

## **Strengthening Partnerships to Support Babies with Special Needs**

Narrator: Parenting, it's the ultimate journey. From the moment one learns they are going to be a parent to the first time they look into their child's eyes and as they continue to bond, parents are the most influential people in a child's life. Together, parents and children experience joy and face challenges. Together they learn and discover. With a parent's care, children can feel safe, secure, and confident as they grow, learn, and explore. As Early Head Start staff, we are partners with parents on their journey. It's our role to seek out ways to support families while continuing to respect, acknowledge, and appreciate their varied emotions and feelings before and after their baby arrives. Every child is a unique individual and every family's story is different.

Parenting can be an all-encompassing experience, one that may feel more challenging with the discovery that the child has unique developmental needs. Receiving a diagnosis of a developmental disorder can be a very sensitive time for families. Learning that a child has special needs can be sudden, unexpected, and bring many strong emotions. Some families learn that their child will face developmental challenges before they are born. Some may learn at birth, while others may have concerns later on. Many families find themselves looking for concrete answers and timelines, answers that aren't easy to come by, especially in the beginning. Parents may find themselves in a state of confusion or even disbelief. Some will sense something feels different about their child but may have a hard time convincing others. Sometimes a diagnosis confirms what they've already known or felt and brings some relief and a welcomed sense of direction. They may be eager to develop a therapy and intervention plan.

Some families may focus on each day and task, gradually moving forward. Others need time and to take stock, find their strength, and reach out to their support networks before they move ahead. While a professional's focus may be on the child with special needs, a parent's attention may need to be focused more broadly, on the needs of the entire family. The collective needs of a family may not be apparent or easily recognized. Families are the true experts. The rest of us only see snapshots of the child's life abilities and challenges. Parents want the best for their child. We need to rely on parents' unique insights to truly work together. One thing is clear, nothing can prepare any parent for the unexpected news that their child has a special need.

Early care and education programs and staff like those in Early Head Start, are prepared to empower parents and families to develop positive relationships with and advocate for their children. Families will find joy and optimism. They are resilient and will strive to do what is best for their child. Celebrating achievements together and providing guidance and encouragement can increase the family's tenacity and build confidence. With early Head Start staff, parents can find courage, strength, and a powerful new network. Together, we can provide the personalized care that best supports each child and family's unique needs. With a focus on high quality and inclusive early childhood education in a warm and nurturing relationship-based environment, EHS delivers programs and services that support the physical, social, emotional cognitive, and language development of children. Go online and learn more about the Early Head Start programs in your community.