

# A Relationship-Based Approach to Professional Development in the Early Childhood Educational Setting

## The Role of Relationships in Collaboration and Implementation

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### Abstract

Hearts and Minds on Babies (HMB) is an innovative, attachment-based training for Early Head Start (EHS) staff and parents, developed through a collaboration between university-based researchers and clinicians and community-based EHS educators. This article describes HMB, our collaboration, and lessons learned when infusing infant and early childhood mental health principles within professional development training for early childhood educators. The authors explain how to frame attachment needs within the goals of the educational setting, honor culture and diversity, and take time to allow for the development of safe and secure relationships. Stories from a university-based HMB facilitator, an EHS teacher, and an EHS administrator highlight how HMB supports the participants' emotional response as they are learning new ways of being with very young children; a parallel experience related to the needs of the children themselves.

Early childhood educators are critical in the lives of infants and toddlers. They provide essential care that promotes the young child's overall well-being and social and emotional health. In programs such as Early Head Start (EHS), teachers

provide responsive, sensitive, and individualized care, yet are also responsible for tasks such as daily documentation, maintaining curriculum model fidelity, and participation in ongoing professional development (PD) training (Phillips et al., 2016). Moreover, EHS serves infants and families who are often experiencing interpersonal and community risks and stressors (Bullough et al., 2013; Jones Harden et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2016). For the EHS teacher, serving families that are under stress can add worries and struggles to their work (Bullough et al., 2013; Phillips et al., 2016). PD training, essential

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Early childhood educators are critical in the lives of infants and toddlers and provide essential care that promotes the young child's overall well-being and social and emotional health.

to supporting classroom quality (Manning et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2009), can address these worries and help teachers strengthen skills and explore new ways of responding to children.

Scholars recommend that PD in the early childhood field needs to address the psychosocial experiences of teachers and focus on supporting the teacher–child relationship (Egert et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2016; Whitaker et al., 2012). Hearts and Minds on Babies (HMB) is an innovative, attachment-based training for EHS supervisors, teachers, and parents. HMB was modeled after an evidence-based caregiving and mental health intervention, initially developed for mothers of children under 5 years (called Mom Power; Muzik et al., 2015; Rosenblum et al., 2017, 2018; Swain et al., 2017). Later the intervention model was adapted for fathers (Fraternity of Fathers); the whole family (Strong Families; Julian et al., 2018; Rosenblum & Muzik, 2014) and subsequently, as described in this article, for EHS supervisors, teachers, and parents (HMB). HMB aims to improve responsive caregiving by increasing reflective functioning, which enables adults to respond in ways that consider their own and others' thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Thus, HMB infuses principles of infant and early childhood mental health by paying careful attention to the experience and the emotional response of the trainee. HMB also supports adult stress reduction and emotion regulation by introducing mindfulness-based self-care exercises. Grounded in attachment theory, HMB helps teachers and parents make the connection between meeting children's need for comfort and closeness and their growing ability to explore and learn.

This article describes HMB's relationship-based approach to PD and parent training and the experiences of a university-based HMB facilitator (Beverly); an EHS assistant education manager at Matrix Human Services (Sherry); and an EHS teacher at Matrix who participated in the HMB teacher training, co-facilitated parent training, and then co-facilitated the teacher training (Shameika). Through their stories, lessons learned over the course of the project are highlighted.

## Collaboration Created a Unique PD Approach

As Michigan was expanding EHS services across the state, administrators at Matrix were committed to providing high-quality PD to their teachers. Along with university-based researchers and clinicians, Matrix staff became part of the curriculum development team and took the first steps at adapting Mom Power (Muzik et al., 2015; Rosenblum et al., 2017, 2018; Swain et al., 2017) into a training program for teachers. They helped the team understand the day-to-day responsibilities of early childhood teachers, the importance of classroom coaching, and acceptable delivery methods. Throughout the project, the relationship between the university and the EHS agencies supported the development of a training that was relevant and feasible.

HMB offers 28 hours of PD for teachers across 7–14 group sessions and three individual coaching sessions (HMB-Teacher). After teachers learn to use the concepts in their classroom, they are trained to share the content with parents at three parent meetings and during drop-off, pick-up, parent–teacher conferences, and home visits (HMB+Parent). EHS supervisors (e.g., center directors, education associates, mental health consultants) attend their own training, which provides them an opportunity to learn the HMB concepts, think about how the concepts apply to relationships with staff, and experience the reflective stance of the facilitator (HMB+Administrator). This group supports administrative buy-in and infuses attachment-based concepts within all levels of relationships that exist within an early childhood setting.

Initially, the PD groups were facilitated by university-based clinicians as part of an EHS University Partnership grant that aims to develop and test interventions for EHS parents and teachers. As part of a scale-up phase, EHS agencies trained their staff to deliver HMB. For a more detailed description of HMB concepts and the EHS University Partnership, see Sheridan et al. (in press).

## The How of HMB: Attention to the Experience

HMB is a unique approach to PD in that co-facilitators deliver the curriculum using a reflective stance. That is, they are not experts that pass along knowledge—they engage in conversations that allow for the participant's emotional response to be described, validated, and explored in a way that increases reflective functioning and is parallel to the connection and exploration needs of children and families. In addition, HMB encourages curiosity, skepticism, and vulnerability. Thus, a group atmosphere that feels safe, accepting, and considerate of the thoughts and opinions of participants is essential. In the infant and early childhood mental health field, it is widely recognized that enhancing the well-being of young children involves responding to their feelings and needs in a sensitive, culturally relevant, and consistent manner (Jones Harden, 2010; Weatherston, 2000).

HMB facilitators recognize that EHS supervisors, teachers, and parents benefit from a parallel experience in which their feelings and needs are met in a similar way, thus promoting the integration of HMB concepts into their unique cultural perspectives and daily lives.

The HMB Program is not a typical approach to PD in early childhood settings. Often training is offered in a lecture-style format that provides information, but that does not support the transfer of knowledge to practice (Balas & Boren, 2000; Fixsen et al., 2001). Learning in the context of ongoing mentoring or coaching relationships, with opportunities to practice using the material, is more beneficial. As the university-based clinicians began offering the HMB groups, it was clear some teachers had never participated in a training that asks them to reflect on their own emotional response to the work and talk about concepts in terms of their beliefs, values, and caregiving experiences.

## The Impact of HMB: Feeling Seen and Heard

**Shameika.** I got my start as an early childhood educator at a small local child care center. It wasn't until I relocated to a larger organization that I realized the power and importance of early childhood education on young children and their families. When I was hired as an EHS Teacher, I hoped this position would allow me to use what I learned through formal child development associate training in a more meaningful and impactful way. This was a "step up" from what I was used to in terms of opportunities to better the lives of at-risk children and families, as well as opportunities for career advancement and development.

I was introduced to the HMB Program and research study in the summer of 2018. As a former student of Wayne State University's psychology program, I felt a sense of alumni pride and wanted to be a part of research at my alma mater. The allure of compensation to participate initially drew me in (as it did some of my colleagues), as did my drive for continuous PD. I wanted to learn more about the program and what it had to offer. I have to admit, I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but I knew I had to be a part of it.

The first HMB meeting was scheduled to be an 8-hour day, and I dreaded the thought of being in "just another work training." HMB was the complete opposite. With learning all of the HMB concepts in just 1 day, I was drawn in and onboard 100%. In the six subsequent meetings, I felt a sense of community. The HMB facilitators took the time to listen and understand, and they provided very helpful tools to use in the classroom. And because the information came from a place of understanding, it was received better. I felt heard, understood, and most important, I felt as though I was receiving information that I could actually use in the classroom. As the groups went on, I became more and more connected to the material and to the HMB vision as a whole. This connection I made with the HMB concepts helped me build deeper relationships with my students because I was better able to understand the why



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Hearts and Minds on Babies aims to improve responsive caregiving by increasing reflective functioning, which enables adults to respond in ways that consider their own and others' thoughts, beliefs, and emotions.

behind their behaviors. It was no longer, "What can I do to stop this behavior?" but "How can I better understand this behavior in order to help the child overcome it?" I became better able to communicate with my students by listening to understand and no longer listening to give a reaction, response, or quick solution.

**Beverly.** When you truly believe in a curriculum, program, or set of concepts, you go into a training with the goal of bringing everyone onboard. However, in the real world, we found that while some participants were open and receptive to the concepts, others struggled. For example, some teachers with very young children of their own found it difficult to think about being responsive, available, and attentive to the children in their classrooms. In order to do their job as an infant-toddler teacher, they had to leave their own baby in the care of others. Fortunately, there were opportunities for facilitators to meet with teachers outside of the group and support them as they voiced their concerns, fears, and frustrations. We came to understand and accept that there were varying degrees of readiness to explore the concepts and connect with facilitators and each other. As facilitators we had to understand the difference between willingness and readiness, and we had to be willing to support and meet the needs of struggling teachers, knowing that doing so would in turn allow them to support and meet the needs of the children in their care. We came to understand that while some participants came to the training excited to hear concepts that reinforced their beliefs or gave them a way of being that they wanted for themselves and the children in their care, others had beliefs or life challenges that made a different way of being difficult. For them, integration and internalization of the concepts did not happen immediately but evolved with support.

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**Hearts and Minds on Babies** focuses on the centrality of the relationships between the teacher and the children in their care.

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A valuable lesson for me as a facilitator was learning the power of the group experience. HMB participants responded to the opportunity to be supported and heard. Although HMB content was important, the environment of the group was critical. An environment that allowed teachers to be part of a group working toward a common goal and where their thoughts and opinions were heard and accepted was what allowed them to explore these concepts in their classrooms. Our HMB groups often ended with teachers expressing how meaningful it was to them to have a safe environment where they could express their feelings and be heard.

**Sherry.** One of my first tasks as the assistant education manager was to oversee the HMB program. I had heard of HMB during my time as a teacher and coach, but was now asked to join an administrator's group. I was nervous because I didn't know much about HMB. When I entered the meeting, I saw familiar faces, which helped me to feel more relaxed, and the HMB facilitators were inviting and welcoming. My first meeting was the group's second meeting, so I was on the quiet side because they seemed so in tune and engaging with each other. However, just listening was a great experience.

The next meeting, I was excited and engaged with the other participants. I began to understand the concepts, and I fell in love with HMB. Being with a group of EHS center managers and administration from different agencies made me realize our frustrations were similar. In that meeting, we talked about our staff, and the facilitators helped us to use HMB concepts to understand their perspectives and think through our responses before reacting to a situation. One example was about a teacher who was upset about some technical issues she was having in the classroom. Instead of coming into the classroom and directing her to remain engaged with the children, it was important to understand that, at the time, she was worried about being able to complete her work and document her observations. Thus, she needed someone to value and listen to her emotional experience before she would be able to return her focus to the children. As leaders, we are groomed to get

the job done and don't always take time to understand where someone may be coming from, you just know you need to fix the problem at hand so you can move on to the next situation.

I drove home after that meeting thinking how HMB helps me understand myself and the space that I was in, which helped me to understand someone else's perspective, so problems can be successfully handled by both parties. Having administration, teachers, and parents all on the same page communicating, supporting, and respecting each other's role will definitely give our children the advantage they need for a great head start of learning how to thrive in this world. HMB knows and understands this and has a unique way of targeting all these important relationships.

## Supporting Sustainability

EHS University Partnership grantees are encouraged to think about sustainability and to fully partner with EHS sites. As such, the final year of the grant was used to build capacity within our partner sites to deliver the HMB training to their staff and parents. Each site selected staff to be trained as a facilitator and to deliver the intervention in their EHS center together with a more experienced facilitator. This is another unique PD perspective—to use staff experts versus calling in outside experts for training. Conversations with parents helped HMB developers understand that they would be more likely to attend parent groups if they knew and felt comfortable with the person providing the training, especially if the facilitator was also their child's teacher. Knowing this meant that administration would have to make decisions about which staff would participate in the training and how they would provide support. For example, how will EHS make time for staff members to participate in facilitator training, planning and debriefing, reflective supervision, and the group itself? Matrix chose to have teachers run HMB trainings at their agency.

## Challenges and Benefits of Using Staff Experts

**Sherry.** The new HMB teacher group, offered by one of our EHS teachers together with the university-based HMB facilitator, was presented to our teachers during the new school year orientation. By the end of that training day, more than 20 teachers were on board. It felt great to see this enthusiastic response, and I was excited to know that I would be overseeing an opportunity to help our agency grow. I scheduled HMB meetings on PD days to minimize disruptions in the classrooms and had to make sure time slots were not overlapping with other mandatory trainings. I felt good at what I accomplished.

However, there were some barriers. After reaching out to the teachers who were interested, they shared concerns about having to meet every PD day. They were worried that it would take time away from attending other required trainings, completing daily notes, and addressing important tasks in their classrooms. In addition, due to other scheduled PD trainings, meeting rooms in many of the centers and administrative offices

were unavailable, and it was difficult to fit in all of the other required EHS trainings. It took time to communicate across agency programs to address these barriers. Unfortunately, this led to a much smaller teacher group than we had hoped.

Because I am committed to HMB, I was able to work through the challenges that occurred. The HMB supervisor group helped me learn to listen and be flexible; I was able to value and respond to a variety of different needs and perspectives, foremost the teachers. Going into a new year, I can anticipate what is ahead of me when it comes to supporting the center supervisors and facilitators, ensuring classroom coverage, and organizing schedules. I will ask for more support from my supervisor and management, and from other content areas, as we continue to ensure we are all working together for the benefit of the children and their families.

**Shameika.** When offered the chance to co-facilitate a parent group, I jumped at the opportunity to further my understanding of the HMB concepts in this new and challenging role. We were able to present the curriculum to the parents, and I felt a strong sense of connection by the end of the sessions. As a participant, I was able to see things only from my “side of the table” and as I saw it, the group ran perfectly well. As a facilitator, I got a slightly different perspective. Although there were some challenges in recruitment and parent attendance, we were able to build solid connections and relationships between teachers and parents that I feel will last a long time.

Later, I was presented with a new opportunity as an HMB facilitator for a teacher group. With this experience, I was able to be on the other side of the table yet again and was introduced to the curriculum using a different lens. However, the uncertainty of being able to be both a full-time teacher and facilitator was a big issue. I realized there would be challenges with having to be in two places at one time. I had to trust that my administrators would be supportive of me taking on this new role.

As a facilitator for a new group of teachers, I drew on my experience as a participant in my HMB teacher group. It was difficult at times, because this group didn’t seem “sold” on the concepts of HMB in the same way I had been. We encountered challenges including time constraints and inconsistent attendance and participation. Furthermore, participants often used the HMB meetings as a way to vent about problems they encountered, which left me and my co-facilitators feeling frustrated that we weren’t able to do more to help and frustrated at not being able to introduce all of the concepts. Each week during reflective supervision, the facilitators would meet and discuss how we could better meet the participants’ needs. As a facilitator, I had a fear of not doing enough. I felt as if I were not reaching the teachers in my group on the same deep level that I experienced in my group. Over time, however, as I was able to talk about my fear of not doing enough, I realized that they had a similar worry—because of all of their concerns and frustrations with their work, they also worried that they would not be enough for the children and families they worked with, that they would not be able to help their children and families grow. We realized they needed



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Attachment-based curricula make the connection between an infant’s need for safe and secure relationships to their ability to explore their environment and learn.

a listening ear in order to open up their minds to accepting the life-changing concepts that HMB was offering to them. Armed with this perspective, we realized that allowing them a place to express their genuine emotional response to this difficult work was exactly enough. It took some time, but once the participants felt heard, they were able to finally make connections with the HMB concepts and the challenges of their classrooms, and I felt the mission had been accomplished.

## Lessons Learned

The stories shared in the previous sections help to highlight the benefits and challenges of offering relationship-based PD within the context of early childhood education. The unique benefits of implementing HMB, an ongoing relationship-based PD, were, at times, challenging for busy EHS administrators, teachers, and parents.

## Infusing Relationship-Based Training Into an Educational Setting

HMB focuses on the centrality of the relationships between the teacher and the children in their care. Educational settings, including early childhood programs, are often performance-based and as such focused on meeting policy standards, maintaining student-to-teacher ratios, completing developmental assessments for the children, and providing resources for parents. Thus, programs may be hesitant to embrace a PD curriculum that is focused on teachers’ emotional needs as part of a parallel process to help meet the emotional needs of children and families and maintain a positive and inviting learning environment. Attachment-based

curricula like HMB make the connection between an infant's need for safe and secure relationships to their ability to explore their environment and learn. Framing school success and readiness as an outcome of safe, secure, and responsive relationships is a way for early educational settings to fully embrace the importance of the early attachment relationship.

### Honoring Culture and Diversity

Cultural beliefs play a critical role in adults' responses to the needs of infants and toddlers. It is essential to understand beliefs about feeding, playing with, and responding to a crying baby within a cultural context. This is not for the purposes of condoning or condemning practices but to gain greater understanding and frame alternate ideas in ways that can be heard, explored, and integrated. We learned that even when presenting a concept that is evidence-based, if it is not seen as connected to a person's reality or not seen as doable and relevant, we missed a valuable opportunity. For example, when discussing the needs of a crying baby, we established an environment that allowed teachers to explore cultural beliefs about spoiling. We listened non-judgmentally to beliefs that were sometimes reinforced within families and communities and responded in ways that promoted the exploration of a different way of thinking and being. Furthermore, we recognized that there is no set formula for being culturally relevant. The cultural norm for one part of a community is not necessarily the norm for the community at large. Similarly, cultural norms and beliefs vary widely between individuals. We learned to avoid assumptions and let individuals inform us of what is important to them. For example, some participants put a great deal of value on weaning from the bottle and pacifier by a certain age while others did not. In these cases, we offered a safe space to discuss and reflect on beliefs around weaning as a developmental milestone and how development itself impacts the teacher-child relationship. This reflective stance helped to develop, adapt, and present content in a respectful and relevant way.

*Hearts and Minds on Babies participants responded to the opportunity to be supported and heard.*

### Relationships Take Time

A recurring theme throughout this collaboration was having enough time. Time was a factor in the planning, implementation, and facilitation of HMB groups. Within individual groups, important conversations about the teachers' emotional

responses, their cultural perspectives, and frustrations about employment stressors were balanced with the sharing of the essential components of HMB. Taking time for participants to reflect on these various topics was important to establish rapport and develop trust between facilitators and group members. However, while doing so led to conversations that helped deepen relationships and led to an understanding of the concepts, participants and facilitators felt pressed by time constraints. Throughout HMB, it was important to frame this challenge within an attachment perspective. That is, the topics raised were emotionally evocative and difficult and therefore important to address within the group, helping the participants feel heard and responded to and more available to explore and learn the concepts being presented.

### Conclusion

The collaboration between HMB and our EHS partner sites, including Matrix, has been successful because all parties were willing to enter into relationships that allowed for the development of trust. Through these relationships we were able to take risks, make mistakes, address challenges, and experience growth. One important thing we learned was that it was essential to consider the complexity of relationships within the early childhood setting and take time to learn and appreciate the unique needs and cultural beliefs and values of those who were most important to the project. In these ways the project itself emulated an attachment relationship that builds a strong foundation from which individuals and programs can grow and develop.

### Acknowledgment

This work was made possible by the Administration for Children and Families Early Head Start University Partnerships Grant (90YR0092) to Ann M. Stacks (Wayne State University), Claire Vallotton (Michigan State University), and Maria Muzik (University of Michigan).

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