

Open Doors

Chapter 11: Engaging Families, Experience It

Brenda Jones Harden: Well, that phrase you used, "You are his world," I thought, how powerful is that, particularly for our parents that we might work with in Early Head Start who feel like they're not the world to anybody – not to their own parents, not to their spouses, maybe, certainly not to many of the professionals with whom they've worked. But what a powerful message to say to a parent, that you mean everything to this little person.

And I can just put myself in the shoes of a parent and feel like I would feel so much better about my life if my home visitor not only said that to me, because the words are important, but also acted in that way in her behavior; that she said, "I want to keep coming back to see you even if you're not nice to me. And I want to comment every time you do something wonderful for your baby, because that's how much I think of you." That – I think, what a powerful message to parents, and how much psychological energy they could get from that that would allow them to do what we need them to do for their baby.

Kadija Johnston: Yes. Yes.

Brenda: But another thing you were making me think about is how sometimes, like you said, we don't see what we want to see. So, one of the things I'd like to think about with home visitors is finding the one moment or the two moments in the context of that visit where we can see what we want to see. And almost every parent will give you some moment that you can celebrate with them.

So focusing on their strengths, focusing on the positive, focusing on when they do something well goes a long, long way. And you can see it in how their affect changes and how you'll see them try to repeat what you just celebrated again, sometimes when they shouldn't be, like, you know, they're pushing it and the baby's moved on. But they got such gratification from us saying to them, "Oh, look at how you made your baby smile," that they want to get that gratification over and over again.

But that's a sign of movement, and we celebrate that, and we look for opportunities to be that person for that parent. And that becomes, to me, almost more important than the lesson. And that goes back to what you were saying earlier about the "how" in the lesson. The lesson should not be didactically delivered by us. It should be delivered in the context of what we see.

So, again, you use the curriculum as a foundation, particularly if we can't remember all that child development and all that brain development stuff. We've got it right there in the curriculum. But if we use it at a time when it relates to some behavior in the parent, then they're going to internalize it more instead of this sort of sitting there listening to us talk about developmental milestones.

Kadija: And I think what we're talking about can seem so simple. And I want to underscore again that it is the greatest skill to be able to draw from what a parent is already doing with – or being who they're being with their child. And I think one of the things, as I was listening to you, I was thinking about, "What does one have to do to get oneself in that space?" And I think if you're worried, if you're preoccupied as a home visitor, which can – our home visitors can have good reason to be.

Brenda: Yes.

Kadija: But if we can't get our worry out of the way, it's impossible to see a parent do something that's meaningful to a baby, because it rarely will measure up to our aspirations, and even what might be doing something remarkable for this family doesn't look anything like doing something remarkable in this family. That – that the idea of – that you see that a parent turns to her baby to put the blanket over them before turning back to you to talk about how difficult her job search has been. To isolate that moment when she turned to that baby, to see it and notice it, is hugely meaningful to that baby; but we've got to be able to be in a place where we're not thinking that's meaningless. And it has to be genuine.

Brenda: Yep.

Kadija: I think parents have – are very adept at knowing...

Brenda: At knowing.

Kadija: ...if we're being genuine or not.

Brenda: And as a home visitor, you have to know – you have to keep that in your mind at all times, because it gets hard and you feel like, "I'm not getting through and I'm trying so hard." And all of us are in this work because we care about parents and we care about children. But I often say to home visitors, you've got to do it over and over and over again, and you revisit that every time you do a visit. In every activity, in every piece of the curriculum you're going over, in every interaction you have with parents, you are constantly emphasizing how much they mean to the baby, how important they are to their baby's development, how what they're doing in the moment matters for a lifetime.

So there are certain kinds of tenets that – you're right – you've got to keep giving voice to, but you've got to show it in your response to parents. And it can't even be, you know, "I like your baby," because sometimes parents even get jealous of the time we're spending with the baby and not with them. So – and then they act out and then they don't want us to come back, and we're like, "What? We were doing so well." So you have to really be mentally vigilant about what you know is going on with the families with whom you work...

Kadija: Yes, yes.

Brenda: ...all the time. All the time. And again, that's why having an opportunity to reflect on that and supervision become so important, because when you're in the moment and you're trying to do a million things – there are, you know, five siblings in the house and there are people going in and out, and you got this little teeny space in a one-room apartment where you're trying to do your home visits, and it's just hard. It's just hard. It's hard to keep all of that in your mind.

Kadija: Yes. Yes.