

## Stay Connected to Decrease Family Stress in Difficult Times

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Hello Head Start. I'm so excited to be with you, today. It—This is a different kind of vlog I've got going. I've got my friend Kiersten from the Office of Head Start central office with me.

We're going to talk all things child and family safety, today, and she's our family expert. So, she was willing to join me today, and I'm so excited—Say hello, Kiersten—so that we can share with you some really good information this month. We know that safety is at the forefront of our thoughts. We have so much going on, so we think this is going to be a really, important vlog for you to hear and hopefully you'll take away some good information.

Of course, we have to start with our love note, and I have a great love note this time. Related to this, believe it or not, there was a great tweet that was shared with me that I was able to retweet where it has a picture of these two gorgeous Head Start cuties taking mail out of their mailbox. So, the love note is going to Community Action Commission of Santa Barbara County Head Start and Early Head Start, but specifically, to Ms. Jenny, who was the teacher there and she mailed letters to all of her children and they got to take the letters out of the mailbox, open them, and read them.

Now, why is that relevant to child, family, and family safety? Because the big message that we're going to share with you today is really around staying connected to our families and how important that is anytime, but particularly now, and how those relationships that you foster with the families are what makes the difference in terms of their ability to manage stress. Really decreasing parent stress is the overarching theme today. What can we do to decrease parent stress so that we can increase the effectiveness that the parents have in their homes and their ability to kind of manage a really tough situation. So, Kiersten, thank you so much for being here, today. And maybe you want to just start us off with a couple of ideas. We had so many that we had batted around, but we wanted to share some of the highlights with folks. So, what do you think about, you know, decreasing parent stress.

Kiersten Beigel: Yeah, I think so many of our programs and staff are really focusing so much on connecting with families right now, and they're very—I hear so many people talk about how worried they are about their families. And so, I think first and foremost for all our families, we really want to offer compassion, connection, and care, because we know that when we have opportunities to connect with each other, people who care about us, we can see, feel seen, feel heard, that that brings our stress level down, right? So, first and foremost, really orient—

Dr. Bergeron: Our letters, right? Those letters those little girls got to take out of the mailbox and the parents got to see that somebody took the time to write them. Just that alone. Don't you think that kind of just that compassion and connection.

Kiersten: Yes. And I think any parents seeing their child light up at the connection they have with their teacher can also bring their stress down, right? Their own worries about their child.

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah, definitely.

Kiersten: Another thing. Go ahead.

Dr. Bergeron: Well, I was going to say the more obvious ones that I think we know, but just as reminders is, you know, they're the immediate stressors that we know, especially right now, are really problematic. Do I have money for food? Do I have rent? Am I going to get kicked out of my house? Is my electricity going to be turned off? Now, some of those things we've seen, you know, program, organizations and communities come together and we're seeing like electric companies say, "we're not turning your electricity off." And so, some of those are being managed at a much higher level than—than just the Head Start organization. But there are other things that are really important that people get help with. Like, "how do I apply for employment?" Maybe, they're not sure how to do that or just have a hard time with it. So, those basic needs, survival kind of needs, if we can take care of those, we've at least taken care of one layer of, sort of, the immediate stressors.

Kiersten: Yeah. First and foremost, right? Those concrete supports that we can offer and help families connect to in greatest time of need can bring down that stress level a little bit. I think we can also, you know, regularly invite parents to talk about how they're doing, how they're feeling, how it's going. What do they need to unload on or unload about in terms of what's going on at home, normal frustrations they might be feeling of being in the same space, or a small space, or a large space, and really feeling like they can, you know, have a listening ear for what's going on.

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah, and you know, you don't have those regular connections, like drop-off time or pick-up time where you might have an opportunity to just see stress on someone's face and say, "Hey, are you having—is something going on, are you're having a bad day?" We don't have those interactions right now. So, you have to really be deliberate about it. Pick the phone up and call. If your folks are technologically plugged in and they have the devices, doing this kind of conversation can make such a big difference 'cause you can see someone's face and maybe be able to catch some things that you might not otherwise notice.

Kiersten: Yeah. And programs can also make devices available, you know, like short-term use cell phones and tablets and that kind of thing, when they're being used to support parents around their stress, decreasing isolation for parents. Those are expenses that programs can—that would be allowable. So, what are your thoughts about just children's behavior and what staff can do to support parents around, you know, their children's behavior and just routines at home.

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah, I think it's really tough. You know, we all know that when kiddos go home for like week—over winter, the winter break or something like that, that it's always an adjustment. But this is—this is such a difference in terms of it's not just that we're not going day-to-day to our regular Head Start program, but we're actually not even able to really leave our house for anything. So, we don't even have regular activity set up. So, it's really quite challenging. And I think supporting parents with setting up routines is really important. Just the simplest thing, like a bedtime routine or making sure you're not eating meals—all of your meals in front of the television, in terms of like bringing the family together and having some structure to the child's day. It makes such a big difference for the child. They like that predictability. And I don't know, you know, sometimes it's easy as a parent to think it's—it's a—

it's a better—better response to just sort of let children kind of go wherever they want to be at the moment, when really some structure, even though they might fight it a little bit, is something that ultimately is going to be better for them. But parents might need some support with that because it's hard when you're home all the time, and coming in, honestly, probably just tired, and feel like it's just easier to not have to create those structures, but ultimately, I think structure is probably better.

Kiersten: Yeah. It's also better for adults, you know, in times of great stress. Like right now, we're all looking for some predictability wherever we can get it, right? It's hard to deal with so much uncertainty. And so, predictability and routine is also really good for us. And I think that kind of brings up a really important point around how staff can problem-solve with parents around their own needs for self-care. And sometimes when, you know, people are very overwhelmed and stressed, the creative brain can really shrink, and the problem-solving brain can shrink. And sometimes, you just need someone to talk to, to think with you about ways you can instill some practices in your day, things you just can't think of when you're really overwhelmed. And so, that's a really important role that staff can play to help parents incorporate some practices in their day. Even little things that can help them feel just a little bit better, a little calmer, a little bit more able to cope.

Dr. Bergeron: Yeah, I'd love that point. And you know, I kind of feel like, in this situation where we find ourselves, because we don't have that kind of regular interaction, you almost need to just have a regular conversation with parents, maybe not every day, but often, so that you're just checking in. And it's not this deliberate session about how to structure my family, rather than just having that creative, sort of, organic conversation where you're listening for those cues, and you can make a suggestion about, "Well, you know, if you create some regular mealtimes you might find ...

Rather than it being so, sort of, prescriptive-feeling, I think people are more open to sort of an organic conversation and it feels more creative and you can almost lead the parent to that conclusion. It becomes more collaborative in nature, and I think, a little bit easier to implement it from that regard. And I think it's just, certainly, challenging because everything's virtual, even this, right? So, even setting up a vlog like this is just harder to do. But, there are some virtual supports for parents. I think probably a lot of groups online have probably cropped up.

Kiersten: I also know that a lot of staff are worried because they so much want to connect with families. They want to be working. They want to be making those connections and not all families are available or maybe as interested. And I think as long as Head Start staff come, you know, with, you know, a genuine sort of, I guess intention, right, around the compassion, around the care. Not so much about staff's urgency to do their job, but more just really about checking in. I think that if we can all just take a deep breath. And if, you know, we're there for parents; if parents don't want to connect at a given moment, that's OK, too. But, programs are regularly making that effort.

Dr. Bergeron: And you know, what's really great about the way that Head Start works too, I was really thinking about this recently, is that we already have those relationships established with our families because of the way we operate. We sit down; we do plans with them. We're finding what parents need and connecting them with those resources. So, in a time like this,

reaching out doesn't feel as foreign as it might feel if we didn't have—if we hadn't already forged those relationships. So, that's definitely, we get to start ahead of the game on that, which I think is really fantastic.

Kiersten: That's true. Even for those families though, that are, you know—even if they are newer families this is an opportunity to really connect by being helpful, right? By really letting parents—new parents know the Head Start way is—

Kiersten: ... that we really want to support you and your child. And so, this is a difficult time, but it's also a time that can forge some strong bonds and strong relationships with newer families, as well.

Dr. Bergeron: So, that's really exciting. I think that that's such a great opportunity. And even though this vlog is—it's May by the time folks are watching this, we're recording it in April, and April is "Child Abuse Prevention Month." And, I think that, you know, the big piece here, that the big relevant piece is if we can reduce parent's stress, we've reduced the likelihood that they will be more reactive in times of, you know, stress within their day. And we just want to be aware of that. I think we know that rates of child abuse, and neglect, and domestic violence can increase during periods like this—emergencies, disasters, and that's just human behavior. We all get nervous and react differently. And, parents may find themselves feeling different than they ever have before.

You know, it's just such a different situation. So, I think it's just, you know, taking some time to speak to those, to speak to this because, yeah, we do have those small numbers of our families that we do want to provide extra care to, right? So, we know who our families are that may be more prone to this and just be mindful of that. And you know, you also know which of your children, for your day-to-day operation can be the most challenging. And you figure in a small space at home all day, that's probably only exacerbated. So, just knowing which of those families do you need to maybe take a little extra time and care, to make sure you do that. So, I think it's just a really important topic to talk about.

Kiersten: Yeah, it is really important to just to take the time and just think some of those things through. And we know programs have plans in place oftentimes for these kinds of safety situations that can come up with families. Nobody should be doing this kind of work alone, right? When there are safety concerns. And so, I think it's really important programs have a designated person, at this time, who any staff can talk to if there is a safety concern, whether that be concern around a child's safety, or an adult in the case of domestic violence. And, yeah, many programs, you know, you may have already had concerns about certain families having these situations.

You may not have known for sure, but you can know that these trying times and this increased stress could be kind of making things worse. And so, important for us to acknowledge that and to put some plans in place. I think, you know, as far as child welfare, you know, staff should really have a point person they can talk to, if they have questions, concerns, and feelings about a particular family situation or a child that they're concerned about. Should be really clear on what those states specific child abuse and neglect laws are, and having a conversation about

risk. What do you think the risk is to the child, at this point? You know, understandably, many staff are worried about preserving relationships with parents.

So, if it does come to a point of needing to make a child abuse and neglect report, then you know, there are ways to preserve that relationship with parents by being very transparent and trying to talk through. Again, you have to really be careful about what the risk to the child is. But, really important to be transparent. This is a very difficult circumstance for families to be in. And so, even inviting parents to offer some things that they would like to make sure are communicated. Letting parents know that you might need to make that call.

There are lots of different ways to think about how you can preserve the connection with the parent while still fulfilling your role as a mandated reporter. We do have some resources on the ECLKC that can help programs think some of these things through a little bit more, as well.

Dr. Bergeron: Well, we'll make sure and include them here below the vlog, so they can just click on them and check them out. I know that that is a tough responsibility and it's a fine line. But I think at the end of the day, parents appreciate the fact that we care enough to make the effort, right? Ultimately, that ends up being a support for their family, even if it's a really difficult thing to work through. So.

Kiersten: Well, and you can let families know that, you know, I vow to, no matter what, support you and your family through this process, as we go through, you know. So, that really communicates a care and a respect, even though the situation and circumstance might be dire.

Dr. Bergeron: And, you know, this is—this is such a complex topic. So, I've actually decided that this would be one of at least two, maybe more vlogs that I'm going to put out that are all sort of interconnected. So, I hope folks will stay tuned for more and hopefully you find these helpful. I'm pulling in our core team, our central office experts on these because I think that we have so much experience and knowledge. And Kiersten, I really appreciate you joining me today. And, as we close out, I always end with an "in case you didn't know."

So, I've got one for everybody. In case you didn't know, we just launched a new campaign called "#HeadStartHeals" and that is going to be centered around all things related to this topic, substance misuse, mental health, all of the things that Head does to help heal children and families and then help them thrive. So, stay tuned for more about Head Start Heals. You'll see it on ECLKC. You'll see it on my Twitter.

If you're doing something specific around trauma, substance misuse, safety, all of these topics, any kind of professional development, I know right now everything's virtual, whatever it is, if you want to post that on Twitter, tag me "#HeadStartHeals" and we'll start to collect all of those things. It's always nice when we can see what's going on the ground.

So, thanks again, Kiersten, for joining me. And I always say Head Start is access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.