

The Origins of Early Head Start

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start! Happy February. It is time, once again, for a monthly vlog for you. And as I said in January, we are going to spend a lot of time in 2020 celebrating Early Head Start. Early Head Start turns a quarter-century this year. Twenty-five years of Early Head Start. And so, we want to make sure we pay special attention to Early Head Start and its uniqueness, and also tie it into what Head Start does already.

But before we get started, in tradition, we've got our love note and we are focusing on Early Head Start programs with our love notes this year. So, this month's love note goes to LEADS Community Action Agency, ABC Nursery in Ohio. This is a program that serves incarcerated women and it is only one of only eight programs in the country where the children actually stay with their mothers who are incarcerated, which is, we know that time with the baby is so important.

So, the fact that they're not separating the babies from the mothers is a really big deal. And ABC is key in helping to facilitate all of that. And not only are they doing the typical Early Head Start programming, but they are working with those moms so that when they are released and they're going back to the community, that they have some transitional support for both their child and for themselves, so that it's a smoother transition for everybody. So, I thought this was a really great example of what Early Head Start can do to both influence the development of a baby and also to help mom, which, of course influences the development of the baby.

Now, you might be wondering why I'm not by myself. OK, here's the thing. I think my knowledge of Early Head Start is what I would call limited, and, you know, I want to make sure that we're really paying tribute, so I brought my friend, Amanda, with me this month, who knows everything there is to know about Early Head Start. OK, just about.

Amanda Bryans: And you did have four babies, so you're probably a little bit more of an expert than you're reflecting.

Deborah: OK, I had four babies. That's true.

Amanda: Yeah.

Deborah: But programmatically. OK, so I want to make sure we cover all the bases. So, I asked Amanda if she'd join me, and I'm gonna ask her some questions and we're just gonna have a dialogue this month, a little bit different, so that we can really highlight particularly the early development piece of Early Head Start. So, before we get started, or as we get started, we want to talk about the research. You know, Early Head Start's been around since the 90s. And can you share with us the research behind that and why would we take that step to actually expand Head Start to pregnant moms and beyond?

Amanda: That is great question, and I think that everyone in our community can really feel proud about how much the program works to incorporate what the research is telling us and to use that to drive constantly improving services. And in the early 90s, it was just the tip of the iceberg emerging about how much human development and brain development happens

during those earliest weeks and months and years of life. And as we were starting to really see that research, there was an advisory panel and a report and they said, "Hey Head Start, what you're doing for 3- and 4-year-olds is great, but it's late. We need to start earlier with the very youngest babies, even prenatally, and their families to get the biggest, kind of, possible impact we can have on their development in their lives."

So, more and more, we used to think babies didn't feel pain. People had no idea of all of the things that were happening for them and that it's incredible explosion of neurons and connections and exposure to language and all of the things that are happening. And understanding the role of the relationship that the baby has with the people around it who are taking care of it and how influential that is was critical part of, kind of the underpinnings of Early Head Start and it's just continued to grow.

Deborah: You know what's really interesting about that? I was just reading an article today about pre-K and public schools and that whole piece and actually, in the article it said it's great that public schools are starting to embrace 4-year-olds, that they really aren't starting early enough. It needs to start at birth, so I think we may have started something that might be ... I mean, wouldn't that be crazy? If you're actually starting to think of public school being birth until 12th grade.

Amanda: It's amazing, and there are things that I think we in Head Start have learned through our work with Early Head Start that will improve what we do with preschoolers.

Deborah: Yeah, that's so exciting.

Amanda: So, we worried a lot about pushing down too much, but on the other side there's this knowledge, understanding about the importance of continuity, connection, relationships between children and parents and children and teachers, that's really, I think, helped us do even better in Head Start, as well as doing more if we're doing Early Head Start.

Deborah: So, is that part of Baby Faces? The stuff you were just sharing, like that knowledge base that we've been building. Is that a big piece of the Baby Faces study?

Amanda: Some of the Baby Faces has reflected that and some of even the earliest research we did, right from when Early Head Start was implemented, we had an impact study in it. It told us things about, you know, the importance of that long-term connection between children and adults, and other things that we weren't expecting, like if a program offers more than one option, it has better outcomes. And we think that might be because you can better align the option that parents need, which is something we sort of always intuitively thought, but we actually found evidence of that.

Deborah: And isn't that kind of true about all of it? I mean, if you had asked a mom 100 years ago, does birth to 3 matter? They probably would've said yes, because intuitively, you kinda knew it. But when the research backs it up, it just—it just changes. It's a game-changer. So, do you think ... What parts of Early Head Start are actually cutting-edge now?

Amanda: I think it continues to be cutting-edge kind of across the board. One of the most important things that we've done is the, kind of recognizing that babies need playful, intentional teaching. It's not flashcards. In one of my earliest talks, I was talking about

curriculum in Early Head Start, and one of the people in the audience stood up and got a great laugh by saying, "What are you gonna do? Put flashcards over the cribs?" No, that's not what it looks like, but it does mean we're talking to babies when we go through the daily routine. We're associating words, we're exchanging looks, we're practicing turn-taking in conversation, we're supporting their physical development by making sure they're not spending the whole day in a—in a convenience carrier, or a car-seat kind of thing, or a bouncy seat. All of those interactions and supports we're providing are intentional, and planned, and reflect each child's development so that you can kind of keep upping the ante.

Deborah: I think it's the intention. Right? Being intentional about what you do. You know, you reminded me of an Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership that I visited, and it was actually also in a women's prison. And the director had been at that facility for a very long time, long before the Early Head Start partnership, and she said, "If you had been here prior, you wouldn't recognize this place. That before, it was more about just care. You know, just, you're safe, you're fed."

Amanda: You're in a crib. You're in a—Yep.

Deborah: I mean, they were loved. Exactly. But now, their day is so intentional and there are real purpose behind everything that they do. So, what you're saying really resonates with me, just in the little experience I've had visiting those centers. Do you have a favorite age or stage if you think about development?

Amanda: Well, that's really hard. I love children. I love them from birth to early adulthood, I really do. I like pregnant women a lot, too. It's just so fascinating.

Deborah: My adult kids are great!

Amanda: I know! I don't want them to change, but every day ...

Deborah: OK, so I'm gonna make you pick, then. Let's say birth to 3, Early Head Start. [Inaudible] If right now, I could hand you a child, what would make you happiest?

Amanda: Well, right now? Right now in the federal ... I would want a baby. A little sweet-smelling, melt in your arms, look in your eyes, think you're the most wonderful thing, little, tiny baby.

Deborah: I'm with you. I love holding babies.

Amanda: I love the potential. I just saw a quote—

Deborah: They can even cry. It's fine; yeah it's fine.

Amanda: It's fine. I'm a good juggler.

Deborah: Me, too.

Amanda: But, you know, I just had this quote. Pat McMahon our TA lead showed me about every baby, the miracle that is represented by every baby who's—who's born. And I was so moved by that. And I just want us to feel that potential for every single infant, toddler, and preschooler who walks through our doors. So, they are a complete and total miracle.

Deborah: So, on that note then. What would you tell our Head Start community if you had your wish for them, especially those participating in Early Head Start or may be even thinking about it. You know, there may be new opportunities for folks to get in at Early Head Start if they're not doing it already. What would be your wish for those programs and those children?

Amanda: I want our teachers and our staff to see themselves as consummate professionals. I want them to know and to be respected and regarded for the incredible work that they do. The challenges, the influence that they have. You know, my own children went to child care when they were very young, and I went back recently and visited with my son. And I said to those teachers, "You are part of this child, you helped raise him. What he is and what he will become is partly because of what you invested in him." It is an incredible honor, and I just want people to feel so proud and filled up with that opportunity. Even though I know it is really, really hard on a day-to-day basis. But it is a professional job that you do that requires not just ... It requires education, right? And background and experience, but it also requires this kind of, your characteristics of—of joy, of connection, of relationships, and kind of a belief in the potential of the human being. So, that's what I hope for. How about you?

Deborah: That's a pretty good hope. I was ... It's funny, when I asked you that question I was answering it in my head, and I was thinking, and it probably is connected, that what I really wish is that for all of our Early Head Start teachers, that they wake up every day, so excited to go to work, because you have the greatest job. We are honored to have you doing that job and those children and families are so fortunate to have you in their lives. So, that's very connected, right?

Amanda: That's it.

Deborah: So, before we go, we have an if you didn't know it already, so I'm going to let you share this one. We've only been doing Early Head Start officially since 1995. And it doesn't get the majority of our funding. But how many children have we touched?

Amanda: We started in 1995, very small. We've had waves ever since, and as of 2019, 3 million children and families have gone through Early Head Start. Thanks to all of you.

Deborah: Three million. That's fantastic. So, we're going to close with our traditional saying. Remember, Head Start is access to the American dream. Help me with this one.

Together: Go make dreams happen! Bye!