

STAFF HIGHLIGHTS

Reflections on 16 Years in Birth to 3 and the Evolution of Service Delivery in Natural Environments

-Pam Garman, former Winnebago County Birth to 3 Program Coordinator

As I looked around the room at the Kalahari in November 2007, of course I had many thoughts. I had been working in Birth to 3 since 1992 and my retirement date of February 8, 2008 was imminent and looming before me. The county Birth to 3 programs throughout Wisconsin have always attracted bright, forward thinking and energetic persons. I listened to the discussions and conversations about data collection and HSRS and had the thought: "When I retire, I wonder if anyone will remember what it was like in the trenches in the early 90's?"

Now, I am not sure its important to remember difficult and painful periods of "growth," but I do think it's fun and funny to be reminded that the things we take for granted in 2008 – natural environments, parent participation, outcome-based IFSP's – are the result of a tremendous effort on the part of Wisconsin counties, the State and the agencies who provide our training and support. As a recently retired veteran of the Birth to 3 movement, I was asked to share a retrospective with *EVENTS* readers about my career, since it encompassed dramatic change over the span of my 16 years of leadership with the Winnebago County Birth to Three Program. I am a true believer that, as we age, we only remember the things that we are supposed to. I hope my retrospective look will include what I remember as well as what I should have forgotten.

When Arianna inquired if I would be interested in writing an article, she mentioned the May *EVENTS* theme is "Stories at the Center." She asked if my story could take shape around that idea...I couldn't believe it...my Birth to 3 career started, where else...AT THE CENTER! Now I know that is not what Arianna meant, but I cannot resist it as a beginning point.

When I began as the new Winnebago County Birth to 3 Coordinator in 1992, the first assignment given to me by Ken Stoffel, was to visit the Birth to 3 Centers – we had two in Winnebago County – and find out what they were doing with kids. Winnebago County had, and still has, a strong commitment to persons of all ages that have disabilities. We had been providing funding for services under contract for

several years. However, there was no county involvement in service development, quality assurance or service delivery. At that time, this was true of any Wisconsin county that was providing services for children with disabilities.

The advent of the new federal (Part H) and state legislation (HFS 90) dictated the changes in services for this target group and would require Wisconsin counties to demonstrate compliance with the new mandate. We began to be showered with a lot of new acronyms and words to learn as well as implement what they represented: B3, IFSP, EI Team, eligibility, intensity, frequency, assessment, evaluation, 45 days, interim IFSP, surrogate parent, service coordinator...you get the picture. HFS 90 became our dog-eared bible. In August, we were informed that all children had to have an IFSP by December 1 so we could have an accurate child count. We used to complete the Child Count by using #2 lead pencils with fill-in-the-circle forms. I knew I loved HSRS!

So, back to my first week in Birth to 3. When I visited programs in the centers for the first time, the centers seemed to meet the needs of both parents and staff. Infants and toddlers were riding in car seats on busses and vans to a bright, cheery center to receive therapy or special education with other infants and toddlers. A majority of center time was spent taking coats and snowsuits on and off and changing diapers. Parents and caregivers appreciated the break after they put their children on the bus and knowing that their children were being well cared for.

You can only imagine – and this is what I wish I could forget – the anger, conflict and emotional upheaval that ensued in the next few years as we moved to a system of parents participating in their children's services and started planting the seeds of change for services to be provided in the places where children spend the most time, a.k.a. natural environments. I know I am preaching to the choir (you) in 2008 when I define that as home and daycare. In the early 90's it was almost unheard of and the popular sentiment was that the counties were not providing the services in a way that would

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promote optimal development and with the persons most important to the child if they were provided in a center. Parents and providers went to County Boards, the media and the public with their cause and it was a very difficult time for persons working in Birth to 3. Being responsive to parents and families is a Birth to 3 mantra and here we were, causing upset and anger to families.

The good news is that children turn 3 – so gradually, and over 3 years, Birth to 3 services being delivered with parent participation in settings where children are naturally became the standard. Children were still being served in center-based settings, however, as it was still allowed. Providers could make a case for it for children over age two who could benefit from peer interaction.

The next phase in the later 90's, eliminating any center-based services, was also filled with conflict. It was accomplished with many meetings, IFSP re-writes, teeth grinding and chocolate. Thankfully, no one got hurt. In later years, parents who were with us at the time have commented about the perspective that hindsight now gives them, that the child development experts that designed the new mandates did have the best interests of children in mind. Current parents with children in Birth to 3 would not be able to imagine their child getting services any other way than with them in their home or daycare.

The role of the lead state personnel and the various lead county/provider staff cannot be minimized as we all acted and felt like we were fighting a war for best practices for kids and families. Many other counties shared our experience and we all talked regularly to ensure we were on the same track. We needed each other then and that remains true today.

Today's current challenges, although laborious at times, seem like a pleasure. We HAVE evolved. The opportunity to meet the needs of children and families will always be challenging, that's human nature, and why you all love your jobs. Meeting the challenge and discovering together how to best inform the federal and state government that we are meeting outcomes will also continue to challenge you. Birth to 3 is a work in progress and most of you will not realize the results of your diligent work – unless you stay around as long or longer that I have and can see strong parent advocates or your former Birth to 3 kids graduating from high school and in some cases having their own kids.

The “old dogs” around the table that day in November, (you know who you are Cindy and Diane...) concluded that this history will never repeat itself. Birth to 3 processes and best practice beliefs will continue to change and improve in small ways but the babies will never be riding the bus again.

I am thankful for the years of being part of that period in Birth to 3 history with all of you. CARRY ON! 🍀



Winnebago County's Pam Garman (center) and Cindy Flauger (right), along with Diane Fett from Fond du Lac County (left)