

Understanding Early Head Start

(links for viewing and download at end of transcript)

(music) Narrator: What hopes and dreams do we hold for a young child? For her family? For America? It is widely known and accepted that the foundation for learning is set in the first three years of life. Relationships formed with adults during these years set the course for all future development. In 1994, Congress created Early Head Start to take full advantage of the potential for learning and development at the youngest ages.

Narrator: Gayle Cunningham was a member of the Early Head Start Advisory Committee. Gayle: I think if there was any turning point in this country's commitment to infants and toddlers it had to have been the information we were receiving about brain development. It was almost astonishing to realize that in spite of all of our efforts for three- and four-year-old children, very often we were too late because the needs for development, for stimulation, for good growth really came from birth.

(music) Narrator: All children from birth to age three need early child development experiences that honor their unique characteristics and provide love, warmth, and positive learning experiences. And, all families need encouragement and support from their community so they can achieve their own goals and provide a safe and nurturing environment for their very young children.

With these words, the Advisory Committee made the case in 1994 for the formation of Early Head Start. Building on the experience of Migrant and other programs that had served infants and toddlers for many years, Early Head Start was established in 1995. Since that time, it has grown to serve over 55,000 pregnant women and children birth-to-three with comprehensive, full-day year-round services.

These services, which must conform to the Head Start Performance Standards, take place in centers, homes, and a combination of the two, depending on the needs of the family at different points in time. Children can be served through locally designed options which emphasize partnerships with family and center-based child care. In fact, partnerships with child-care providers have become increasingly important as a way to meet the changing child-care needs of families, and to enhance the quality of services.

Early Head Start and community sharing of resources, training, and knowledge, is critical to addressing the serious challenge of building a competent work force for infants and toddlers. From Birmingham, Alabama to Fort Washakie, Wyoming; Flint, Michigan and Denver, Colorado to Fairfax County, Virginia; Early Head Start has made important differences in the lives of babies, families, and communities across America.

Shundra (on cell phone): Ms. Hasberry? I was letting you know that I'm on my way to your house. Ok... all right... see you later - bye bye. Narrator: In Birmingham, Shundra Ptomey and Lequette Hasberry have been working together for two years. Lequette: She had filled out one of our flyers stating that she was interested in the home-based program.

Shundra: She came out and I was two months pregnant when I met her and since then I've been ... her. And since then, she's been there for me, I can go talk to her about anything, and from there we just grew closer to each other. Narrator: During pregnancy and since the birth of her daughter Deeandra, Lequette has provided home-based services and worked with Shundra to support Deeandra's development. Now, Deeandra is transitioning to the Early Head Start center, because Shundra is going to work and attending school.

Lequette: I've had her since she was two months pregnant and now Deeandra is a year old. So, it took some time there. But I think the transitioning is going very well and Shundra knows that I'm there for her. Shundra: It feels great that Ms. Hasberry will be there. Narrator: In the center-based program, Deeandra is thriving. Shundra: I think it's very good the way they care for her on a one-on-one basis.

Narrator: This individualized approach is a key component of Early Head Start. At the program in Fairfax County, Virginia, each child's cognitive development is carefully observed and addressed through an ongoing process of assessment and individualized curriculum activities. Teachers routinely photograph children to inform their decisions how to be most responsive to the learning needs of each child.

Janice: A photograph says a thousand words so from this we not only get information about the little girl's progress; but we also get a lot of information about the little boy and his social play. (children giving dolls a bath in the classroom with a teacher)

Karmentrina (teacher): I might ask them an open-ended question, "What is that?" I might say, "Where's the nose?" If I ask them one day and I might say, "Where's your ear?" and they might look at me like I'm crazy, but I know I've seen them do this - I not only saw them do this, I took a picture of it. Narrator: Based on daily observations, teachers continually adjust the curriculum based on the changing needs of the child.

Ronald: One of the things that Early Head Start is trying to do is to clarify the notion of curriculum for infants and toddlers. For infants and toddlers, you don't take an activity or a game and have them do it for fifteen minutes. So, the curriculum for infants and toddlers is a process of looking to the infant to find out "What are they interested in?" and then setting up the environments and interactions to adapt and expand, and to allow the child to practice on those things.

Narrator: The primary mechanisms to assure quality service delivery from birth to age five are the Head Start Performance Standards. Across the country, Early Head Start programs use the Standards and research that supports them to organize themselves to meet the unique needs of their communities and to deliver important child development, health and family support services.

The Standards also describe the ways parents take on the roles of governance in each program. (music) In Flint, Michigan, at the Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools Early Head Start, the Performance Standards set the framework for the delivery of all services. Emerging literacy and family literacy, nutrition, physical, mental and dental health services, home visiting and community outreach.

Carolyn: I think the Performance Standards are such a valuable tool because, in provision of Early Head Start services, you are really putting together an organization that is as comprehensive and has a depth comparable to any business or human service agency or hospital, for instance, because it's all-encompassing in service to children and families.

And when we see a little child crawl into the lap of an infant teacher and nuzzle up for a story, from a relationship that's been in place for two years now that she's in the toddler room, that child knows that this is her family, knows she's OK and knows that literacy is a wonderful, nurturing part of her life, and that's the Standards coming to life.

Violet: For the first page, you can each take one of the Polaroid cameras, they're all set and ready to go. We'll go into the other room. Take a picture of your child. Try to make it a close-up so their face is big enough so that they'll really be able to see it and recognize themselves in the book. And we'll go do that, and then we'll come back here and put the books together.

Children, when they first, when they first go to school they don't just magically learn to read, ok. They have to have some background knowledge first. They have to know that you turn the pages one at a time, and you do that with practice. It's important when you're working with your child that you try to have fun. Mother: You like it? Son: Look at this - I want to see more.

Mother: OK - we can read it some more. How many kitties are there? How many kitty cats? How many? Son: One, two, three, four. Violet: The family literacy part of the Program Performance Standards is really throughout, they get the immediate feedback from their child of learning, and that's a powerful feeling, when you can actually feel like a teacher of your child and be successful and understand not only what you're doing but why you're doing it.

Narrator: Melinda Baker is a family support visitor. Like other Early Head Start home visitors, Melinda is on the front

lines in working with families under severe stress. In addition to ongoing training experiences, the program sees that Melinda receives support through individual and group supervision offered to home visitors. The group includes mental health coordinator Kelly Dahl. Melinda: I just feel like I'm not getting anywhere. I'm feeling so overwhelmed by it all.

Kelly: I'm an infant mental health specialist, and my role here is to facilitate a reflective supervision group for the home visiting staff. The purpose for doing that is that their job is to provide relationship-based services to families with very young children, and their goal then is to help parents provide those children with supportive and nurturing relationships, and the belief that that's the best way we have, one of the best ways we have of supporting their overall cognitive and physical development as well.

Narrator: In Denver, Colorado, Family Star was one of the first Early Head Start programs funded in 1995. Lereen: When we initially began, it was about a grass-roots effort to close down a crack house in our neighborhood. I was one of those parents who started my career in Family Star as a parent, and realized that in that community there was a bigger statement that had to be made. And we knew we could only do that if we provided infant-toddler care for that community.

Narrator: Since that time, Family Star has developed a rich array of services, one of which focuses on fathers. Mitch (to children): You want to roll down the hill? Come on, let's roll. Ready? Ready? Come on, want to roll down the hill too? Ready? Mitch (to two other men): So I think that's pretty much like my ideas, how we can get them, more families involved, and the dads and so forth.

Craig: I think it's a great idea, Mitch. Third man: I think so too. Craig: I think the goals are to be able to fall in love with their fathers. To really see their dads as one of those sacred teachers in their lives, being the sacred teacher about what relationships are all about. Number one, relationships with that child, that child's relationship with that dad, and that that dad then becomes a model for other dads.

Shelly: Can you call, I'm going to give you the physical therapist's name and number. Can you call and make sure she's on her way, because if not, it helps me know what to do with Rosa. Narrator: One of Family Star's youngest children is Rosa Calderon. Rosa was born with a life-threatening medical condition that requires special attention from teachers and other professionals on staff who work closely with her mother, Yadi Madrano.

Yadi: Rosa's condition is she can't grow. She has a chronic weight loss, and that means that she's never going to get big - she's going to stay the size she is. (11:46) Shelly: She's been here on her back this whole time. Beverly: Rosa's mom just turned 20 this year, this past couple of months and she has a seven-year-old and a three-year-old, and then there's Rosa. And Rosa is a miracle baby.

Narrator: Rosa's primary caregiver is Shelly Navarro. Shelly: That's what I think that I've learned working with Rosa is how amazingly strong she is also, just in that little body and in how far she's come. Narrator: Caring for a child with special needs requires strong partnerships with Part C agencies that identify and serve children with disabilities.

It also requires staff training and support. The teachers work closely with Yadi and with other staff members to create a team that, together, meets Rosa's needs. Mary Ervolina attends the meeting in her role as the mental health specialist on staff. Mary: Well, I think the goals were two-fold for me, with one to provide sort of necessary information and education to the staff and to help to decrease some of the anxiety that they were experiencing.

Narrator: Yani's relationship with Family Star is testimony to the depth and continuity of service Early Head Start provides to families. (music)

Narrator: In Wyoming, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains on the Wind River Shoshone-Arapahoe Reservation, Early Head Start services are shaped to serve the unique needs of this community. With a rich and proud history, and a short walk from the grave site of the legendary Lewis and Clarke guide Sacajawea, Native American infants and toddlers learn and grow in an atmosphere where home culture is valued and celebrated.

A comforting massage is a practice that primary caregiver Sandra Tudsop uses to relax and communicate with a young child. Sandra (to child): Stretch your arms out. Stretch your arms out. Stretch your arms out. You like that, huh?
Narrator: Sandra's talking strengthens Justin's language learning, and builds their relationship. Sandra (to child): All done. All done. All done. We're done! Kiss the baby. Kiss the baby.

Narrator: The learning continues with a soft book. Language and literacy learning with a trusted adult. The Shoshone Tribal Business Council serves as the Early Head Start grantee at Wind River. It provides financial support for teacher certification training, and promotes the hiring of Native American teachers as a way of assuring culturally appropriate learning. Denise: In our centers, all of our teachers are of the native culture. Every single one of them are.

I'm proud to say that all of our teachers have their CDA. Narrator: There are three Early Head Start locations on the Wind River Reservation. Fort Washakie is named for renowned Chief Washakie. John Washakie is a Tribal Council member and Chief Washakie's great-grandson.

John: We do the grant and we offer as much assistance as we can. If it's for someone to show up there, then we'll show up and participate. If it's to build a building, we'll talk about it and if we have the funds, can raise the funds, we generally will build a building. It's whatever we can do.

Raven: Are you ready to go take a nap? Are you ready for a nap? Narrator: Little Raven Limpy is a teacher at the Arapahoe Early Head Start center. Infant Hallie was having difficulty sleeping. In her role as partner with the family, Raven sought help from the home.

Raven: He said that he had a cradle board that was given to her by her great-grandmother and that he put her in there after a feeding, so I asked him if he would bring it in and I would put her in there so that she could have a good nap. I sang to Hallie a lullaby that was sang to me by my grandmother. The cradle board is that security and comfort and so when she's in there it's not like a restraint or anything, it's for her needs. Developmentally, she is getting the love and everything with the cradle board she is sleeping.

Ivan: I know we've always held our children as being very sacred to us, as I'm sure every society does. I think there's just great promise for this program in terms of how we want to groom our kids. The benefits are, we're reaping them now but I think that there's a lot more in the future for us. (music)

Narrator: So, does Early Head Start work? The five-year Early Head Start National Study indicates the answer is a resounding "Yes", particularly in those programs that fully implemented the Performance Standards early on. Ronald: One of the fortunate things about Early Head Start is, right from day one, they thought about the research needs. What we found was that those who receive the services did better on measures of cognitive development, language development, and social-emotional development.

What we found is that the child just doesn't do better, the parents had some very nice growth too. They read more to their children, they had a home that was more intellectually stimulating. Daniel: As a public school superintendent, I support Early Head Start because it's the right thing to do. It pays tremendous dividends for our community, for our schools, and more importantly, for the children that are involved in these programs.

Narrator: What is the dream for this child and her family? Gayle: My hope, my dream is that Early Head Start will expand to be half of the entire Head Start program, so that nationally we are helping women in pregnancy, helping women through childbirth and through those first months, and then through the infancy and toddlerhood of their babies and seeing them through into Head Start and on to successful school careers in kindergarten and beyond.

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