

# Engaging Families Early & Often

A dual-generation strategy can help extend the benefits of early learning

*By Deborah Bergeron*

**A**fter spending three decades in K–12 education, Head Start was new territory for me. But only one week after I was appointed to serve as the director of the Office of Head Start, I met a woman named Cynthia who told me about her experience as a Head Start child in 1965. “Head Start saved my mother’s life,” she said.

Cynthia spent the next 20 minutes telling me how important Head Start was to her and her family, five decades later. I was stunned! How many programs can have that kind of impact?

As a school administrator, my influence on families was never that significant. My focus was always on the child—the student—and his or her achievement. Trained never to blame the family for a child’s difficulties, I might have actually *ignored* families, not wanting their circumstances to stand in the way of a child’s ability to succeed.

I now know that the potential to forever change the trajectory of a child’s life is tied to what happens with the parents and family. Academic, social, and emotional skills are important for children’s success, but radical engagement of the family is the “secret sauce” that leads to favorable long-term outcomes like Cynthia’s.



## Influence and Impact

Parents are their children's first teachers and the most influential people in their lives. This belief is fundamental to the Head Start program and it is evidenced through hundreds of stories about Head Start's impact.

Head Start programs support families while inviting their contributions to the program. Parents play a key role in core programming such as curriculum and hiring. This participation ensures that Head Start is responsive to family and community needs, which leads to better child outcomes.

At the same time, Head Start helps parents achieve their own life goals. This support might include developing a plan for and connections to housing, jobs, and education. Many parents become classroom volunteers; some go from unemployed to working. Still others finish community college and ultimately achieve advanced degrees. These changes have a tremendous effect on the child.

## Both Generations Benefit

Research suggests that this radical "Two Gen" approach to family engagement might offer the greatest chance for success in disrupting generational poverty and improving child outcomes. Parent education has long been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of family income; it also predicts children's educational outcomes and long-term economic outcomes.

Incorporating a Two Gen model can help schools create better outcomes for students most at risk of failing or dropping out of school. There are several things you should consider to support such an approach:

1. **Ask parents about their goals for themselves and their families.** Document goals to help families think long-term. Your staff's interest in the well-being of the entire family will go a long way in the classroom.
2. **Extend existing work.** Your local Head Start engages with families in a way that might seem radical. Your school can align parent engagement and support with your feeder Head Start program. Your school could also continue the community partnerships established by Head Start to support parents.
3. **Train teachers to first ask parents about the child's interests, strengths, and dreams.** Ask parents what they're worried about. This helps parents feel at ease,

particularly at the beginning of the first parent-teacher conference.

4. **Invite parents into your schools.** Create a welcoming environment, and offer parents opportunities to participate in planning activities. Demonstrate respect for parents' perspectives and values. If you're feeling really bold, consider the Head Start Policy Council model, which empowers parents to have meaningful input into program decisions.
5. **Build staff buy-in.** As with any change, you will need your staff to support the effort. Staff might perceive Two Gen work as more on their plates. It takes trust and work to engage parents directly in the school process. Get your staff's ideas about what might be most effective for your school, and implement the ideas that make sense.

Before tackling these duties, you must make families the center of decision-making. Children need consistency and stability in their lives, and that comes from their families. It might seem incongruous, but making time and space for parents will change outcomes for children for the better.

"I enrolled my daughter with Head Start, and from that day on, my life forever changed," one parent said. "I began volunteering in any way I could. I attended the Knoxville Leadership program. I had many great opportunities to attend conferences. These are things that I never thought I would ever get to do.

"I learned how to be a better parent," she added. "I learned skills to make my kids self-sufficient. Today, all [five of] my children are productive citizens. None of them has ever been in trouble with the law, drugs, or alcohol. I have attended college and have my dream job. I am also six classes away from graduating with two Ph.D.s."

As a former public school administrator, everything I did revolved around the child—and it was this thinking that allowed us to achieve success on test scores. But I've learned that expanding my focus to the whole family, particularly for families living in poverty, ties the short-term result of test scores to better outcomes for the child in my classrooms and beyond. Shoot for long-term successes instead. 

**Deborah Bergeron** is the director of the Office of Head Start.



## PARENTAL BENEFITS

A 2014 analysis of data from the Head Start Impact Study says that the parents of 3-year-old children enrolled in Head Start programs experienced steeper increases in their own educational attainment within three years compared to non-Head Start parents. The correlation was especially strong among parents who already had some college experience and among African American parents.