

## Supporting Children Experiencing Trauma

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello, Head Start and welcome to my March vlog. I'm super excited this month to be here with my friend, Sangeeta. She's joining me because we are going to dedicate this month's vlog to the issue of trauma. And as you know, because Early Head Start turns 25 years old this year, all of the vlogs are going to have a little bit of an extra umph around infants and toddlers. So, this month will be no exception. And what we're hoping is to give some guidance and some context to an issue that has really become very important throughout the country, but certainly within the environment of Head Start.

So, before we get started—we always start with a love note. So, I'm going to start with this month's love note. And it's a little bit different. This is more of a memorial love note. As some of you may know, Ron Lally passed away earlier this year. And he was integral in Early Head Start work, infants and toddlers, and spent decades contributing to the field, really influencing Head Start and Early Head Start. His work still exists, the Early Essentials, and many, many other pieces you can access online. And I think even Early Head Start still feels that work, that he sort of, the road that he paved. So, we want to just, you know, our love note today is not so much a shout out as it is a memorial recognition of a lifetime of work. So, excited to do that.

And now we're going to move on to our topic. As I said, we're going to talk about trauma. And we've talked a lot about this, and we decided that we would do a campaign this year.

Sangeeta Parikshak: That's right!

Dr. Bergeron: So, we've decided #HeadStartHeals will be our campaign, so that we can raise the issue of trauma. And how to cope as a professional. And we know that Head Start has, is kind of uniquely positioned to deal with trauma, to deal with the impacts that it's having both on programs, on families, the whole nine yards. And so, I'm excited for you to be with me here today. She's my pro.

Sangeeta: I'm excited too.

Dr. Bergeron: So, you want to start off and just share with folks kind of the foundation.

Sangeeta: Sure, yeah, so, Head Start Heals really came about because we were doing these regional events related to opioid misuse. And there's a lot of overlap between substance use disorder and trauma, as we all know. And so, we realized in all these regional events that actually, people were saying, you know, "that just being a part of Head Start," a lot of parents were saying, "just being a part of Head Start, makes me feel like I am able to cope better. It helps me with my healing process," hence, Head Start Heals, right?

Dr. Bergeron: Uh huh.

Sangeeta: So, one of the things that we've been trying to do just as we are kicking off this campaign, and we're hearing a lot around trauma and trauma-informed care, is really coming up with, kind of, "what is trauma?" Making sure that everyone in Head Start knows what we're talking about. Because, you know, trauma and traumatic experiences and trauma-informed

care, all of those different terminologies can be a little confusing. And so, what we are focusing on is, we're aligning with SAMSA and their trauma guidance documents around the "Three E's."

Dr. Bergeron: OK.

Sangeeta: OK. So, the "Three E's" are: The event, the experience, and the effect of trauma. And so, oftentimes, we feel a little bit like, "what can we do; this child or this family has gone through so much. This event is really overwhelming. We can't change what happens to that child."

But, actually, what is I think is heartening about the research, and all the research around trauma-informed and trauma-informed approaches, is that it's all about the experience, what the child experiences.

Dr. Bergeron: OK.

Sangeeta: And so, the event can be something like a car accident, right? And so, if the child is witnessing a car accident or is in the car accident, that experience is different, right? And that changes the effect. But if you have that experience and you are in a program like Head Start, where you are surrounded by stable, nurturing caregivers, you know what your predictable routine is, and all of those things, then that experience and the effect really changes, right? So, you feel like, "OK, I went through this, but I have a stable, nurturing environment to go back to." So, that's how we think about trauma. And that's how Head Start plays such a big role. Early childhood plays a big role. But particularly, Head Start because Head Start is comprehensive in nature.

Dr. Bergeron: Right. So, that is really heartening. So, what we're saying is: We can—we can have these environments, or experiences, or events that are traumatic, but we actually are empowered at Head Start and Early Head Start to make a difference for those families. That's very exciting, especially, in light of the fact that we do see quality funding coming from the budget that's going to allow folks to look at their own programs and decide how can I best enhance the already nurturing environment that I'm providing. So, that's something for you all to think about, of course, and I'm sure you are.

And you know, one of things, you—you gave all these different terms around trauma. I think it's important also to note that we have a tendency to latch onto to something and it becomes kind of a buzz word. And it makes me a little nervous. Because what happens is, I know, from being in the field, from being a teacher, from being an administrator, that when you have a challenge, you want to find a solution. And you kind of can get hit from all directions with providers of solutions, of programs and it can be easy to latch on to one. And what we want folks to do is to be really careful about that, right? You know, think it through. Those kinds of programs can come in pretty packages. And if you unwrap it, inside, meh, it might be helpful, it might not be. So, to be really thoughtful.

I think the key to what you were just saying, that really strikes me is creating a nurturing environment: We're built for that. So, it's just really looking at what you're doing now and how can you take it to the next level for certain children and their families?

Sangeeta: Right. Yeah.

Dr. Bergeron: I love that. I love that. That's great. So, in many ways, we're really not talking about like flipping the model upside-down. We're really talking about changing the way we look at things.

Sangeeta: Absolutely. Yes. Yes.

So, when we're talking about trauma and trauma-informed approaches, what we're really talking about is changing the way we think about a child, with challenging behaviors, for example. Looking at that child and saying instead "what's wrong with you?" to saying "what happened to you?" Oftentimes, when it comes to trauma and mental health, we think, "oh, we need to actually take this child out of the classroom and help them."

But actually trauma-informed approach is about changing the way the entire way we look at the child, not necessarily having to change your environment around them. But realizing that the environment is already built to be trauma-informed, and like you said, just kind of upping it for it.

Dr. Bergeron: I love that you brought that up. It makes me think about my work as a K-12 administrator. Because one of the toughest things that you kind of have to manage is of course, classroom management, behaviors, discipline, whatever you want to call it. And I found the most effective thing I could do was just to support teachers in how they looked at what was going on in their classroom. Not at how they responded to it. I didn't go to, "you should act this way." It was more, "can you look at that child and instead of looking at looking a bad behavior, look at a behavior that is serving that child to some extent." It is providing some kind of service to that child. And if it's not in line with what you need from him or her, then you ask yourself, "what's motivating that and what can I do to be better service, so that behavior doesn't have to happen?"

And that's kind of complicated. But the idea is kind of what you said. It's not looking at the child and the behavior and labeling it, "bad behavior" or "challenging behavior." It's—it's looking at it and thinking, "I have an opportunity to actually provide support for this child. What can I do to do that?"

Sangeeta: Right. And all of the things you just hit on are part of a trauma-informed approach. So, trauma-informed approach is really about, you know, realizing the prevalence of trauma is out there, recognizing the signs and the symptoms of trauma, knowing how to respond, and then, in the end, making sure that you don't do anything to retraumatize the child.

And you know, I was a mental health consultant in the Head Start program. And so, I did what you are saying: It's go in and talk with the teachers and say, "maybe you can change the way the classroom is set up a little bit. Have a cool down corner that's a little bit more central, so the kid doesn't feel like they're isolated." And those types of things. And so—and so, all the things that you just talked about is all part of a trauma-informed approach. So, if you're already doing that, that's wonderful. Right? So, you don't have to feel you have to revamp the whole thing.

Dr. Bergeron: And I think also, like the simplest message I used to give teachers is just don't take it personally. I think sometimes behaviors, we feel them as if they're a projection of our

own ability to teach, or ability to manage kids, or "I'm doing something wrong." And instead, just let go of that and understand that you're—you're running this very complex little human environment in the classroom. It's OK, like you can relax. And then, your body language is different, your tone of voice is different, and then children will respond differently when those things are calm.

Sangeeta: That's so true. Right? And so that's going to be a big part of our Head Start Heals campaign is staff wellness. Right? So, we're going to be focusing on, how do you make the environment a little bit more calmer, how can you allow children to express their natural feelings without going out of control. But really how can you take of yourself so you can do all of those things for the kids. Right?

Dr. Bergeron: That's right. And for leadership, I would say, that's also then leadership making sure they're taking care of their staff. So, if you know that things are, it's a long day in a particular environment, you probably need some built-in breaks for those teachers. They can recharge, and get back in the classroom, and not feel like it's a—it's a game of survival from morning till afternoon. That's never a good space to be in.

Sangeeta: And I do feel like your love notes that you do at the beginning of every vlog is a perfect example of how you take care of all of us. Yeah!

Dr. Bergeron: Oh, yeah! That's great! So, you could do love notes.

Sangeeta: There you go!

Dr. Bergeron: Every Monday. Love note for your staff! [Laughter] I love it. That's great! So, I'm assuming that, I mean we've already got a lot of resources, right? Maybe, we can connect folks to some resources that they might not have known about.

Sangeeta: Yeah, so I will be directing you guys to SAMSA's website. We're partnering very closely with them. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, it's all free resources. We're going to put them on the ECLKC. Kind of cross-reference them, as well. We have a lot of great resources that we're bundling together on the ECLKC. But you need to go under the "Mental Health" section to go to the "Trauma" section, as well. And there will also be a section for "Substance Misuse." It's all very much intertwined.

Dr. Bergeron: I love that. And I will say, I will often talk to public schools and guide them to ECLKC. This is free! Don't go buy a new program for 3- and 4-year-olds. You've got it right here! It's paid for by the public. It's open to you. So, I'm going to say the same thing to Head Start. SAMSA stuff is yours. Don't go buy a new program that'll tell you to do what SAMSA will tell you to do for free. Look at what you can get for nothing, and then look at what you could spend your dollars on to really make them go further. That's great.

So again, it's #HeadStartHeals. So that's our Twitter, that's our way on Twitter of kind of promoting this and lifting it up. This will be a little bit different. What could you share on Twitter that would highlight this? You could share a training that you're doing. You could share a new idea in one of your classrooms. Like you were saying, moving the break, like the brain break center, instead of being in the corner where it feels like I'm being punished to the middle of the room. Like that's an idea that maybe folks haven't thought of. So, if you think you've got

this really cool approach to just one specific thing, snap a picture or a video, put it on Twitter, and #HeadStartHeals and we'll start to collect all these resources for everybody to share.

Sangeeta: I'm just real excited to read what everybody is doing.

Dr. Bergeron: I know. Me too.

Sangeeta: And whatever questions come through, too.

Dr. Bergeron: And you know there are all these creative ideas out there.

Sangeeta: Yes! Yes!

Dr. Bergeron: And that's the beauty of what we do. We get to take all of them and put them in one place. Not very many programs get to do that. So, we're excited about that. So, keep us posted. And remember ...

Sangeeta and Dr. Bergeron: Head Start is access to the American Dream. Go make dreams happen.