

Head Start and the Opioid Crisis: Reaching Families Early

Julie Hermann: I think there was this old school belief that if something happened to a child when they were an infant, or a toddler, that they were so young that they wouldn't remember. And obviously, now we know, that that's very far from being true.

Robin Gersten: All sorts of things happen to the children. They become fearful; they're not trusting. Some kids find anything to make their needs be met, so they're going to act out because if they act out, someone's going to pay attention to them. Again, we get those other kids that just crawl inside themselves, so it really disrupts development.

Julie: When you have families who are experiencing substance abuse, the children are often exposed to a number of risk factors—from physical abuse and neglect, witnessing of domestic violence, maybe even prenatal exposure to opioids or various drugs, and all of those things have a major impact on a child's development.

Robin: And that's what we're seeing with the children that present to us from families with opioid addiction problems.

Rosemarie Halt: It has to start in pregnancy, actually. And teaching mom about how to be a good parent is one of the best things that you can do to prevent trauma in the child.

Margie Chastain: If we're able to provide that education, provide those resources, and just be a support in that family's life, then there's a better chance that, you know, we can mitigate the negative impact to the whole family and to the child's, as well.

Julie: We know from neuroscience that there's an amount of neuroplasticity, and so with healthy, and appropriate, and solid attachments we can actually do some reparative work with children so that's what we're really trying to accomplish through our variety of interventions.

Nadine Miller: Those first three years of life are so critical to the child's development. And so if we invest early, if we invest often in our Early Head Start program, our other Early Childhood Home Visiting programs, we are just way ahead of the curve in really creating an environment of little ones who will grow up to be healthy adults.

Jamilah Miller: So, I'm an Early Head Start advocate. We work with families from pregnancy to age 3. For our prenatal clients, we see them every two weeks for about an hour, and we kind of just get them prepared for the arrival of the baby. We talk about the development, you know, where they're at, making sure they go to their prenatal visits. And just kind of making sure they have a healthy and safe pregnancy.

Margie: Helping the parent become the child's teacher, in a way, and modeling, you know, for the parent and for the child. Focusing on different domains of development. How are they doing with gross motor? How are they doing with speech? How are they doing in a number of areas?

Jamilah: And then from about four months to age 3, that's our home-based. So, we see those families for an hour and a half every week. And with them, we're continuing on making sure

they're on the right track in terms of development, but then we're also preparing them for their educational journey into Head Start.

Toscha Blalock: We want to empower those parents who are going to be with them until they're ready to go on their own. And we want them to be equipped, to keep making that difference in their lives.