

Early Essentials Webisode 5

Amanda Perez: Hey, I'm Amanda Perez with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and welcome, again, to "Early Essentials." "School readiness for babies: What does that mean?" Well, we know that school readiness for infants and toddlers is not about pencils and paper or worksheets and tiny little desks. But what is it? Let's find out. We'll begin by hearing from staff. We asked Isha Barrie, an Early Head Start center manager what her staff does to prepare the smallest children for school and this is what she said.

Isha Barrie: For the infants, they come to us, yeah, starting at the age of six weeks, so we see all the development, from crawling eating and also how they develop their fine motor skills, especially the social skills, how they develop playing with their friends in the classroom. And the teachers, seeing how the teachers nurture those early stages, moving them from infancy to toddler. It's just fascinating, seeing them growing from one developmental stage to another.

Amanda: The skills that Isha describes things like how children play with their friends in classrooms are foundational for school readiness. Here I am at a family childcare home in Columbia, Maryland, a place for just the kinds of learning that Isha describes. Last week, I talked with Ron Lally, co-director of the West Ed Center for Child and Family Studies, about what I'm seeing here and in programs like yours, that are at the heart of school readiness for infants and toddlers.

Amanda: Hey, Ron! Thank you, so much for joining us via Skype today. It's great to see you!

Ron Lally: It's good to see you, too, Amanda.

Amanda: Thanks for being here. So, we're going to jump right in with you. We're talking a lot, in the Head Start community, about school readiness, these days. What do you think is important for people to consider as they're thinking about school readiness for infants and toddlers?

Ron: Well, I think a lot of the skills that the child needs, once they get to school the foundation for those skills are developed in the brain during infancy and it is early brain development, where the child is born with a brain the size of 25 percent of an adult brain, and, by the time they're three, it's 85 percent and it's wired through all of the experiences that they have. What we're finding is those language experiences those social experiences those emotional experiences, and the intellectual experiences are critical to the development of the brain that is going to get you through the rest of your life. And patterns are set down that will be there for the rest of your life as you build new information, on the information that you got and used early in your life.

Amanda: I'm wondering if we can think, for a minute, about the framework that Head Start has put forward for school readiness So, they've asked us to look at five essential domains, right? So, they've asked us to look at physical health and development, social and emotional development, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, and approaches to learning. Now, we got a question, probably the question in this area, from the field; let's hear it now.

Martha Stowell White: What does school readiness look like for infants and toddlers?

Amanda: So, what does school readiness look like? And, when we are thinking about this question, I'm hoping that you can help us draw a line between, particularly, those relationships, the importance of those relationships and school readiness.

Ron: What we're looking for is for people to understand, people who are caring for babies whether it's the parent in childcare or even a home visitor, that the child, the baby, is incredibly vulnerable, but, in addition to them being that vulnerable, they're incredibly competent And so they have all of these skills: They're looking to find out cause-and-effect relationships; they're trying to understand the use of tools. They're imitating you. They're developing schemes for thought and action. All of those are inborn parts of them that need a helping hand. And what we say to the infant/toddler teacher is: "Don't be a teacher, be a facilitator," because the baby has their own agenda and it's a sophisticated agenda that deals with all of the issues that Head Start lists in those competencies

Amanda: So, that really gets us to my next question for you, Ron. You've done a lot of thinking about this and I'm wondering about the developmental goals that you've identified for infants and toddlers.

Ron: One of the things we found very helpful for caregivers is that the children under three are simultaneously engaged in three pursuits. One, it's a search for security. The very young child has kind of anchored all of their activity in making sure that they are connected with someone, so that they get their needs met. Then, there is this kind of search for meaning, a quest where they will want to explore the world. And the third is that they are, through their time interacting with us and kind of seeing how they're acted with, building a self-identity where they understand "me" and "mine" and "I'm this and you're that."

These things are happening simultaneously during infancy, but it's almost like a spotlight is turned on one of them in these three stages and so, for the very young child, most of their activity is focused around issues of security. Then, what happens is, around 7, 8, 9 months of age, as they start to crawl and move away, they get captivated by exploration and they want to try things out in the world. For the 20-month-old or so and up, what they're learning is about "me" and "mine" and how to get along with other people.

Amanda: So, Ron, let's take a look at what school readiness might look like for infants and toddlers. We're going to start with a video from a Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program in Florida and this is a young infant with a caregiver. This infant has had a long feeding with this caregiver and the caregiver is just doing a final check, to make sure the baby is done with her bottle before she notices that the baby is really engaged with the cameras. Let's take a look.

Teacher: Cójelo, pues. ¿Vas a querer otro poquito, o no? Hmm? Ya no más tetero. Ya no más bibi. Hmm? ¿Ya no más bibi? ¡Ah, te gustan las fotos! ¡Sí, te gustan las fotos! Ya te vi. [Camerawoman laughs] Te gustan las fotos.

Amanda: Okay, so, this baby is clearly not ready for school, yet, but let's think about what's happening in this interaction that really speaks to us about school readiness.

Ron: Well one of the things that we know is connected with school success is attachment, that the child, when they're in school, they have to feel confident about that there are people there to help them.

And what we see on the mouth and smile of this child is there is a contentment in the relationship with this caregiver. The other thing is that the caregiver is not saying strongly, "You have to drink your milk now." What she's doing is she is looking at the child, responding to the child, and, when she sees that the child is excited about the camera, she goes to that, which says, you know, "I get what you're interested in and I'm going to follow your lead." The child smiles, they enjoy the moment together. And you'll also see that what she's doing is, even though the child is not able to speak to her, she is using language, which is so important, in the early years, that we know that adult vocabulary is correlated with the number of words that are spoken to and with the child. She is in a dialogue with the child, where it has to do with the child's meaning. And so, she is really involved in providing this secure base, along with some of the other issues related to exploration and identity.

Amanda: Let's look at a baby that's a little bit older, so this is a mobile infant, now, in a family childcare setting; let's take a look. Girl: Hey.

Mother: Did you find the puzzle pieces? Yellow and -- or orange and blue.

Amanda: Okay, so that baby was really working with that puzzle. Tell us what you saw in terms of school readiness for a mobile infant there

Ron: One of the things that we know about infants is, in intellectual development, they're kind of programmed to do certain things. They seek out understanding of cause-and-effect relationships and how to use their body as a tool and so one of the things that she was doing, with that first toy, is that she was trying to pull it out. Because she could pull the puzzles out of the puzzle box, but this was screwed in, and so she tried these schemes that she kind of has naturally to get that out and couldn't do it. She struggled a little bit more and then just went and found some other things.

And so what she was displaying was this exploration where, on her own, using some of the skills that she has, she explores the environment and, in that exploration, learns some new schemes about how to operate. The other thing that was very prominent was this child had gained the security of the relationship with the caregivers obviously, because she was in this other room by herself. She was secure enough to be there and then what she did is she took her toys in to show the caregivers. And so, she was practicing independence out there on her own for a little while and then coming back to connect to the security of the caregiver.

Amanda: Finally, Ron, we have some photographs from a program. This is a toddler who's playing in the housekeeping area. Let's look at those photographs.

Ron: He has a great attention span. He's focused on this particular housekeeping kind of activity and, one, he's able to attend to it. One of the things that you need in school is you need impulse control and you need the ability to persist on a task; he seems to have that. The other thing: That he's very independent, in the sense that he can do these things on his own. He's going to need some of that -- not exclusively, but he'll need some of that independence in school. He has imitated or seen all of these things happen and he's incorporated it into his way of understanding and being. Part of what goes on with these older toddlers is they're learning how to fit into the society into which they are born. And they're learning rules of the road from their caregivers, from their parents, and one is you want to keep alive his ability to get into things and figure things out and revel in his interest and curiosity in the world. This is a really important place where children learn the beginnings of executive function, which has to do with self-regulation and impulse control and the ability to get along with others.

Amanda: So much happening in those first three years. Ron, we have a question from a new practitioner let's listen to that

Steven Allen: I feel like some of my children enrolled too late to make a difference. What can we do, when they're already toddlers?

Amanda: So, this practitioner is really thinking about the importance of those three years. What do you see as the effects, when children come in a little late to these programs?

Ron: I think there are two answers to that. The one is: We have seen, in California, recently, as children are not coming in to care until they're 2 1/2 or so that there are some things, baggage, that they bring in, from either care that was not kind of a continuous care, different people were taking care of them. Sometimes, it is a problem and you really need to understand both the vulnerability and competence of that child and get them to feel that they're in a safe place, first. And then, what you do is that you kind of read their cues about what they are interested in and work through your movement with that child through the child's interests.

That said, the other part of it is the child is still only 2 ½ and I don't think we ever want to give the message "It's too late"

Amanda: So, it begins with that security piece, again, there. We asked a veteran teacher from Indiana for her thoughts about this as well; so, let's listen to what she has to say.

Reagan Hatton: As an Early Head Start teacher, we often get toddlers that are enrolled late into our program, so, as teachers, there are some things we can do to help. We help the children and the families become familiar with the socialization process because, for a lot of them, this might be the first time they are entering a childcare setting, and we also use assessments and observations to help focus on some areas that might need extra attention paid to, so that we can help better prepare them for the transition into preschool

Amanda: So, a really practical reminder from this caregiver, Ron, about sort of the kinds of things that are already in the Early Head Start framework, for serving these children. So, we have ongoing assessment; we have individualizing of services; we have close work with the family in preparing for transitions there. We have another question that's come in, from a new staff member.

Belinda Garrison: I am a teacher and a home visitor. Can I support school readiness in infants and toddlers?

Amanda: So, we asked a veteran home visitor in Michigan what her thoughts were; let's hear what she has to say.

Janine Morales: I believe that in order to support school readiness in infants and toddlers, the most important piece is for the home visitor to educate parents and guardians on how preparing children for school doesn't just start the summer before they enter into school; it begins at birth and it doesn't ever end. Educating the adults in the home on how the child's development within the first few years of his or her life can lead to the success that they find in school is a vital piece of the puzzle. Providing ideas for fun and engaging activities that the adults can do with the child in the home to work on the various areas of development can also be a great way to support school readiness.

Amanda: So, this home visitor really reminds us that families have a primary role in supporting school readiness for their young children. What would you add here, Ron?

Ron: I would add a little bit about helping the parent find out what the child needs and is interested in by observing and interacting with the child. What you do is you create experiences based on the child's interests and then try things out. And we always know that everything you try out isn't going to work and don't force it, just see how it works and then try something else, but get your information about what to do from the child.

Amanda: Ron, thank you, so much for being here today. It's lovely to see you. I want to thank the folks that asked questions and those that offered their expertise. And I hope, Ron, the next time I see you, it's in person. We'll see you soon.

Ron: Okay. Thanks, Amanda.

Amanda: So, we heard today that school readiness for infants and toddlers generally looks really different from an academic experience, but routines, interactions, play, environments, and, of course, relationships, offer those children the foundational experiences that we know prepare them for school and for life.