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Getting to Know New Directions Early Head Start



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If you are an early childhood education professional, you have most likely heard of the Head Start preschool program for children from low income families. But did you know there is also for younger children? According to Head Start's website,

Early Head Start programs promote the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of infants and toddlers through safe and developmentally enriching caregiving. This prepares these children for continued growth and development and eventual success in school and life. Following the general Head Start model, Early Head Start programs support parents, both mothers and fathers, in their role as primary caregivers and teachers of their children. Programs assist families in meeting their own personal goals and achieving self-sufficiency across a wide variety of domains, such as housing stability, continued education, and financial security. (Head Start ECLKC)

New Directions Early Head Start

In Delaware, New Directions Early Head Start (NDEHS) is housed in the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC). I was able to chat with director Heidi Beck about the important ways that NDEHS serves our communities. The supports provided by NDEHS are twofold, serving children birth-three years and their families at home and partnering with early childhood education programs to serve additional children and families.

Families receiving support through the home visiting program receive visits once per week. These visits can begin during pregnancy. The home visitors work with the families using the Parents as Teachers curriculum with the philosophy that family members are the child's first teachers.

NDEHS also works with three early childhood education programs to serve additional children ages birth to three and their families. NDEHS works with early childhood education programs to improve program quality, encourage family involvement, and decrease staff/child ratios. One of the main focuses is on the program and family partnership. During our conversation, Heidi mentioned that parent/family involvement is so much more than showing up for an event. Family involvement should be embedded throughout the program with families playing an active role in the child's learning and development. For this to be successful, it is also important for families to understand the work that educators are doing in the classrooms.

NDEHS is committed to providing the support to programs to help them meet the goals of Early Head Start. This includes the availability of multiple support staff including the following:

- Mental health consultant
- Health consultant
- Nutrition consultant
- Coaches/mentors
- Family support staff



Building the Bridge

One of the phrases Heidi used during our conversation was “building bridges.” This struck me for many reasons. After so much time adjusting to our new normal during the pandemic times, it has been necessary to reconnect and build some new bridges within our early childhood education community. During the past almost three years we have had to rethink how we encourage parent involvement while social distancing. We have used technology to bridge the gap between home and education, using Zoom and other platforms for conferences, learning activities, book reading, and even family events. We can certainly look to NDEHS for more ideas on how to navigate the home and early childhood education program connection.

In addition, we can view NDEHS as a model for holistic support of families. We know that children need to feel supported and loved at home and in their early childhood education programs in order to thrive. Working together with families leads to better outcomes for children. We are so fortunate to have such a great example of this system for our children of Delaware.

Resources

Click [here](#) for additional information on New Directions Early Head Start.

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