

Charting the Course for Parent and Family Engagement in Head Start Forum, Washington, DC: Parent Interview:  
Darrin Jackson

(links for viewing and download at end of transcript)

Darrin Jackson: Hi, my name is Darrin Jackson and I'm Head Start. Some of -- some of the people that know me, relatives, you know, other women, they would see me and say, "Why don't you put your kids in Head Start?" And I said, okay, and I looked around for Head Start and I found, I guess, the -- the preschools and the day care. I didn't know the difference. And they told me it was like \$180 a child, and that was -- I thought about that, you know. That's basically \$200, \$600 a week, \$2400 a month. That was a problem for me, you know. And -- and so I just kind of let -- let it go. But then people still kept coming to me, telling me about Head Start.

And finally -- eventually, I got the right number and -- and -- and -- and I got this Head Start, and it just really changed our lives -- me and my kids' lives. You know, they first contacted me and said, "Well, in order to get in Head Start, there's requirements you have to go through. Your kids need medical exam, they need dental exam, and, you know, who's your doctor?" And all this other kind of stuff. And I'm going to be honest with you, I didn't have medical for my kids.

You know, by me having a disability, I couldn't get health insurance for myself, you know. They -- they -- they -- they gave me Medicare, but that doesn't cover my kids, and that's expensive for me, too. I -- I really didn't know, and so I -- I -- I didn't have anything for my children, so they never went to the doctor. To me, every -- every time I went to the doctor, that was like \$200 or more per child. And that was just out of the range for us. And -- and then they says, "Well, don't worry about that, we -- we -- we know where a clinic is. You take your kids to this clinic. We have doctors, we have dentists, we have everything you need."

So I took my children to this clinic, and I was overwhelmed by the amount of support that was there. And again, it gave me a sense of relief because, even though I said my kids are healthy, you're still always wondering whether they're sick or not. And -- and -- you know, and I was worried about the swine flu and all the other kind of things, and they diagnosed my kids as being healthy. And -- and then, I -- I never gave my kids shots but -- you know, and I felt kind of bad, my kids had to get, like -- some of them got like 13 shots at once.

Then... And -- and -- and -- but they -- they -- the Head Start called and assured that I had a healthy family, and -- and when I wasn't able to do that, or when I didn't have the knowledge, they provided a means and a resource and corrected the situation for me. And this was before I -- I even became a part of the program. I wasn't even approved into the Head Start program. They just seen me as an individual in the community coming to apply, and they cared about the -- the -- the well-being of my children, you know. And they was totally supportive.

And so, now that I got the physicals and everything for my kids and -- and their health is -- was assessed, they actually got accepted towards the program. Now, two of my kids was old enough to go, you know, but my baby, he was too young for the Head Start, and there's a waiting list and everything else. But, I took my two kids to this program and -- and what happened after I start taking them, Head Start didn't leave me alone as -- as a father, you know.

They -- they was -- they was sending my kids home with packets every day of a little information -- brush their teeth. I -- I -- I didn't think it was important for kids to brush their teeth. When I was a kid, I didn't go to the dentist. I figured their teeth was just going to fall out anyway and -- and I didn't have medical insurance, so why even be bothered with the process? But Head Start, not only did they educate me about the need for my kids to brush their teeth, they actually brought somebody in there to varnish the teeth of all the kids to keep them from having cavities -- didn't charge me anything, you know.

This -- this -- this was, like, amazing. And -- and -- and I'm gonna tell you part of the story. Part of the medical

examination, they -- they had to see a dentist. The dentist said, "Well, this son has a cavity and this one has a cavity, so it needs to be fixed." Well, I told you, I didn't have medical insurance. So as my kids were going through the program, they kept asking me about this dental. And, you know, I'm a man, you know, I'm not gonna say I don't have no -- I can't afford it or anything like that.

I just tried to let it just go and -- and they kept at me, and finally when they saw that I wasn't gonna get my dental, they called me into the office and said, "We have a dental program right over here, A-Plus Dental. We're gonna call the office. We -- we made a appointment for you. Take your kids over there." They took my kids over there, they got their cavities filled, and my kids loved it. They wanted to go back to the dentist, you know. So -- and I'm saying, it's like they took care of me and they still -- as I got through the program.

Well, another thing that happened when -- when my kids were in the program, they were coming home saying new things like, "Daddy, today is Wednesday." Or, while I was making them something to eat, my son said, "Daddy, I want seven nuggets." And then I put seven nuggets, he went down there and counted, went 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. My kids never displayed these type of actions and activities before they went to Head Start. Then after they finished eating, they got up and started cleaning up the table. I mean literally, picking their plates up, putting their stuff in the trash, trying to go to the sink and wash their dishes.

They never displayed these type of activities until they went to Head Start. And I'm like, "Hmm," you know, it really made me think, 'cause I -- prior to Head Start, I said, well, as long as my kids know their ABCs and they knew them well, they was -- they were good. I never thought about the socialization skills and the application of the knowledge that the Head Start gave to my children, you know. And then they allowed the Head Start to tell you, "Well, come out to the classroom" with these little papers. And so I come to the classroom, and then they said, "Come inside, come stay."

And so I'm sitting in the classroom, and now -- now I'm starting to see why my kids are doing these things, you know. The Head Starts, they -- they give your kids nutritional meals and then they -- they -- they -- they had the kids clean up, they had the kids wash their hands. They -- they teach my kids these skills that, you know, like I said, I just didn't even realize. Another thing that I -- I realized that I didn't realize was that my kids was sitting up into the table and they had them cutting paper and drawing. My kids didn't know how to color or cut paper, you know.

And I'm not trying to make myself seem like a bad parent or nothing, but, you know, when you got three kids, that, you know, scissors and crayons was a mess, you know. I don't want them cutting up their shirts, the curtain, or to color, so I avoided them type of things. And I didn't realize that that was a skill that my children needed. I actually kind of feel bad because they told me when they go to kindergarten, they will be expected to learn these things. Well, my kids were not ready. If I hadn't of went to Head Start, my kids would have went in kindergarten lookin' like they don't know nothing, you know.

And I know that affects the kids' self-esteem, you know. And that's important for a child to have a good self-esteem, as far as their learning among his peers, and I -- and my kids, you know, they -- they -- they wouldn't of been right. And I appreciate the Head Start for showing that to me. You know, there's so many things they done. And another thing the Head Start did, they was sending home homework packets every day, telling me to read to my kids, and -- you know, it -- it -- you know, my kids actually enjoy that, you know. They -- they enjoy the time. They actually create an atmosphere where I had to do things with my children.

'Cause, like, before Head Start, I was in a rut. I was depressed, you know, "I'm trapped," you know -- you know, "I just -- I'm just here." But they -- they said, "No, do some things with your kids." And another thing that Head Start -- okay -- another thing... Let me -- let me try to speed this up. Oh, it's so much. They -- they invited me to join a Policy Council. So let me skip to the -- to the thing. And -- and -- and it... Basically, they -- they wanted the parents to be involved with the Head Start program. And I thought it was just a thing where they just want us just to sit down, it was like a faïg½ade.

But it just starts -- said in this meeting -- they started discussing budgets, meal, educational material. They -- they broke down a classroom by language, ethnicities. They -- they didn't just make us attend, they said, "Okay, now that we got this kind of people in the classroom, do we have things in the classroom to -- to cater to and facilitate the -- the

learning of these particular kids?" And so -- and I start -- I said, wow, these people actually really care about what's going on with my children's life.

And -- and -- and to sum this up, it -- I -- they also asked me my opinion. And not just my opinion, they asked for my vote, which means if I didn't vote on the item that they were proposing, it was not going to happen. So they actually gave me a real power and control over the -- the education and influence of my child within the program. And it made me feel involved, and it -- it actually gave me something to look forward to.

And then it made me feel like I was giving back, you know, for the things that was done for me in -- in -- in the community. And -- and overall in my life... If I look at my life now, it's a year later -- you know, my kids been in Head Start for a year. Me and my kids smile, we talk, and -- and -- and I know I gotta cut this off. I -- I'm jumping the bandwagon, but I -- I forgot about this. But, no, let me continue on the subject -- we smile, we talk, now we -- I've started doing other volunteer. You know, I said, wow, I do need to get my kids out the house. I put my kids in basketball, then I became the coach. Now my -- I coach basketball every week.

I take them to the game every Saturday. But Head Start is what got me out of my rut to take my kids out to do these things. And not only am I affecting my kids now, I have kids, like little groups of kids -- I done went through four teams already that -- that are influenced by me, you know. They -- when they see me, they remember me, you know, and -- and -- and when I affect their life -- but this is something from Head Start.

And then when my kids go around these kids and I see the other parents, they see that the discipline and the mannerisms and the socialization that my kids have, it -- it's up there, it's high. It's acceptable. My kids actually rub off on them. And parents come to me all the time, "Wow, you got great kids. What are you do?" It was Head Start. I get it all the time: "Your kids are great." Head Start did this for my kids.

Also, I went and enrolled in school last month, you know. I been in school for -- for a month because -- my vision of life ended. And it -- and it -- and it was over with, but Head Start gave me a new vision on life. Now I -- I have to -- before I go, I just want to say this thing. It's about fathers. I don't know if any fathers are listening to this, but you don't really know what it's like to raise a kid and it's -- it -- it's -- it takes a lot of sacrifice and involvement, and I really don't see how somebody could go to bed at night not knowing if their kids eat, you know.

And us as men, we need to take care of our families -- families and not leave it for the women to do by herself, you know. It -- it -- it's stressful, it's time-consuming, and -- and -- and it costs money. And you stopping by every now and then, this -- this -- the visit -- that's not really cutting it. A -- a parent that has a child at home, they -- every day they have to make sacrifices. They say, "I can't get the new this, I can't get the new that, 'cause my kid's gotta eat," and that's not fair to put all that burden on one person. I'm just saying, for me, we need to -- to pick up and -- and -- at the level of men, 'cause a child is important in a man's life.

I mean -- I mean, men is important in the child's life, you know. And we need -- the men to be there, whether you're in the home or not. But don't just have babies and leave it for the mother and say, "Well, she getting the welfare check," or whatever she's doing. No, the kids need you there and you need to help support her because -- even if it's just watching the kids for her for a time. We need to change the view and image of -- of -- of men and -- and -- and make "Daddy" to mean something.

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