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Head Start still making a difference after 50 years

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By **Debbie Kelley** (/author/debbie-kelley) Published: November 5, 2014 • 0

Casey Massengill doesn't know what she would have done without Head Start, a federally funded preschool program for low-income parents that is observing its 50th anniversary.

The wife of a soldier stationed at Fort Carson and mom of two young boys, Massengill noticed her oldest son, Emery, didn't seem to be talking like other kids his age.

"I have a background in early childhood education, and I knew when he was 1 his speech wasn't developing as it should," she said.

After "fighting with the doctor" for a few months, Massengill found the Community Partnership for Child Development, or CPCD. In its 26th year in Colorado Springs, CPCD is the local provider of Head Start classes and the Colorado Preschool Program, a state-funded early childhood education program that does not have income restrictions.

One in every six children in El Paso County lives in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and Colorado has one of the fastest growing poverty rates in the nation. CPCD has been affected by the trend. Enrollment is up 20 percent this year, with the organization serving 2,030 children - the most in its history.

There are several Head Start classrooms at Fort Carson, including Early Head Start, which is for pregnant women and children up to 3 years old, and Head Start for 3- to 5-year-olds.

Emery was in the toddler program last year. He attended two days a week, four hours a day, playing and developing vocal, social, emotional and motor skills.

"A month after he started, I started noticing a difference," Massengill said. "He started speaking using more words and was happier and socialized more."

This school year, he graduated to the classroom for older preschoolers, which he calls his "big boy class," instead of last year's "baby class." It's four hours a day, four days a week.

Emery is thriving, Massengill said.

"I love it, and Emery loves it," she said.

She credits the work of the Head Start program for his progress. Head Start goes beyond typical early childhood education programs by working individually and collectively with families, said Noreen Landis-Tyson, president and chief executive officer.

"We understand the children's first and best teachers are their parents," she said. "That's always been our approach since we were established in 1964 as part of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's War on Poverty."

Along with classroom time, each family in the program receives home visits from teachers.

"We form a partnership and bridge the gap between the home and the classroom," Landis-Tyson said.

"It's important for the family to understand the developmental stages and how to support their child so they can reach their full potential."

A speech therapist worked with Emery, too. There also are classes available for parents on topics such as nutrition and budgeting.

Goals of the student and parents are a big focus. One of the Massengill family's desires was to help Emery bond with his dad, Cameron.

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"Their relationship has grown so much," Massengill said. "When Cameron first came back from Iraq, Emery didn't know him, and Cameron would get frustrated because he didn't know how to make the connection. They had struggled, up until last year."

Research has shown that children who participate in an early childhood education program like Head Start are more likely to do well in school, stay out of trouble and graduate, Landis-Tyson said.

Renita Wolf, a financial executive with Wells Fargo who chairs the CPCD board, said without Head Start, "There would be many children who would fall between the cracks and would not get the education they need in early childhood development and benefits they need to be productive students and eventually adults."

The CPCD is preparing for its annual fundraiser, the Community Giving Breakfast. The event usually raises about \$100,000 that helps support the 25 percent of the Head Start programs not funded by the federal government.

"It's very important, and those monies do go back to serve children in our community," Wolf said. "I have a lot of passion for the organization because of the benefits it offers children in our community that they would maybe not otherwise have."

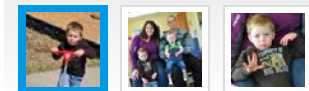
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