

Parent and Family Engagement Outcomes
Head Start Family Engagement Week 2011 – Day 2

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes: Hello. I'm Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Director of the Office of Head Start, and I want to welcome you to Day 2 of Head Start Family Engagement Week. During this week, we are launching the Office of Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

The framework is a technical assistance resource for programs that outlines a research-based approach, a set of strategies, and parent and family engagement outcomes. Our National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement has worked with the Office of Head Start to develop this framework. This fall and in the coming year, the National Center will offer training and resources that flow directly from the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework.

Yesterday, I had a chance to speak with you about the importance of family engagement in Head Start. I shared with you some stories from parents on how Head Start has taught them how to be better advocates for their child's lifelong learning. Today, I'm very excited to be joined here in the studio by two parents; and I'm going to start with Ben and ask them to introduce themselves.

Ben Simon: Thanks, Yvette. My name is Ben Simon. My wife and I live in Arlington, Virginia, where we're foster parents. My foster son's name is Jordan and he's 23 months old, and he -- he goes to the Northern Virginia Family Services Early Head Start.

Yvette: Thanks for joining us, Ben. I really appreciate it. And I want to introduce Brianna.

Brianna Scott: My name is Brianna Scott. I have a 16-month-old daughter. I am on the Policy Council with Campagna Center. I represent Jefferson Houston Early Head Start.

Yvette: Great. Thank you so much, to both of you, for joining us. I really appreciate this. So I want to start a little bit and talk about family engagement. So, Ben, tell us your story about how the -- what the program has done to welcome you and to engage you in the day-to-day.

Ben: Sure, I'll be glad to. So when we talk about engagement and welcoming, I think back to the first -- first day when we took Jordan to Early Head Start. When we got Jordan into our home, he was going to another daycare -- different daycare environment, and the report we would get from that daycare environment was that he was kind of a handful. He always wanted to be picked up, he always wanted attention. And my wife, to her credit, thought we could do better, in terms of -- in terms of child care.

And so, we were fortunate enough to be able to enroll in the Early Head Start; and that first day we dropped him off, pick him up, kind of waiting for this report, and he gets just this glowing report. They -- they -- they love him. He's -- he's... All those -- all those things that the other care provider -- other caretaker would kind of say was kind of a handful, they saw as just huge potential. And from there, how could we not feel welcome? And then, from there, it's just grown.

Yvette: That's great. So, Brianna, you talked a little bit about being on the Policy Council. How did your program engage you to do that?

Brianna: Well, when we first started, I -- you know, the social worker got to know me and we talked a little. Then she said, "Hey, you know they're going to do the elections again for the Policy Council. Hey, you should join." I said, "Okay, well, let's -- let's try that out." I wound up winning and -- for the site and, you know, now I'm representing Early Head Start for Jefferson Houston. And it's a really good, you know -- it's a really good experience with the Policy Council because you get to see not only your child's classroom, but, you know, everybody else's classroom, and you get to know what's going on.

Yvette: That's great. So hearing both of you say that, it sounds like communication played a huge piece in this, from, you know, Ben getting a good report at the end of the day to Brianna, somebody saying, "Hey, we got this Policy Council."

So I guess, Brianna, let's -- let's start with you. Is it also true that your program made it clear to you that it -- that it's important for you to know about the program and know what's working and what's not working and what's -- what's a problem? So, you talked -- that you don't get to just see what happens in your child's classroom, but you get a sense of what's happening throughout your program. How do you share some of this information with the folks in the program?

Brianna: There are the parent -- the monthly meetings that Policy Council... We do kind of run those for, you know, your -- each classroom. We do get to share just a little bit of things. We didn't -- not completely a lot, but they are definitely welcome to talk to us if they have a problem with anything. If the classrooms -- if there's a leak or something, then they tell us and we let, you know, everybody know that, "Hey, look, you know, there's a leak, and we're going to go fix that." And if there's any problem with the children or if there's a problem with the teachers, we definitely are the first ones to know and we definitely will fix it.

Yvette: That's great. So I hear you both talk a lot about your relationship, and I think that that relationship between the caregiver and the child is really important. And, you know, research has shown us a lot that that really is what makes a difference in a child's life. It's the relationship between the caregiver and -- and the parents, whether -- and it determines how well kids are doing.

So, Ben, can you talk a little bit about, in your program, how they have helped to sort of foster the relationship between you and your wife and -- and your foster child, and what the program has done to support you all?

Ben: Sure, sure. I mean, that kind of partnership between -- between the -- the -- the teachers and even the administrators at Head Start and us, I mean, it's just such a powerful thing. And I'll give you -- I'll give you a quick story.

So, a couple weeks ago, go to pick up Jordan and he asked for a cup of water, which is one of the things he's been doing, which is, you know, very good, that he's asking for things now and kind of communicating. And he -- he knocks the water over, and I think he does it on purpose. He's kind of ahead of his time; he's only 23 months, but he's -- he's getting into the terrible twos. And so, the teachers handle this by just saying, "All right, Jordan, here's a paper towel, clean up your mess." He takes the paper towel and, as a -- as a 22-month-old kid would do, tries to clean up his mess.

And it's -- it's stuff like that where, what a powerful and helpful way to teach him about taking responsibility and that what he's done isn't right, and totally appropriate. And it's stuff like that where we're able to learn from the -- the team at Head Start and then use that in -- in our lives and apply that in other ways. So, it's been a very powerful -- very powerful thing, in many ways.

Yvette: That's great. Brianna, can you share a story about something that the program has really done to sort of help you to better support your 16-month-old? Because they're also, you know, running around, really active.

Brianna: You know, they always are good with communication. If anything's happening or even if she has the slightest little fever there, they make sure that, you know -- hey, they're going to call you and say, "Hey, look -- look, maybe, you know, you might want to take her to the doctor." You know, same situation.

You know, I came into the classroom and she will find bottles around the room and give them right to the -- to the babies because she is the oldest in there right now. So, she would just give them to the babies that, you know, which one it belongs to and -- and that was, you know, great. You know, you wouldn't think that, you know, hey -- you know, a 16-, 15-month, would, you know, know whose bottle it belongs to.

Yvette: Yeah, exactly. Well, I really appreciate both of you sharing that with us. You know, I am on this mission for us to tell our story about Head Start, and so I think that these are two very great examples of how Head Start has really supported a positive, loving relationship between you all, as the parents/caregivers, and your children. And it's -- it feels to me and it sounds like you're both very engaged in what your program does every day, and especially in the lives of your -- of your kids.

So, Brianna and Ben, what advice would you give to programs? If you -- you know, we talked about how this is going to be across the country and lots of, not just parents, but staff at local programs are going to see this. What kind of advice would you give to programs in terms of helping them understand how to really engage parents? And I think... You know, Ben, I don't, you know want to -- but, especially for men, I think, and for dads, like what advice would you give to programs about making sure that dads feel like they're a part of what happens?

Ben: I guess -- I guess it would all boil down to trying to form that partnership, and to try to have parents engage and really -- and really make the effort to connect and make the effort to -- to have the lessons

kind of echo each other both at home and at school. I know that one of the joys we would get with Jordan as he was learning to read -- or not read, learning to identify objects -- is that we would have the same books at Head Start that we would at home. He would come home and he would point to, say, a giraffe and say "giraffe," and we'd just be floored because we didn't teach him that word. And he would go to school and point to, say, a gorilla, and they would say, "Well, we never heard him say gorilla." And so when you can form that partnership and when you can form that bond, it's -- it's so powerful.

So, I guess I would just echo keep at it, keep letting parents know the value is there, that it's -- it's more than just a place to -- to drop the kid off and have him be safe and comfortable. Really, it's an opportunity. When you -- when it's -- when it's in sync like that and you have that partnership, it's an opportunity to do amazing things -- go amazing places with that kid.

Yvette: That's great. Brianna, what advice would you give to staff in other programs?

Brianna: Probably about the parent meetings, you know. We want to get as much parents as we can to come.

Yvette: How would you tell staff that they do that? How do you get more parents to come to the meetings?

Brianna: I know it's a bit hard, but I guess you would have to just, you know, kind of stay around the classroom and see if you can find any parents. Or come early in the morning and -- you know, or post something and say, "Hey, look, parents, you know, we're going to have a monthly meeting and we need your participation. And, hey, we're going to have all these fun things, and, hey, maybe we'll have a snack. And we really need a lot of parents."

It's not that easy. I know parents have busy -- you know, jobs, and they're busy, but, you know, I also think that the program could just, you know, kind of spice things up in the meetings. Instead of being just dry, cut, you know, talking, let's, you know, do a little something, maybe with the kids.

Yvette: That's great. So, I'm just feeling like both of your stories are a real, true example of what effective family engagement looks like in our Head Start programs, and I appreciate you sharing that. Especially as the parents of Lauren and -- and Jordan, it sounds like your kids are making amazing progress. And -- and both of you, I think, are amazing parents to give them this opportunity in Head Start programs. I want to thank you both again. This has been really great, to hear your story, and I would just tell you to keep telling your story.

So I want to thank you all for joining us today, and I hope that you'll be able to tune in tomorrow where you'll hear Kiersten Beigel from the Office of Head Start, who will lead a discussion with program staff on the relationship between family engagement and school readiness. Thank you.