

Early Head Start Turns 25 in 2020

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Happy New Year, Head Start! It is 2020. I hope your New Year is off to a great start. I'm excited to be here. This is going to be a great vlog. This is going to be one giant love note today. We are going to start what's going to be a year-long celebration, and that is celebrating the 25th birthday of Early Head Start. This year Early Head Start turns 25, a quarter of a century — a big birthday.

And in light of that, I want to spend the entire year really celebrating this incredible program, starting today. Planting the seed today. And each month, for every vlog, we're going to include a little more about Early Head Start. We're going to try to do some other things throughout the year, of course. But to get started for the New Year, I thought this would be a great way to sort of kick it off.

And, you know, I was digging around looking for different programs to highlight today. And I know that there are a lot out there, but there are a few I just want to mention. And it was really exciting to learn that in 1995, Early Head Start started with 68 programs and we have almost 1200 programs today — in just 25 years. That's pretty amazing.

And we know Early Head Start meets the needs of some of our most special children and their families, our pregnant moms and children birth to 3. Really bringing attention to that time when the brain is developing the fastest. When the influences of our environments make such a big difference in development.

And from a national scope, when it's the time period when we see maybe the fewest services out there for children and families. So, Early Head Start is often a saving grace in that regard. And with the growth of pre-K, we are seeing more of our programs say, "Hey, you know, we can be the Early Head Start provider in the community." And I know school systems are appreciative of that. I've heard many superintendents talk about that. So, as we celebrate this year, we're going to start today, I'm just gonna talk about a few programs that I've learned about and I really wanted to kind of highlight.

First of all, it's important to note, before we jump into this, that Migrant and Seasonal Head Start has actually been providing infant and toddler programming since its inception 50 years ago. And, never deliberately so written in. That's just the population there: birth to 5. And that's the population that they really focused on from the get-go. So, Early Head Start, 25 years later, comes into play.

And now we see programs across regions reaching out to this population. But the Migrant and Seasonal folks saw that early on, that that was a really, really big need. And started filling that need right away. So, it's really great to be able to trace our Early Head Start roots back before it might have been called "Early Head Start," but still serving the same children. So, that's a really fun thing to celebrate.

I also want to highlight a program in Memphis, Tennessee: Porter-Leath Early Head Start. What was so amazing about this program, is to learn about what they've doing for the community in the area of early childhood development and professional development around early childhood

in that community. They've actually created a model learning academy that helps to train folks who want work with children birth to 3. And this model learning academy isn't just training their Early Head Start folks, they've actually become the hub for the community, for a lot of child care in the community.

In fact, they are so popular that they now have in the queue more centers to be built — one of them coming up this year, 2020. They'll be adding another learning academy. And what I find so exciting about this — if you think about the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships — the purpose of that was to bring Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care together to raise quality and take advantage of the efficiencies that you can by partnering. And this is such a beautiful example of that. Where an Early Head Start center created professional development — very meaningful training. And now child care centers from around Memphis are coming to ensure that their folks are trained. And I think they've become a great community resource and something, it's a really great model to look at possibly replicating. Very exciting. So, way to go.

I also wanted to share a memory with you. I had Belinda Rinker come to me, who you may know is here in the central office. And it's funny she's now a fiscal, a facilities person, but long ago, she was part of the Early Head Start pilot. And what she shared with me in her memory of that work that was the most meaningful was when she would see a new mom, terrified of her new responsibility, not sure what to do. And Early Head Start would step in and gently, and patiently support that mother to the point of her feeling confident about her role as a mom.

And Belinda said that she could actually witness the confidence level in the mother changing and to see her bond with her child, and knowing that was something that was being, a foundation that was being laid that would go far beyond her Head Start, her time at Head Start. And I think that's a really great thing to be able share out there.

That when you think about Early Head Start intervening so early, often before a baby is born, and really influencing a mom's sense of responsibility and of empowerment, across all kinds of things, from nutrition and health, to self-care and education, and all of the different things that go into parenting that really support children. So, I think that this is a wonderful thing for us to remember as we celebrate Early Head Start.

You know, what we're going to do this year in 2020, is raise Early Head Start, give it some focus, and celebrate every month in this vlog setting. And we'll have some different trainings that we'll push out. And I want more stories. I love to share these stories with everybody. I know there are a lot of really good programs out there. And I look forward to doing that.

So, as we kick off 2020, we see a year ahead of us of great celebration — 25 years for Early Head Start. Of course, Head Start will turn 55 this year — no small potatoes. And we'll be celebrating all of that.

So, I wish you a wonderful January. And we will come back in February with more exciting Early Head Start and other information for our vlog. And don't forget: Head Start is access to the American Dream. Go make dreams happen.