

Home Visitors Help

[Music]

Amanda Perez: Hi. This is Amanda Perez from the Early Head Start National Resource Center talking today about home visitors. Home visitors play a crucial role in the work of Early Head Start programs. If you are a home visitor, I don't have to tell you that your job is really tough, and really important. Home visitors help. How do we know?

First, we know because the research says it's true. The longitudinal Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project found that, even as Early Head Start graduates enter fifth grade, families who participated in home-based programs had fewer symptoms of depression, less family conflict, and higher family incomes. Wow!

The second way that we know that home visitors help is that we hear it from families, and they say it loud and clear. For the past several years at the Birth To Three Institute, I've talked with families about their experiences in Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs. Every family story is different, of course, but over the years we've heard some consistent messages. Many families have talked about how important you are to them. So let's hear now what they have to say.

Sara Villavicencio, a mom from California, found herself and her three young children in a shelter after leaving a violent relationship. At first, Sara didn't even want Dora, her home visitor, in her home, much less in her life. She describes how Dora eventually broke through:

[Video begins] Sara Villavicencio: And then, like I said, I really didn't know how to raise the kids; I just knew the basics. And one thing that they – she did teach me is something called Floor Time. And that's one of the visits that I really dreaded, because I'm like, "Wait a minute. I have to let you in. On top of that, I have to sit on my floor?" [Laughter] You know, can I just watch you?" And she's like, "No. You need to sit down here. You are not going to give up on your kids." And I'm like, "Fine." And after awhile, I got it. You know, I got what it took to make them successful and see how happy they were when you engaged them. [Video ends]

Amanda: We know that the parent-child relationship is critical to the long-term success of that baby; but sometimes, especially when families are stressed, family members can feel disconnected from one another. Through your work, you support those positive parent-child relationships. Home visitors help. But it's hard to help families build that relationship with children when they don't know what it means to be cared for themselves.

Jayson Farris, a father from New York City, got involved with Early Head Start when his third daughter was born. He wasn't sure how to be a dad, he said, or to show people that he cared. I asked him about his experience in a home-based Early Head Start program:

[Video begins] Jayson Farris: What drew me in was the honesty. I mean, you can tell when someone's really sincere or they really do care. You know when someone is faking it to make it. And it's like, "You know what? I really don't have time for you, so, you know, this little

relationship that you're trying to build is over." But it – it was just the honesty, the sincerity.
[Video ends]

Amanda: Families need to know that they are genuinely respected and cared for so that they can offer respect and care to their children. In your work, you build trusting relationships that families can rely on. Home visitors help. And when families know that home visitors care, home visits can be a bright spot in difficult times.

Lynda Thomas is raising two grandchildren in Washington State. When the children came to her, so did Early Head Start, and at first she didn't know what to make of it or of her home visitor, Vikke. Over time, their relationship grew. When I asked Lynda what it means that Vikke comes every week, this is what she said:

[Video begins] Lynda Thomas: Well, it's huge. I – I said Vikke – Vikke is – has become a part of my heart, not just my head. She's a person that I can depend upon now to be there every week. That when – when a crisis happens in my life or something's going on, she's that person that I know I – I'm going to see on Thursday afternoon at 4:00. And I can hold myself together until I can see Vikke and talk about some of these issues. [Video ends]

Amanda: We know that parenting and grand-parenting can be very isolating. In your work, you promote family well-being. Home visitors help. And as home visitors grow those relationships with families, families have the extra support they sometimes need to be their children's best advocates.

After Tatum Coleman and her family enrolled in Early Head Start, her son Gavin was diagnosed with autism – over and over. But Tatum and her home visitor, Barb, just didn't feel comfortable with that diagnosis. Barb brought Tatum more and more information, and continued to help her set up evaluations for her son. Finally, an early intervention provider confirmed what Tatum and Barb suspected, that Gavin had a visual disability. At Birth To Three, Tatum shared the power of that experience:

[Video begins] Tatum Coleman: [Sobbing] You don't know what it's like. It's so hard not to have people that are professionals in your corner. They – they get so – you know, they go so book-wise, and they don't – they don't hear you after a while. And then they're like, "Well, you wouldn't know. I had the education. I know; you don't." And that's wrong, because I knew what was wrong with my son and they should've trusted that. And Birth To Three, Early Head Start, Head Start trusted that. [Video ends]

Amanda: Families need advocates who recognize their expertise and support their learning about their child. Through your work, you celebrate families as their children's lifelong educators and advocates. Home visitors help.

Families remind us that home visitors use lots of tools to do their work – curricula, resources, materials, including egg cartons. But the most important tool you use isn't on paper, or the computer, or in your supply closet. It's the caring, respectful, trustworthy, consistent relationship you build with a family. Home visitors help.

Yvonne Andersen described herself as young and angry when she got involved in the Early Head Start program in her community in Nevada. Over time, the program won her over, and she really wanted you to know:

[Video begins] Yvonne Andersen: I just want to say really quickly, thank you – all of you. You may not think it, you may not see it at that particular moment in time, but what you do will have an impact on these children and the families. It may not be immediate, but it will, in time, have a very positive outcome whether you experience that with them or not. So just keep that in mind when you're having those difficult times and you're having those situations where you're not sure if it's working; it's working. [Applause] [Video ends]

Amanda: So, we know you do things as a home visitor that might surprise you, that you never imagined, and we know it is not always evident that families are benefiting from the services you provide. But over time, we see and celebrate the impact of your work in the connections families make to their community, in their engagement in the program, in their wellness, and in those crucial relationships with their babies. Home visitors help. Thank you for all that you do.

This is Amanda Perez at the Early Head Start National Resource Center wishing you all the best in your tough, very important work.