

Brenda Jones Harden: Supporting Intentional Interactions in Home Visiting

Jan Greenberg: Brenda, I am delighted to be sitting here with you, having a conversation about the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, or ELOF, and thinking about it as it relates to the work that home visitors do with parents, families, and their children. So, the first thing that I'd like to do is ask you to introduce yourself and to talk about your involvement in work in early childhood and, in particular, with home visitors.

Brenda Jones Harden: Sure. I'm Brenda Jones Harden from the University of Maryland, have been involved in home-visiting work since the late '70s, since I started out as a child-welfare worker, where you did all your work in the home.

More recently, what I've done is really try to look at more of the evidence-based home-visiting models and interventions and try to integrate those within the home-visiting programs that I've worked with and for over the years, including Early Head Start, including some child-welfare home-based programs, as well as some more generic family-support prevention programs.

Jan: Okay, terrific. Thank you. So, going back to the ELOF, we know that the ELOF helps to establish what children should know, and be able to do in preparation for success in school and in life. Why do you think this resource is important for home visitors to know and understand?

Brenda: Well, I am very happy that they've created such a resource and that home visitors have access to it, because I think one of the things that happens for us in our field is that we are pulled in so many directions. So, I think it's a good tool for home visitors to have, to look at when they come in on Monday morning as they're planning their home visits.

But I also think it's a good tool for supervisors to have so that when they sit with home visitors—hopefully every week—and reflect on their cases and reflect on what they've done and reflect on what their assessments have told them about the children in their families, that they are really able to think and plan about "how I can create intentional experiences for children that cut across all these domains," and, more importantly, from my vantage point, that get at the domains where the children are showing that they need some additional support.

Jan: Do you have any suggestions for how home visitors might use the ELOF or the information in the ELOF with families, as they're interacting with families—how this informs that work?

Brenda: Clearly, our goal is to promote child development, just like center-based providers' goals are to promote child development in multiple ways. But we do it through a different mechanism. We do it through, hopefully, coaching the parent to promote specific aspects of child development.

So, as home visitors think and reflect themselves on what they're gonna be doing with their families on a weekly basis, hopefully they can look at this outcomes framework, and think about: "Okay, have I looked at all of these domains? Have I planned experiences for children that meet all these domains?"

So, if we can think, "Okay, we've got this, you know, language communication domain," are we making sure that, in every interaction, we support? Because, obviously, we're not the ones interacting with the children. We're supporting the parents to interact with their children. Have we planned for every child, whether it's a 1-month-old or, you know, a kid who's close to 3—some kind of reading or some kind of sharing of language?

It could be while the mother's feeding her kid that she's pointing out, "Here's your cup, here's your doll. You want to hold your doll while you're eating your oatmeal." You know, all those kinds of things that we are making sure we're intentional about having those kinds of interactions.

So, I think to sort of look at the indicators under each of these domains and think about, again, being intentional in your interaction: "What can I create in the context of this interaction that would get a baby to even understand perceptual problem solving?" Like putting, you know, blocks into bowls of a different size or jars of a different size or if they wanted to use, you know, toys that the family have, that the families have some kind of, you know, shape sorter or something like that—you know, that those are baby problems. They're baby math problems. They're baby science problems. They're baby sort of more higher-level cognitive problem solving. And then to think more carefully about what I can help parents to do. For example, one of the things that we talk a lot about is helping parents to incorporate these interactions in their normal routines with little babies.

So, if we're using the home visit to kind of show a parent how, while you're, you know, walking your child around the house and you're picking up, you know, you're trying to clean up the house, you can be helping your child to be a cognitive problem solver. "Here, take this ball. Go see if you can fit it in the box." Right? That that's meeting that domain.

So, I feel like most home visitors know that they have to do the interaction. What I think is harder for us is to know what specific things we should be focusing the interaction on.

Jan: Brenda, thank you so much for providing such a helpful way to think about how the ELOF can be a very useful tool for home visitors and their supervisors. It helps us be more intentional about the kinds of experiences we scaffold during home visits, to help children meet the milestones laid out in each domain, and it helps us specifically address issues that surface in our assessments.

We really appreciate your time. The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, birth to five, shows the continuum of learning for young children. It provides us with information about what children should know and be able to do in preparation for school and beyond. For more information, visit the ELOF page on ECLKC.