

Pam Winton: Systematically Support Children with Disabilities

Jan Greenberg: Pam, I am delighted to be sitting here with you, having a conversation about the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, or ELOF, and its applicability for children with disabilities. And so, to get started, I'd like to ask you to introduce yourself and then tell us a little bit about your background and current involvement in work around children with disabilities.

Pam Winton: Thank you, Jan. I'm delighted to be here. I'm Pam Winton and work at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development resource center, where I am a senior scientist, and also a research professor at the School of Ed at UNC-Chapel Hill.

So, for a long time, like the last three decades, I have been passionate about my work with children with disabilities, and the focus of that work has often been how to ensure that each and every child really has multiple learning opportunities every day so they reach their full potential. And for children who are struggling and have identified disabilities, that takes a lot of intentionality and a systematic and kind of really purposeful approach to their learning and development. I've ended up, in my work, often focusing on the professional development, personal-prep level, and that's where I've been working for probably 20 years.

Jan: Terrific. So, that actually leads nicely into the next question. So, we know that the ELOF helps to establish what children should know and be able to do to prepare for success in school and later life. So, can you talk to us a little bit about what current research tells us about how we might improve learning outcomes and promote the development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers as described in the ELOF?

Pam: I think—I'm really excited about the ELOF, and one reason I'm excited is because, in my view, it's the first time we've had a national standards outcomes framework. And I know it came out of Head Start, but I view it as something we can embrace across all of our sectors—pre-K, early intervention, early childhood special ed, child care, and that's exciting.

And, also, in my view, though, you can't just expect a miracle, that the children will reach these outcomes. You have to think about what are the research-based practices that support those outcomes, especially for children with disabilities, but for all children, really.

Jan: For thinking about what the ELOF tells us about child development and thinking about what the interests and needs are for children with disabilities, are there some considerations we'd want to think about in establishing effective learning environments that would relate back to development?

Pam: Well, I think you'd want to think about the environment and modifications to that environment that would then give the child more access to the general curriculum, access to the materials, and so access to multiple learning opportunities throughout the day. And then you'd also want to think about the specific responsive, engaging, developmentally appropriate, but also individualized teaching strategies that would be used to support that child, whether it's around cognitive development or social-emotional development.

And, of course, if a child has an identified disability, then that child will have an individualized family-service plan or an individualized education plan. And that plan will then be almost like the guiding light for teachers for what to focus on, what outcomes to focus on specifically for that unique child, and then, also, the strategies and practices that have been identified to be embedded within the curriculum or embedded within the routines that the teacher will use to implement those practices. And that IEP and IFSP document gets developed in a partnership by a multidisciplinary team, including specialists, the family, and, hopefully, the teacher.

But we've learned that a lot of teachers don't actually know that, if the parent invites them, they could attend that meeting. They don't have support to attend, like they don't have substitute teachers available so they can be part of the meeting. And then some teachers even say, "Oh, I didn't even know I could see that document." And some programs don't even have a copy on file.

So, when you think about inclusion and you think about who's doing the inclusion, it's the teachers in the inclusive programs, yet often those folks aren't part of this whole planning process that's so critical.

Jan: So, if I were to ask you to add any other ideas about guiding principles or concepts about applying the ELOF that practitioners keep in mind working with children with disabilities.

Pam: Okay, I would say three things. First, I would say find professional development that helps you build the skills you need to implement the practices that have been shown to be research-based, that will lead to those ELOFs. I mean, find it—not only find it, demand it 'cause you deserve it. So, that'd be the first thing.

I think the second thing would be find your community allies and collaborate. You can't do this on your own, and there are people out there at the community at the LEAs, the preschool disability coordinators and specialists in the early intervention programs, who really are your partners in this work. And if they aren't finding you, go out and find them and collaborate with them.

And then I think third is partner with families because families know so much. They are the experts on their children. And when you think about an ELOF outcome like social-emotional or

peer relations, find out from families what is their most—what is their hope and dream that's really family-driven. And I think something we forget is, you know, families are in it for the long haul. They're running a marathon.

We're running a sprint, and so we're there short term, and when we pass that baton, they're gonna keep going. And if we've crushed their hopes, if we've deflated their dreams, if we don't share their expectations and interests and desires for that child and we don't even know what they are, we've lost an opportunity.

So, you know, you kind of want to say how can you be that teacher or that practitioner or home visitor that, 20 years from now, the parent will look back and say, "I will never forget this person who listened to us and helped us and helped us achieve our dreams and shared our expectations."

Jan: Pam, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today about how early-childhood educators can best meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families. You've helped us see the importance of using the ELOF to guide what's happening in the learning environment while, at the same time, taking the child's own unique needs, interests, goals, and family beliefs and practices into account.

I also really appreciated your emphasis on how important it is to have ongoing support from mentors and supervisors, along with professional development opportunities. These relationships and experiences play such a huge part in preparing professionals for working with children with disabilities. Thank you again for sharing your expertise.

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, birth to 5, 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 the ECLKC.