

Head Start Takes a Stand Against Opioids

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Happy November Head Start. It is time once again for a vlog. I'm excited this month. We have a lot to talk about. I hope your school year is up and running smoothly. It's now officially fall by the time you're watching this, like really fall, and so we're well into it I'm sure.

Let's start off. We've got a love note. I'm really excited to share with you Central Missouri Community Actions Bridge Program. I was introduced to it when I was traveling in October, and was just so excited. I wanted to share it with you. I'm just going to kind of show you my little one pager here. Let's see if you can see that.

And, basically, what this Head Start organization did is it secured some grant funding through the county of Boone. They have special grants related to mental health, and they made a connection between mental health and the comprehensive services that Head Start provides. And then they created a bridge program that provides those sort of family supports to Head Start children, children's families -- through kindergarten, first, and second grade -- in the receiving public schools, which I just think is fantastic.

Not only are they taking care of their children and their families longer, and it's going to be very exciting to see some outcomes from this because what they'll be able to do is then look at third grade performance and see you know, is there a difference since we kind of all are forced to focus on what third grade reading scores look like, and...and sometimes we see that fade away, but so do the services that kids were getting when they were in Head Start. So, it'll be really interesting to look at that.

I'm also really curious to see how it might influence the schools as they see Head Start providing these kind of comprehensive services to families and really taking care of families in the interest of the child. It'll be really interesting. So, I just thought it was really cool to learn about this and was excited to share it with you.

I would encourage you to look for, maybe there are some grants in your vicinity, and you can make an argument about bridging Head Start Services through kindergarten, first, second, third grade, and then I think it'd be fantastic partnership. So, way to go.

Now, this month our vlog topic good segue way for mental health. I want to touch on the work that we've been doing here at the Office of Head Start in the area of opioids, substance misuse -- particularly focused on opioids given the nature of what's happening in our, in our country. And I just wanted to let you know that, if you weren't aware, Head Start has been doing a very focused effort in this area last year conducting forums in half of the regions.

This year, we're finishing those forums in the other half to complete all regions. But, what's been most exciting has just been the outcome from these conversations. The relationships that Head Start, the Office of Head Start, is developing with the medical community, it's just been fantastic.

So, I just wanted to share with you some details. I think it's important to know that statistically about 6 million children under the age of 11 -- about one and eight -- live in households with parents who have substance use disorder. So, that's pretty significant to think about. One in three in our foster care. Trauma of parental addiction can have an impact on a child's mental and physical health over time. I think this is probably something we know best here at Head Start with as much work as we do with families.

But what can you do? What can Head Start do? Across the country, we've been working to address this program, and we have seen Head Start programs doing all kinds of very creative things. Things around wrap-around care, providing support to grandparents who have taken children in. Even training their staff on using naloxone. And that's just amazing to me being prepared at that level as a staff of early educators. So, there is a lot that we can do, and if you're doing something special, I hope you'll share it with us. We're really looking for those great examples.

We've also hosted three webinars this fall. And each one has had special guests from the medical community who have shared incredible information. I highly recommend you look. If you didn't get a chance to attend the webinars, I'm going to post the links here --we recorded them -- and I would very much encourage you to watch them and share them with your staff. There's a lot to be learned.

What was really amazing through this process though is what we have shared with the medical community. They've been so appreciative of what Head Start and Early Head Start can share with them in terms of early childhood development. So, I encourage you to reach out to your medical community and make those relationships, and see if there are things you can be doing together to really support families in this area.

And I think the most important thing we can do with our families is to listen to them. It is to allow them to tell their stories, and in a very judgment-free way. And this is really hard, because if you are somebody who spends all year life taking care of children, and your concern for children is paramount, and you see a parent doing something that undermines the care of a child, it's really hard not to be judgmental. But, what we know is if we want to be able to work with families, and with parents, we have to refrain from that in order to create a trusting relationship that can then help someone toward recovery. And I think that's the important thing to remember.

We also have been working with Sesame Street again. Really excited that Sesame Street brought Karli back. Karli is a 6-and-a-half-year old green Muppet, and she has yellow hair, and her mother is struggling with substance use disorder. And Karli even spent some time in foster care while her mother's in recovery. So, there's a lot there that you might want to use. If you are an organization that is really seeing this prevalent in your community. Maybe Sesame Street can provide some resources for you. I'm going to provide those links to you as well.

And what I would just encourage you to do again is: strong relationships with families, trusting, non-judgmental. Reach out to your medical community. Create those relationships not just so you can learn from them -- you can -- but also so you can share with the medical community what you can do. We had one of our neonatologists say he thinks that pediatricians should be

equipped with prescriptions for Early Head Start, which I thought was just a fantastic idea. So, let them know about, if you do Early Head Start, let them know what Early Head Start does. A lot of people don't understand that, and they don't know that we start with pregnant women. So, knowing that there could be some really good relationship building you can do there so.

And finally share with us what you're doing. It's really important to me that I can see those highlighted programs and share out great ideas, so that we can all grow and get better at what we do, and help our families in to thrive and grow. That's, that's what, why we're here.

So, I encourage you to use the resources I'm providing you today, and to be on the lookout for more webinars. They were very popular. We might do more, but at least watch the ones that were here. And if we haven't been to your region, look for our forums and see if you want to be involved there.

Now, before we finish if you didn't know already -- and hopefully you do -- the Kinship IM came out in September, and it is sort of relevant to this topic because what we found in the whole sort of impetus for this IM, was as I talked to more programs that we're dealing with the opioid crisis and what they were doing with their families, they saw more and more and more children being raised by kin. And then there was an issue because they couldn't find eligibility there. The state didn't identify that as foster care and then...But we have to follow the state's definition of foster care. But there are ways to connect kinship to a lot of other eligibility factors. The IM spells that out pretty plainly, and I encourage you to use it to make sure that you're reaching your community where they need you most.

And I really feel like in light of this IM we should hit a point this year where every slot in Head Start is filled, and that's my goal. One hundred percent enrollment. Reach out, find those kids, and let's help them and their families on the road to being successful, thriving families. We know that's all, that's all anybody wants. So, we are here to make that happen.

I appreciate all you do in this area. I know that it's a heavy lift. But it is really, really satisfying to know that Head Start is there. I think we're ahead of the curve and can be a real change maker in dealing with substance use disorder, opioid, and what families are going through; the challenges that they're having.

So, thank you so much and remember Head Start: access to the American dream. Go make dreams happen.