

**“Excellence and Equity of Care and
Education for Children and Families Part 2”
Program Transcript**

FEMALE SPEAKER: Welcome back, Ms. Vasquez, as we continue our conversation about the current issues and trends in the early childhood field, we turn the spotlight today on the children and their families. And specifically, on challenges to equity of care and education.

First, when we think about availability and access, what are some challenges to equitable availability and access to quality care and education?

MS. VASQUEZ: The first thing that comes to mind is cost. We believe that here, in the United States, that we don't have a class system. We profess that equality and how every one has access or the opportunity is for all, and I think, that that's a little far away from what the reality is.

When we look at education, whichever area of education we look at, the biggest disparity in access is related to cost. If you can afford to pay, you stand a better chance of getting higher education.

The interesting thing about the United States is that we do have programs where families qualify by income. And so we have Head Starts and state preschool programs where children can get high quality services at no cost, but that leaves a huge section of the population hanging.

There is those who are not poor enough to qualify, and those who are not rich enough to pay. And that's the majority of us, who don't have, many times, the knowledge of how to qualify a good program from another, that we don't have the resources to even access if there was a good program. Is there a bus that takes me there?

There are social issues that are associated with that accessibility and availability.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Including infrastructure, right?

MS. VASQUEZ: Exactly. Beyond what we can do in the early childhood environments, but they're certainly very much connected to it. And something that we need to keep in mind and keep abreast of the conversations. If we're looking at quality education and meeting the needs of families, we can't just think of how much we put in the classroom in terms of materials. We need to think of the world around us.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I think that's a very important point, that you talk about the infrastructure inequalities that exist. I think, that there's also an inequality in terms

of the funding stream, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, how that interrelates to the whole issue of equity of access and availability?

MS. VASQUEZ: I know about the world of Head Start. I spent a good number of years there and the whole goal is to reach out for those who are less fortunate. Because Head Start literally means giving children a jump start, helping them be ready for kindergarten, and it's a well-rounded program that addresses the issues of children as part of the family, as part of society. The intentions are really good.

The funding has come and has not stopped. Does it match up the need? I would question that. We often see in the statistics that programs turn in with their grant, that the need is much greater than what is available to service that community. And the funding has not changed because there is always the dilemma of, do we give it to the preschool? Do we give it to the school age children? Do we put the money on health? As if these were really choices that we had to make.

It's almost as, when I work with homeless families, they had to think about, do I spend my day looking for food or do I spend my day looking for a job? As if these are choices. We live in the world that doesn't necessarily make sense, and we seem to be comfortable with it. We accept it as if it is normal for us to have these conditions. And I don't think it is normal, and I don't think that we should accept them.

We need to figure out how is it that we put forth that commitment that we have for children? We have a very interesting way in our society of feeling comfortable with this concept and pretending that the problem is maybe not as important today, that it will be more important tomorrow. But we can't wait. We have children growing up, going to school, attending classes without all the social needs met, without food in their tummies, without someone knowing how safe their environments are. It's very easy to turn around and blame parents, and say, it's their fault. It's their obligation. I don't know any parent who doesn't want the best for their child. I haven't met one yet. In my 26 years of this work, I have never met a parent who does not want the best for their child. What they can provide varies.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I very much concur with your assertion that the issue of inequity in terms of access and availability is a social issue, is one that concerns all of us. Could you share with us a couple of examples either all of these hardships that you encountered, and, if possible, also of ways it was overcome through a particular program or initiative that you know about.

MS. VASQUEZ: When I think about servicing children, I cannot separate the child from the parent. So when I think about that, I can think of places that I worked with where I served as an early childhood professional. There was a time when I had the opportunity and the privilege to work with women who were incarcerated, and they had children. When I came in to working with that

population, my assumption was that their children would be in foster care, that they will be removed. And nothing was further from the truth than my assumption.

That's not what happens. They care about their children. They want the best for their children, just like any other my mother would. And they make sure that when their children are born, even if they are in prison, that their children go to the next family member that they have contact with. Because they also value family ties and the importance of culture and the importance of nurturing.

And so when I think about that, and when I look at our profession, and what is it that we need to think or what is it that we need to pay attention to prioritize, the first thing is asking parents, what do you want from your child? Is not a rocket science, as we sometimes think it is. It's great to start at the Piaget. It's great to know the stages of development.

But when it comes to working with people, nothing replaces the conversation. What do you want for your child? How would you like to see your child succeed? And then, figure out what is it that we can bring into our relationship that is going to support that? What tools do we give parents?

Preschool is a window of opportunity, both for the child and for the parent. This is the beginning of a career for both of them, so what do we do? What contributions do we make so that they can carry through the rest of the time? As a practitioner, I really didn't worry too much about the ABCs. I really didn't worry too much about the one, two, threes. They were part of what we did, but, to me, it was more important to give children vocabulary.

We live in a world where parents have such pressures, they don't have time to stop and ask how was your day? They don't have time to stop and explain to children. They have their explanations in their heads, and I often tell parents, you need to stop and you need to say what you're thinking.

At breakfast, if the child asks for soda, and the parent is rushing and trying to get out of the house, they'll say, no. But what they're thinking is, that's not healthy. I love you. I want you to be nourished. I want you to be ready for school, milk is the better choice right now. You can have soda later. They just don't stop to say it. And we live in such a drive-through environment that the important things that need to be said, sometimes get omitted from our daily life.

So figuring out, how is it that we help? We call that to attention to parents, they'll change their behavior. The parents are treated with respect. If they feel that they have safe environments for their children, if they feel good about leaving their children under our care, they will be better parents automatically. We wouldn't need to have parenting classes.

FEMALE SPEAKER: So what I hear you saying, and tell me if I hear you correctly, is that part of that whole equity issue, in terms of access and availability, also includes reaching out to the parents, which are an inseparable part of this child/parent unit, and that as an early childhood professional, we have an obligation to help parents become their best and help them fill in those areas that they themselves might not necessarily fill in because they don't have the time, they don't have the resources, and so on, but that's part of the equity issue, would you agree?

MS. VASQUEZ: It's a very important piece of it.