's Abuse Hotline offers 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.

- Dial 1-800-96-ABUSE or 1-800-962-2873.
- Visit www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse.

Florida's Early Steps Directory

Statewide information and referral services for families of children with disabilities and special health care needs. Resource specialists provide answers and/or possible choices for services in your community.

- Dial 1-800-218-0001.
- Visit <http://bit.ly/1HhSjOy>.

Information and Resources

Florida KidCare

Health insurance program for uninsured children younger than age 19.

- Dial 1-888-540-5437 | TTY 1-877-316-8748.
- Visit www.floridakidcare.org.

2-1-1

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.
- Visit www.211.org.

Transition to Kindergarten



When families are actively engaged in their child's transition to a new learning program, the child performs better socially and academically. This is especially

important in the transition from VPK to kindergarten in order for the child to feel safe and secure. Children whose families learn about the new school setting, school policies, and have positive relationships with the teachers and other school staff show greater school readiness, less stress at the beginning of school and stronger academic growth during the school year. Here are some resources to help with the transition.

Office of Early Learning

Find resources online to support children and their families during the VPK to kindergarten transition.

- Visit <http://bit.ly/2f4OA9L>.

Transition to Kindergarten Resources

National Association for the Education of Young Children

NAEYC promotes high-quality learning for all children, birth through age 8 and has family resources to help make the transition less stressful.

- Visit <http://bit.ly/1nDBgKO>.

Ready Freddy – Pathways to Kindergarten Success

Suggestions for parents to help their child be successful in kindergarten.

- Visit www.readyfreddy.org/for-parents.

Reading Rockets

Articles and tips for parents and educators, monthly e-newsletter and more to help children be successful learners.

- Visit <http://bit.ly/2g0icqK>.

Head Start Transition to Kindergarten

The Office of Head Start promotes school readiness for young children and supports mental, social and emotional development of children from birth to 5. Head Start offers a wide variety of transition resources for parents and teachers.

- Visit <http://bit.ly/2fABZPn>.

Parent Toolkit

Useful tips and tools to support the growing child at all ages, parents will find ways to support their child during kindergarten.

- Transition to Kindergarten: <http://bit.ly/1kDAUnW>.
- Kindergarten Growth and Development: <http://bit.ly/2fJIfSJ>.



Florida VPK

What is VPK?

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program is a free educational program that helps your 4-year-old be ready for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Why is it important?

Statistics show children who complete VPK are much better prepared for kindergarten than those who do not attend.



Who is eligible?

Any child living in Florida while attending VPK, even one who is living here temporarily.

Contact Us

250 Marriott Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Toll-free: 866-447-1159
TTY/TTD: Dial 711
Email: VPKquestions@oel.myflorida.com
Web: www.FloridaEarlyLearning.com



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