

Celebrating 20 years of resilience: *A look back ... and hopes for the future*



By Susan Damico, M.A.

In 1996, I graduated with a master's degree in Social Service Administration, but I was very unclear about my future.

It wasn't until I landed my first job at Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health that I could have even articulated what my "dream job" would have been, or what a fulfilling career path would have looked like. I accepted the position of project coordinator and was tasked with researching what Devereux – a national nonprofit behavioral healthcare provider – could do to help address the nation's growing number of children developing emotional and behavioral disorders.

My first year on the job included researching this alarming trend; speaking with experts in the fields of early care/education and mental health; understanding the needs of parents, caregivers, and children; and assessing the resources Devereux could bring to the table – to make a positive impact. For those of you familiar with the DECA Program, you know how this story plays out.

This year, we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Preschool Program – 1st edition. The DECA Program is a strength-based, resilience-building assessment and strategy solution that provides parents and professionals with research-based tools to promote young children's social and emotional skills that are critical for lifelong success and happiness.

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I feel tremendous pride as I reflect on the positive impact the DECA Program has had on children (millions have been assessed), families and communities (tens of thousands of professionals have been trained) these last 20 years. I am equally proud of the role Devereux has played in elevating the nation's focus on young children's social and emotional health.

Linda Likins, our first director at the Devereux Center for Resilient Children (DCRC), shared a vision that Devereux would change the way we prioritize children's social and emotional health. **Paul LeBuffe**, author of the DECA, carried out that vision by creating standardized tools to provide parents and teachers with reliable and valid data to identify areas of need and prevent the development and/or escalation of challenging behaviors.

For me, the beauty of the DECA Program is that it takes the best of what research says young children need and puts it into a practical framework that reflects an understanding of the day-to-day realities of parents and teachers, who often struggle with limited time and resources, while balancing competing priorities. As Paul LeBuffe often says, "The DECA Program is rigorous, relevant and reasonable. It meets the highest professional standards for assessment tools; provides meaningful results parents and teachers can understand and use to help children; and it takes a reasonable amount of time to obtain this important information."

As Devereux commemorates this milestone anniversary, we celebrate our role in shining a light on the importance of young children's social and emotional health, and recognize the valuable role others play, as well. For example:

- In 2001, the Center on Social Emotional Foundations for Learning and the Center for Evidence-Based Practice for Young Children's Challenging Behaviors developed the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children.
- Evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula focusing on young children – such as Second Step, PATHS and Incredible Years – play a key role in advocating for an early start to building social and emotional skills.

These resources – and the organizations and professionals behind them – help us achieve our shared vision of a world filled with socially and emotionally healthy children.

Looking back, I recognize the tremendous accomplishments of all those committed to strengthening young children's social and emotional health. In addition to supporting the healthy development of millions of children, we now have a more robust understanding of the science. Research studies continue to strengthen our knowledge about the development of social and emotional competencies, and how essential they are for long-term health and well-being.

And, while it is important to celebrate our collective successes, I am sobered by the reality that far too many children continue to lack these skills, and struggle because their home and school environments do not optimize these skills during the critical early years. We have accomplished much, and yet we still have much to achieve.

One of the benefits of the career path I have chosen is that, every day, I learn about social and emotional health, not just for children, but adults, as well. Social and emotional skills are learned – it is never too late to acquire them.

Optimism is an important social and emotional competence; I practice being optimistic about the future and thinking about what the world will look like when Devereux's vision is achieved. I invite you to join me in this practice. Take a moment and picture a time when all children are loved and nurtured by healthy adults; when all children laugh and play in safe environments; when they make friends, are challenged to learn and grow, and grow up to be happy, productive and socially-connected members of their communities. This is the vision. This is what must be achieved.

Thank you for honoring this milestone anniversary with me and members of the DCRC team. As part of the celebration, I encourage you to take advantage of our [DECA Program anniversary giveaways](#), and use them to foster good health, happiness and resilience in yourself, and in others.