**Early Childhood Health**

**Health Literacy Highlighted**

The health information readily available today is not usable by most Americans. Nearly 9 out of 10 adults have limited health literacy and find it difficult to fully use and follow everyday health information. 1,2,3 Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.4 Limited health literacy affects people’s ability to adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors and is associated with worse health outcomes and higher costs.5 Without clear information and an understanding of prevention and healthy lifestyles, people are more likely to skip necessary medical tests, visit the emergency room more often, and have a hard time managing chronic diseases.1

Quotes from past participants of the NCECHW health literacy training:

* *“I am so excited to bring this training back to my community!”*
* *“In 10 years of working with Head Start, this has been the BEST training I’ve ever attended. Not only did we receive valuable information, we were shown through various modalities how to implement! Thanks so much!”*
* *“I have to share that I have not been this excited about a training in a long time. Even though times are tough with budget cuts, it is so nice to have something positive to focus on.”*
* *“The training of trainers was a life-changing experience. I feel motivated to take this program to my families and help change their lives.”*

Early childhood programs can have an active role in improving the health literacy of their families by building partnerships with parents and caretakers focused on the health and well-being of their children. Parental health literacy is defined as a parent’s knowledge and understanding about basic health topics as well as their ability to navigate health systems,7 which is linked to health and long-term outcomes of their young children. Numerous studies have found a link between low parental health literacy and child health outcomes and found evidence that interventions providing written materials and educational opportunities can increase parental health knowledge and improve health behaviors.6,8 To effectively reach parents and change behavior, interventions need to be engaging, culturally sensitive, and in a clear language that can be understood. Improving parental health literacy also has the potential to improve children’s school readiness and long-term outcomes, as research documents a strong link between child health and later educational success.9,10,11

The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness (NCECHW) has successfully worked with Head Start programs nationwide to improve their families’ knowledge, skills, and understanding of basic health topics. The NCECHW Health Care Institute utilizes a structured approach to health education using business management principles such as marketing, planning, data collection, and follow-up, and provides low-literacy health materials in multiple languages. More than 130,000 families have been trained since 2001. Published research has shown consistent results: the average number of emergency room and doctor visits among parents decreased 58% and 41% respectively (p<.001). Further, work days missed by the primary caretaker per year decreased 42%, and school days missed per year decreased 29% (p <.001). Children spend more time learning in the classroom and parents have increased knowledge in health promoting behaviors. For future Health Care Institutes, teams from both Head Start and child care programs will be able to apply to attend this in-depth training and provide health education with families of children in their programs.

A parent who attended the training at his local Head Start program shared:

*“The information was presented in a way that even experienced parents had new learning. I am more comfortable trying to handle illness or injury that can be dealt with at home. I enjoyed the training so much that I have encouraged our Maternal Home Visiting staff to collaborate on the planning and facilitating of a class as well. Thank you!”*

All early childhood programs must work together to ensure that health information and services are provided in ways that meet the needs and interest of all people. Improving health literacy should continue to be a national priority.

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