

Early Essentials Webisode 6

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Amanda Perez: Hey, I'm Amanda Perez with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and welcome again to Early Essentials. In today's webisode, we're talking about you. Just as young children are learning, you're learning, too. We asked a veteran teacher about her experience in getting started with infants and toddlers. Here's what she had to say.

Dolly Arthur: I was actually, "I want to learn every day." So, I was like in a learning process. I said, "Okay, let me do it, but teach me how to do it. I will definitely do it." So, I learned a lot of things.

Amanda: One of the most important lessons of this work is the central role that you play in services. But how do you take care of yourself as a learner, as a professional, in this work, and why is that care so important? We're here today at CentroNia, a community organization that offers Early Head Start services, among other things, here. We're meeting here today a few people who have done a lot of thinking about those questions and how they can help. Let's go meet them.

I'm thrilled to introduce Mary Ann Cornish from Higher Horizons in Falls Church, Virginia, where she's the executive director there at that Early Head Start program. You all have services to expectant families, home-based services, and center-based services, as well. Thank you for being here.

Mary Ann Cornish: Thanks for inviting me!

Amanda: Oh, of course. And Rosalba Bonilla-Acosta is the Maryland program director here at CentroNia, where we are. Here at the Early Head Start program, they also have services to expectant families, home-based services, those center-based services, as well. And we're thrilled to have you. I understand that you started here as an intern 25 years ago.

Rosalba Bonilla-Acosta: Correct.

Amanda: I'm wondering if you can help us understand why it is so important that staff pay particular attention to how they're feeling, and sort of taking care of themselves, as a part of this work.

Mary Ann: This is such a rewarding career, and I think it's important that new staff understand the importance of the work that they're doing with our youngest children and with the families. So, as they think about shaping their career and their lives in Head Start and Early Head Start, it's important for them to take care of themselves. It's important for them to realize the rewards that they're going to get by building a career in Head Start and Early Head Start.

Amanda: Rosalba, what would you add?

Rosalba: I think that it's important to understand that this is hard work; and it is important for the staff to be able to communicate and to share the importance of what they do. Stress is one of the things that people may feel, may encounter, and it is important for the staff to understand that we can – there is support throughout this career.

Amanda: But we also know that folks are entering into relationships with babies and with families; and they're not – and these are not surface relationships, right? So, I wonder if – Mary Ann, if you could talk a little bit about what it is to sort of be with children all day, with these young children, and what that experience is like for staff.

Mary Ann: I'd like to say it's a piece of cake, [Laughter] but in reality, it is hard work. And I think, as new staff come into the career, it's important that they know it's hard work and it's serious. And you have to take time and build in time for yourself and take care of yourself; so it is a combination of taking care of children and taking care of yourself.

Rosalba: Yeah, I totally agree. I think, like Mary Ann said, it is important to take care of ourselves. And one of the things that you have to do as an individual is to understand the signs of stress, understand when you are overwhelmed, and how you communicate that and how you take care of yourself.

Mary Ann: I think I go back to – to realizing that you have to have a balance.

Rosalba: The model for Early Head Start is a community-based model. Therefore, you have parents who are also staff and that brings – that possesses challenges and – and challenges for the parent and – and also the dual as staff. So, how do we help them set up, understand those boundaries that in one way you have the role of staff, but you're also a parent?

Amanda: Yeah. So, it's really important that folks understand sort of where their professional responsibilities begin and end, what their role is and also where that ends, and – so that they can make sure that they aren't taking on more than is really theirs to handle.

Mary Ann: Exactly.

Rosalba: Absolutely.

Amanda: So let's take a look for a second at some photographs and some video. I really want to help folks think about how people – how staff use themselves as a tool in this work. So, let's look, first, at some photographs from a center-based classroom. So, here, Señora Edith is playing with these children and doing some peek-a-boo with them, as we can see. Mary Ann, what do you see in these interactions?

Mary Ann: Well, first of all, she was very engaging. The children were engaged. There was definitely relationships with the adults and the children. And, the curiosity.

Amanda: I love that part where she's – that little face is right up next to hers. There's just so much care and love in that exact moment. Rosalba, what would you say?

Rosalba: What I would say is that we're definitely seeing how that teacher is using what she knows about her children and learning. Well, we know the children are learning through play while they're doing that activity. They're using vocabulary; they're using their social-emotional. They're using – they're making friendships; they're laughing. And the teacher really, really understands early child development. By doing this activity and the fact that she is – she is part of the play, it's important. She's modeling, she's facilitating, and children need to see these models.

Amanda: And especially through that relationship where she really knows those children.

Rosalba: Absolutely. And – and the other piece: Not only because they might be toddlers or infants, they are learning. They are learning. They're definitely learning. So, all of these intentional activities that we do with children is with a focus.

Amanda: Absolutely. Let's look at another video now; and this is a video of a home visit. So, here's a staff person working with a child and family. Let's see what she's doing.

[Video begins] Home Visitor: No. You like playing with these, huh? Because I brought some things to make Play-Doh with.

Val: Make Play-Doh?

Home Visitor: Mom said she had some things.

Mom: I have some things, too.

Home Visitor: Okay.

Val: Play-Doh!

Mom: You want me to grab some stuff?

Home Visitor: Yeah. Shall we make Play-Doh?

Val: Yes!

Home Visitor: You like Play-Doh?

Val: Yeah.

Home Visitor: I do, too.

Val: Do, too.

Mom: Well, before we make Play-Doh, I'd like to put all the frogs, monkeys, and ducks away.

Val: No.

Mom: Val.

Val: A green one! A green one.

Mom: That's too bad. I thought we were going to make Play-Doh.

Home Visitor: Oh, yeah, we were going to make Play-Doh.

Val: One! One duck.

Home Visitor: Do we have a hungry bag over there?

Mom: There is a hungry bag right here.

Home Visitor: Can you feed that hungry bag?

Mom: [Chomping sounds]

Home Visitor: Here, hungry bag.

Mom: Aah! I'm going to go in there.

Val: Bag! [Laughter] [Video ends]

Amanda: Okay. So, what did you see in that clip between that home visitor and that family?

Rosalba: What I see is that the home visitor is using what she knows about the family. She is facilitating, she's – as an observer, the interaction between the child and the family, and as a support system for them; at the same time, understanding the family culture and interest of the child's care. And as a home visitor, she's there to support the family and – as well as to share with the family what developmental practices are for her child– best developmental practices.

Amanda: What would you add, Mary Ann?

Mary Ann: Well, I think you can hardly determine who's the visitor and who's the mom. So, there's a shared relationship and they're balancing the activities off of each other and taking – they're building off of each other's leads. That's what I want to say. And that's a good thing, because, you know, it's not overpowering. There's a shared responsibility for the learning that's taking place.

Rosalba: Absolutely.

Amanda: And it speaks to, clearly, a very skilled mom, but also a really skilled home visitor who is really supporting this mom and taking this role in this child's life. We have a question – a relevant question, here, from the field. We're going to listen to this new provider with her new question.

Hope Bailey: I'm surprised at how tired I am at the end of the day. I feel like I'm taking care of everyone: the babies and the family. What can I do to take care of myself?

Amanda: And we have a response here from an experienced provider, as well.

Michelle Blowe: In the beginning, I would visit a city center water fountain to decompress before I attended to my own family. I would walk, I would read, and sometimes I would even take a nap; and it did a world of good for me and my family. Now, during the day, I do deep breathing and I don't sweat the small things. I tell myself, "You are not Superwoman, who can save the world, but you are a super woman who can help families make positive changes by building positive, trusting relationships."

Amanda: We have another input here from a family child care provider.

Virginia Dee: I exercise every day and I also eat what I'm supposed to eat. I eat with the children, so I eat what they're eating, and we eat a very healthy diet. And I try to get enough sleep, but that's the hard part, is – is going to sleep early enough.

Amanda: So, we heard lots of specific strategies from folks there. Rosalba, what would you say is an important way to take care of yourself as a staff person?

Rosalba: I think it's important, first of all, to understand that this is hard work. And looking – looking for signs of stress. We – we do our best to look for those signs in our staff when they're stressed and to be able to support them and to provide them with – with mental health services, as well as other services that they need. It is important for the staff to understand that these services are not only targeted to families, but it's also targeted to the staff. You are part of a community, you are part of this building strong foundations, and we are here to support you.

Amanda: I love the way that you phrased that, that they're not just for the families, they're also available to staff. Mary Ann, what would you add?

Mary Ann: I think taking care of yourself is so important, and being able to find ways to – to stay focused, and just – just getting a good balance. Sometimes you feel like you're isolated, you're in this all by yourself. And I think staff also feel that way; but once they sit down and talk with other staff, they realize, "Well, I'm going through the same thing. You know, I should've talked to you two months ago before I went home feeling overwhelmed." So, just being able to share challenges, share concerns, and kind of decompress with each other is just as important.

Amanda: Well, it's interesting – right? – because every individual staff person will have a really different way of dealing with stress and really trying to figure out what that is for you, what it is that's going to be helpful to you, as you're sort of monitoring for these signs. We have another question here from a new provider; let's listen.

Moneth McCrory: I feel really responsible in this job. It's a little scary. What if I'm missing something? Families are relying on me.

Amanda: So, that's a big question; and before you all respond, let's listen to Dan Bonior. He's a home visitor from Maine.

Dan Bonior: Trusting yourself to take on these responsibilities is one tool that you can have in your toolbox when things get a little difficult. But it's also good to accept the idea that, as caring and as professional as you are, sometimes you might need some help. It's important to have a network of other professionals that you go to when you need some information or advice; and because you have good support, you know who to talk to and who to go to for resources and information. Ask your coworkers to be in your network. Advocate to your program managers and your supervisors for good training and good supervision. Meet with other agencies. Attend team meetings for your families. Reach out and call another professional to share information. Having a good team behind you and knowing when to use that team will make our job just a little bit less scary.

Amanda: Wow. So, a lot of information from Dan. A lot of professional associations can be really helpful places to find sort of resources, and training and community, as well. Places like the National Association

for the Education of Young Children; places like the National Association for Family Child Care. What would you guys add as strategies to really support folks?

Rosalba: We make our best to partner – to pair new staff with staff who are not only experienced, but also professional and have understanding of the community we serve, have understanding of the language, have understanding of what is needed in this community. And that's really important, building positive relationships with families.

Amanda: Definitely. Mary Ann, what would you say about that?

Mary Ann: I think my advice to staff would be – is: We all make mistakes, and it's okay. You know, the work is intense and it's complex, and you've heard everybody talk about how many roles that you have to wear in any given day. But I think it's – it's okay to share with a colleague or a mentor or someone else that, you know, "I really kind of screwed this up today," and it's okay! You're going to come back to work tomorrow and you're just going to do a better job!

Amanda: And can you say a few words about reflective supervision as well, Mary Ann?

Mary Ann: I think reflective supervision is so important because this gives you an opportunity to share with your supervisor or with another individual actually how you're dealing with some of the challenges and to be able to review the day; review a situation with another person and to share openly and honestly to get some feedback and to discuss options and other strategies, alternative ways of doing things. It's a great support system.

Amanda: Well, and we know that not everybody has access to reflective supervision, but we certainly want to celebrate it for folks who do. So, do either of you have final words that you would offer to folks who are new to these services?

Mary Ann: My final words are: this is great work. It's challenging work, but I think it's so rewarding. And I think that as – new people coming into the field may get a little distracted because they're overwhelmed, but I think that with the support, the training that's offered in Head Start and Early Head Start, and realize that this is a career path. You started as an intern, and here you are now. So I think that realizing that if you want to build a career, this is an excellent opportunity. There are resources that are available; there are support systems that are available. And you can mentor others; folks can mentor you. So I would say approach it as a career versus a job or a profession.

Rosalba: I totally agree. Teachers and people in this field should never underestimate our role in the children's and families' lives. We are that first contact. We are the foundation for those children. So, we have a big role; and therefore, it is important that we take care of ourselves in order to take care of others.

Amanda: We want to thank the folks that offered their questions today. We want to thank the folks that offered their tips, as well, online. And I cannot thank you all enough for being here today to share with us. I'm going to let you guys get back to your busy schedules, but thank you for being here.

Rosalba: Thank you.

Amanda: We've thanked our faculty, and I want to thank you too. Remember how essential you are to the experience of children and families in this program. Take care of yourselves. Thank you for all that you do, and thanks for tuning in to "Early Essentials."

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