



Brianda Rodriguez with her sons Jeremiah (17 months) and Josue (3). Photo courtesy of Child Crisis Arizona.

Child Crisis Arizona extends its **EARLY HEAD START PROGRAM** to Mesa

By Margaret Beardsley

CHILD CRISIS ARIZONA is expanding its Early Head Start program to Mesa, and 114 additional children and mothers will be able to take advantage of the services this fall.

Established in 1994, Early Head Start programs help with the mental, social and emotional development of children from birth to age 3. In addition to education, Early Head Start provides children and their families with health, nutrition, social and other services. Early Head Start is responsive to each child and family's ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage.

The program has been a game changer for Brianda Rodriguez, a mother of two, who took advantage of Child Crisis Arizona's Early Head Start in Phoenix with her 3-year-old son Josue.

"I just felt like Josue needed it, because he wasn't speaking a lot," Rodriguez says. "He was just mumbling words, and I felt like if I put him in the program, he would just get better. ... Once he came (to Early Head Start), he started saying more words — just getting better at speaking."

The program has been so helpful with Josue that Rodriguez enrolled him in the regular Head Start program and put her youngest son, 17-month-old Jeremiah, into Early Head Start.

Cindy English, early-education manager for

Child Crisis, says the years from birth to age 3 are vital for language skills.

"We do a lot of reading of books," English says. "We work on building vocabulary, trying to close that gap of word knowledge. Kids who aren't being read to every day have fewer words, and when they get to kindergarten, they don't do as well. When they get to preschool, they don't do as well. So zero to 3 is really where it all starts."

Child Crisis started providing Head Start services after realizing how much it would help families they serve, English says.

"We started as a shelter, but we saw a need for more preventative care. Families needed education before they get to a shelter. We needed to educate families and help kids on the front end a little bit more, so that's really why we started our program," she says.

There also is a prenatal facet to their program, which includes home visits and working with mothers-to-be to make sure they're receiving prenatal care and support. Once the child is born, Head Start staffers continue home visits, teaching moms and dads about interacting with their babies. Also offered are parenting classes, English says.

Rodriguez says she and her husband learned about conscious discipline.

MORE INFORMATION

Early Head Start is funded by a federal grant, but Child Crisis Arizona must match up to 20 percent of those funds, so monetary donations are welcome, along with food, diapers and baby wipes. Donations can be dropped off at 2234 E. Polk St. in Phoenix or 817 N. Country Club Drive in Mesa.

Child Crisis Arizona offers emergency children's shelters, adoption and foster-care services and support, early-education programs, parenting classes and more. Learn more at childcrisisaz.org. To enroll a child in their Early Head Start program, call 602-889-6165. Early Head Start programs are available throughout Arizona.

Find a program via the Arizona Head Start Association, azheadstart.org, or the Early Head Start National Resource Center at eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov.

"It's just positive reinforcement, like talking to them positively. When they start throwing a tantrum, instead of giving them a spanking, we would just acknowledge their feelings and say, 'Oh, I know you're upset, but you can't do that right now,' and just be there with them until they're over it, or send them to their room to a safe place."

To qualify for Early Head Start, families must be below the 100 percent poverty level, which in 2016 is \$24,300 for a family of four. The in-home piece of Child Crisis Arizona's Early Head Start Program began in September in Mesa; the plan is to offer on-site services there by January.

Rodriguez, who was in nursing school when she enrolled her oldest son, thinks the program has made her family stronger.

"I think it's a great help," she says. "They helped me, so I could help my family be in a better place."

Margaret Beardsley of Phoenix is a staff writer and former television-news executive producer. She is the mother of two adult children.

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