

Parent Plenary: Foundations: Families Track Child Success from Their Earliest Years

Angie Godfrey: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the afternoon closing plenary. The closing plenary is always one of my favorites because it's a parent plenary. And I think it's only fitting that we always give the last word to parents. All of us know that the heart of our program is the parents and families that we work with. And as Early Head Start has grown over the past 20 years, it's grown to the influence, inspiration, and hopes and dreams of the parents and children and the families that we work with.

So today you're in for a special treat. As Early Head Start celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, the panel today is going to look back at the last 20 years, beginning with their experiences in Early Head Start and sharing through their lens what the growth and development of their lives and their children's lives has been for the last 20 years. So I know you all know that you're in for a real treat, so sit back and relax and listen. Thank you.

Amanda Perez: Thank you so much, Angie. It is such a pleasure always to be here with everyone in the room. These families, especially, with all of you out there. We're coming to the end, as Angie said, of this virtual Birth to Three Institute. And we've heard over this week a lot of information about different foundations for learning and a lot of the things that we can do in this program that provides comprehensive services to children and families. So I'm not gonna get the order right, but we talked about program services and the foundations for learning that occur through program services and things like management systems and leadership and those kinds of pieces. We talked about the foundational influence of families.

So we had lots of sessions today that really focused on how important it is to engage families as a part of their children's learning. And we also talked about the child on that first day, on Tuesday -- We talked about the child and brain development and self-regulation and really individualized care for each child and family that folks are serving. And we heard from a lot of different voices.

So we heard from researchers, and we heard from practitioners. We heard a lot from federal staff. We also heard from some trainers, I know. We wondered -- What would families say? What would families name as the foundations for learning for their children? And so we thought we'd ask them, so here we are. And we're so glad today to have three families with us who are gonna share their stories, and in doing so, in sharing their stories of their experiences with Early Head Start, we're gonna hear about what they...We're gonna get their insight into the kinds of things that provide a foundation for their children as part of this incredible program.

So I'm gonna give you all their names. We're gonna have a little opportunity to meet them here at the beginning. And then we're gonna have an opportunity to listen to each person in turn. So let's figure out who's on the stage here with me. They told me how to work this remote. Okay. So here on my left is Xitlali Sosa. Xitlali is here from the Agribusiness Child Development Program's Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, and they are up upstate New York. Xitlali, we are so glad to have you with us. We're also here with Valerie Young. Valerie's gonna go next, and Valerie is here from SIUE. SIUE stands for Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville's Early Head Start program. And finally, we're gonna have an opportunity to talk with Stephanie Bolin, and Stephanie is here from Northwest Tennessee Early Head Start. Welcome to all of you, and thank you so much for being here.

We -- As we listen to these families, I hope that you will have an opportunity to reflect on the kinds of things that you've heard this week, all three days that we've been able to spend together and talk about foundations for learning. And I hope as you do that that you're also listening for the things that families say that are really unique and really offer us insight not just into foundations for learning for our children, the children that we serve, but also foundations for our practice. All of us have very individual roles. We're doing very different things with the programs that we serve, and we all have a different way of using our practice to support that child's learning. And I hope when you hear these stories today that you're really listening for the kinds of things that you can take back tomorrow and really implement.

So we're gonna start with Xitlali. I'm gonna turn on my ears so that I can understand the interpretation as well as you can out there. So, Xitlali, let's start first with your experience with migrating here from Mexico. You came from Mexico to upstate New York, which I can't imagine what that was like.

Xitlali Sosa: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. Good afternoon before anything. I would like to thank everyone, especially Head Start, for the great help they have provided me and my family. At the beginning, it was pretty difficult because of the language, the English language, the barrier, the lack of services. I didn't know much about the community. But once I met and I was introduced to Early Head Start, my life changed a lot. Initially, I was working at a deli. I would have my little baby there, my little daughter there since she was born until she was 3 years old when I finally learned about Head Start, so the change was drastic.

It -- It was something exciting when I learned about the ABCD program, because when you...you know, when you first start, you are... it's sort of a shock because of the culture and because of the tradition. I would see... You know, it was great to see that my culture was being reflected on the walls, in books, in pictures that I saw. So it was something I really enjoyed seeing. Something else that was important that I saw was not only did they focus on the education of the children but they focus on us, the parents, so we can move forward, improve our education, and be a good, excellent example, you know, being that we're the first parents to our children.

Amanda: Absolutely. It's so much that you shared there, Xitlali, as a part of your experience. So you came here.

One of the things that you told me was that you felt really isolated, that there weren't a lot of families that really understood your culture and community, yeah?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. I pretty much arrived here by myself -- just with my husband, not my mother, not my brothers, no one who could support me. Sometimes when -- when you have a family member here, it's a little easier, because, you know, your brother, father -- Someone can help you. But when you're by yourself, things are much more difficult because you feel isolated, separated from everything even though the community may bring you services. But if you don't know about those services or you don't take advantage of them, then, you know, you feel isolated as well as your children.

Amanda: Well, how would you know about them? I mean, it would be impossible, really, to understand that they were there unless somebody was really sharing them with you, yeah?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: With the lady that I was working with, the owner of the store, I met the parent coordinator of ABCD. They -- They were friends. So I met them, and they gave me information on the...She gave me information on the center, and she told me that I could come in and learn more about the ABCD program because they could really help me out with my -- my little girl. My little girl was very quiet. She was very timid. Most of the time, she was in front of a TV because I used to, you know, cook food, and it was impossible for me to be taking care of her. So she was in front of a TV a lot.

When I finally went and saw the location, the building, they gave me a tour, I met teachers, I met the director. I got to see the entire program. What I liked the most, what I loved the most, was that they spoke my language. They were able to understand me. So the center now, if I can tell you, they're like my family, because at this time I only have my husband and children. My husband has a lot of family, but not me. I'm here by myself, so in terms of family...

Now with the center, I feel, you know, like I have a great company from them, and I feel that any doubt, any concerns that I have with regards to any -- any concerns of my -- my children, they're able to really help me and put me on the right path.

Amanda: So it felt like a community support to you. There was a place where folks understood your language, they were speaking your language to Monica, right? So that was an important part as well, that -- that this was a baby that had grown up monolingual Spanish, and here was a program that was really offering services to her in a language that she was familiar with, with toys, you said, that were familiar to you from home.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. It was -- It was really good. And it was very attractive for the children. They -- They really loved to be there because they see things there that they see at home. And, you know, the children's toys. And when you get there -- For example, what I saw was a rag doll that I saw that that I used when I was a baby. A soccer ball -- things that really made me feel at home, familiarized me with the place. Amanda: And we know how important that is. I mean, we hear that as a foundation for -- for the experience of welcoming a family to your program -- really having those, just making it a welcoming and familiar place to children and families, of course. We have a picture here. Actually, we have a couple of pictures. Oh. I keep going backwards. So that is when Monica was first born. You and Santiago and Monica. Just in the very beginning. And that was shortly after you had gotten here to the United States.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. I had just arrived, and my baby was newly born.

Amanda: Brand new. And here Monica is working so hard at the center. And she wasn't the only one that was working at the center. They -- They got their hooks in you pretty quickly, too.

Interpreter: [Speaking Spanish]

Amanda: Started working with them.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish, laughs]

Amanda: So they hired you within two weeks, right?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. I was first a volunteer when my child joined the program. And, you know, since they noticed I was always very interested in everything that was shown to me, they told me, "Listen. You can come, you can drop her off, and you can leave." But I wanted to learn. I wanted to be able to provide for my daughter more than what I had been able to provide to her up to that point, being that I didn't know about this program and I had not been able to take advantage of this program. But once I got associated with ABCD, I really was fascinated by everything. So I would stay there from 8:00 to 4:00 in the afternoon, when my daughter would come out, and I would take advantage, I would learn, I would ask about the concerns or the doubts that I had.

The teachers at ABCD, they were always willing and able to give me more information, share ideas with me. My baby was very quiet. She didn't speak much. She didn't socialize much with the other children of her same age. So it was a bit difficult to, you know, to play with other children of the same age because she was surrounded at home by adults. So the teachers began giving me an idea how to work with my daughter so she can be a little more...so she can socialize a bit better, so she could express herself a little better verbally. And I saw the progress, 'cause in two months my daughter was already playing with children, socializing with other children.

And she would let them know what she liked, what she didn't like, and now she talks too much!

[Laughter]

Amanda: That's always the way. We have to be very careful of what we wish for. Yeah. Yeah. So you were a huge part of that program from the beginning. And they said, "Oh, you're here all the time. We might as well give you a job." Right? And then you had two other little ones. So Jimena was born in 2004, right? And Sebastian was born in 2011. And they were enrolled in ABCD as well. Now, Monica had been enrolled in the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, although she was a little before 3 when she got started. But these two got enrolled with the Early Head Start program. How early?

Interpreter: [Speaking Spanish] What time did the other two start?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: I see the difference in my children. For example, my daughter came in at 3 years old at the Migrant Head Start. With Jimena, it was prenatal. So it was a totally different experience. It's 360 degrees in what I saw. I was pregnant...While I was pregnant, I was already asked to read to her. I was participating in the events that ABCD was putting together. They would inform us about the importance to read to the children, even they were still unborn. So we would caress our belly and...but, you know, it wasn't the same emotion.

I was now reading to my child. With my second child, I was reading to her, I was reading to her, I was singing to her, things that I didn't do with my first child. So yes, I really learned and I got a lot of help. Same thing with Sebastian. I enjoyed him so much. It was like three different phases of my life. With my first child, it was a little different because it was my first child, my first... So you enjoy her a lot and everything, but there was a lot missing.

With my second child, I already had my CDA. I had more experience. I was already... working on my CDA. I was working at the agency. So there were a lot of changes already. And with Sebastian, forget it, you know? All the experience was already in place. [Laughs]

Amanda: Wow! I so did not feel that way with my second child. [Laughs] It's funny, right, though, because they're so different, too, when they come to you, but you'd had so many experiences at that point with different children coming in with different temperaments and different experiences. And when you talk about infants and toddlers, Xitlali, you speak in such a lovely way about what you understand about them. Can you talk a little bit about some of the things that you learned as a parent with ABCD?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: I learned to understand my children. I learned how to come down to their level. I learned that at home we can teach them so much. Sometimes we ask, "Oh, wait a minute. I don't have much to teach my children. You know, this is my first child. I don't know what to do."

But know that the time you walk into the kitchen, you know, you can ask them, "Listen. Help me with this tomato. Give me that which is colored green. Hand me that which is colored red. You know, give me a small cup. Give me a large cup." You're teaching them so much when you're folding clothes, how to put things in order, how to keep things. You know, simple things. For the children, you know, it's a -- it's a drastic change for them because at the same time that you're teaching them, you're teaching also to be independent, to do things on their own. So it's very, very, very good what I've gotten from ABCD Head Start.

Amanda: Now, Xitlali, you were a part of Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. You got services to expectant families as a part of ABCD. You also got home visiting services as a part of ABCD. So you've done it all. And one of the things that you said to me as a home visiting parent... as a parent in a home-based program, you said one of the things that you really learned is that you don't need a lot of fancy toys, that you have everything you need.

Interpreter: [Speaking Spanish]

Amanda: I love that message because it's such an important piece of foundation, that the foundation isn't a thing, right? Families don't offer a thing to children. They offer a lot of things to children, but they don't offer something concrete and substantial is the most important piece. What you said is it was the experiences, right? It was the -- It was the tomato that you were talking about. It wasn't all of these fancy toys. And that was such an important message sort of going for you as part of what you were doing.

Can you talk for a second about services to expectant families? 'Cause that is a very important part of my heart, and I wondered if there was something that you would say that you learned as a part of participating in that that you wanted to share with us.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Well, I learned a lot of things. One of the most important things was how to be an -- an excellent teacher. 'Cause we...we're not born with instructions on how to be a great parent, and every child is different. So I like the fact that we get different types of training on how to understand and work with your children, how to respect their ideas, how to strengthen what the...who the child is and deal with what they present, their...you know, his character, their character. And for us, we just understand them as parents, because sometimes we want to set limits, but we first need to really lower ourselves to the child's level. And, you know, and sometimes we think about the way we were educated, and, "I wouldn't educate myself that way."

But no, things are different now. Things have changed, and we are living now in the era of technology. We're living in a wonderful phase, a wonderful... The way we lived, it was great. But now things have changed. And as a parent nowadays, we have to prepare ourselves to be able to offer our children the best.

And that's what the agency ABCD does. Not only do they focus on the child's well-being, but they focus on the parents, the family. So they involve the whole nucleus -- the mother, the father, the children -- all the children. Not like in my days, when I was a child. My mother would take care of me. My father was always working. But now -- now things are shared. Both parents are -- are an important part of the family. They both must work. Both parents must work as team members to bring, you know, the child progress. And if we want our children to be professionals in the world, we, you know, we have to be part of their education.

That's what the agency does. They give you a lot of alternatives to help your child and for you to improve yourself and then be able to help your child in the education...in their education, because that's a very important phase. Because we...sometimes we feel that only the school is in charge of educating the children, but no. We as parents have to put our little grain of sand and be involved in everything that involves our child's development. If our...If your children sees you, that you're enthusiastic, that you're involved, then the child will get even more excited and will be even more active, because now the child says, "Wow. My mother is involved in this. My mother knows this." When we go to our conferences twice a year, you know, and you find out that your children's doing fine, that's not enough, because you say bye and then you don't come back -- No. You need to be there so they can see you and they...they feel and they can see that you're there to motivate them so they can be...do well.

Amanda: Well, you take us there, from pregnancy all the way through age 3, through age 5, through high school, right? It's the foundation of really learning about that family, the importance of family, the importance of that role. And I love that you brought Santiago in as a piece of that. I know you said that was such an important part of services to expectant families for you was really bringing in Santiago, the whole family, everyone involved so that everyone saw the importance of their role there. Here's another picture. This is a picture -- a more recent picture of your family. How are the folks in your family doing now?

Interpreter: [Speaking Spanish]

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: I mean, what can I say about my family? I can only say the best. You know, I can say that my oldest daughter is very smart. I've come to Washington to get recognition awards for her. I've gone to varied places. My smallest one -- I always get good reports on her. She's excellent in math, I've been informed. My little boy, he's more of an explorer. He likes to look around, explore. Talks a lot. And I think the base of success is for...the family unity, that we all want the same for our children. I speak a lot with my husband. Actually, we always like to eat as a family. He comes home late from work, but we wait for him, and then we eat together. We ask him how his day was. We ask him, you know, what do we want.

We try to please our daughters as best as we can, and, you know, but we're always on the same page in what we want to do.

Amanda: Lovely. So a very united foundation you have for your children with this family. Xitlali, one of the things that's been so interesting about hearing from you...Well, first of all, let's ask about you. What about you? What are you doing now?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Well, right now I'm just began as a parent ambassador for the agency, for the ABCD agency. And I -- And I love that role because we're able to provide other parents who don't know about the program -- you know, give them information of how the program works, what is it that we want to accomplish through the program. And it's great. I don't -- I don't have much information here 'cause I just started, but I -- I love it. I've been since... Me personally, I got the information from a family coordinator. But I would have loved for maybe another parent to have told me about this program, some...another parent to have told me, "This is the way this program works, and this is how it can help you." Because when you hear it from another mother, from another parent, sometimes it's more exciting to get the information. And my daughter used to cry a lot in the beginning. And, you know, the teachers would tell me, "It's normal. You know, she's going to... She's gonna adapt." But I wouldn't... You know, I didn't get the same feeling as though maybe if another mother would've told me that everything was gonna be okay. It could've been the same words that the teacher was using, but being that it was coming from another parent, from another mother who had a child just like yours, it probably would've been really good, 'cause it would've made me understand it a little better.

Amanda: Well, and Xitlali, you have had a long...You're not just a parent. You're also a career teacher in this program, right? So you've been a teacher's aide, a teacher... an assistant teacher, a home visitor, and now you're a lead teacher for infants in your program in a sort of looping model, which is allowing the kids to have continuity of care, which is so lovely. All of those experiences. And you're studying to get your degree, yeah?

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Yes. I am studying. I'm in at the University of Cincinnati. And I'm very happy to...to be there. I mean, it's the same thing I just said. The ABCD agency has so many possibilities, has...offers so much potential for the parents, for the entire family. Because, as I said a few minutes ago, if we are...if we get educated, we're able to give our children a lot more. And all the parents have the same opportunities as everybody else. We just have to be willing to take that opportunity and make something out of that opportunity. Because I can't go to a university full time because my child is only 4 years old. I can't leave him alone, you know, for so long while I go to school.

But yet I can put him to sleep. I can still study in the afternoon on my computer. I can take him to the park and still continue studying. Those are the little things that allow you to say to yourself, "Well, I'm not leaving my child alone for too long or I'm not dedicating the time I should be to them." I'm able...It's good because you're able to... I'm able to organize myself with my time. You know, the time is very flexible. It's not a very rigid program where you have to be in the school building. So it's pretty good.

Amanda: Great. And it's an online program. It's available in English and Spanish. I understand it's fantastic. So it's great that you have that opportunity. Xitlali, I want to bring in the new Head Start Early Outcomes framework here. This is a brand-new document that many of you might be familiar with. You may have seen it where you are. And this quote is about dual language learners, like your children, Xitlali. But this idea of the foundational importance of culture, of community, of identity is so key to our work, right?

So, when you started, you said, it was so important that ABCD provided this community that was familiar and loving and warm and welcoming and felt like home in many ways to you, felt like family in many ways to you. And I think that's one of the things that we provide when we really provide this culturally responsive, individualized care for children and families. And I know that that's something that you provide now as a part of your work, and I love it -- I love that you're out there doing that as a parent ambassador and also as a teacher. Xitlali, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Thank you very much for inviting me.

Amanda: So we're gonna move on to Valerie Young from Southern Illinois. Valerie, can we start with your service? That's where we want to start. We know lots of programs are serving military families. And you're a military family.

Valerie Young: Yes, I am. I spent 10 years in the military. Two of those years I was in the Army National...Well, no. I was in the Army Reserve, and eight of those years I finished was with the Army Reserve, or National Guard, rather. I did a few tours. The two tours that stand out is Hurricane Katrina, and I did Iraq.

Amanda: And how long were gone for in this...or -- or how long were you posted on those tours?

Valerie: Well, with Hurricane Katrina, it was approximately three months. We -- We went in two days after it began, and we just stayed to two months. Iraq, however, the tour got extended for two years. And within that time, I developed some mental illness. My dad passed. There was a lot of stressful situations. And this is prior to the children, so...I served my country.

Amanda: You absolutely served your country. And like so many people, as you said, you came back and you'd been really affected by that experience of doing that. So things to really pay attention to and to look out for, right?

Valerie: I agree. [Laughs]

Amanda: Yeah. So, let's talk about your kids. Look at these beauties. So you came back and you had these little ones.

Valerie: Yes. I -- I had Sultan. Well, I was pregnant in 2009, but my military career ended in 2010. So that was a good year, 'cause I was on light duty, so... But I eventually gave birth to Sultan, who's on the right -- well, my left, rather, your right. And I gave birth to Virtuous in 2011, September 28th.

Amanda: And they are gorgeous. They're beautiful, of course. Now, how did you get connected with Early Head Start?

Valerie: Well, I am for homeschooling. So I was trying to homeschool the children on my own but I didn't know the procedure. So I did teach them, you know, as a parent would, because most of the learning is involved in the home. So one day -- I believe it was an outreach worker -- they were going door to door with pamphlets, and they had something with SIUE Head Start. And I was thinking about it. I said, "Okay." "Well, I can give this a try," because I wanted to do homeschooling or interact with the children within the home. So she gave me the pamphlet. I reached out to the director or a co-worker. And to me, it was just a door opening and I just walked through it.

Amanda: Well, and Valerie is one of those people that walks through a lot of doors. But -- But it was interesting that you did that. And I think one of the things that was really fascinating about that is this idea that you had in your head already that you -- that you knew yourself to be already the primary teacher for your children. You saw that, and you wanted to really take on that role long term. And you saw home base as a perfect match for the work that you were doing. So you had a home visitor.

Valerie: I did. [Laughs]

Amanda: Sandy. And tell us about Sandy.

Valerie: Sandy. She is as professional as any staff person can get. She is caring. She's... There's a fine line between professionalism and her duty as a mother and a co-worker. And she reached out to me. She provided information in regards to the things that I lacked. And I just loved her. For instance, when she... I'm strict on time, guys. I just...I'm gonna tell the world -- I am strict on times. So she said, "Ms. Young, I will be there at 9:30." She came 30 seconds late. [Laughter] I was -- I was livid, but I -- I explained to her, you know, I explained to her the situation. 'Cause I -- I would not blatantly go off on anyone. [Laughter] So she worked on some areas. I worked on some areas. And, you know, we -- we we were a match in heaven. And I was like, "Oh, I love you, Sandy." And, you know...So yeah.

Amanda: What I love about that story is the... what I love about it is the -- is the relationship part of it. So we had -- we had speakers this morning who really talked about partnerships versus relationships and what it means to be in a mutual relationship with a family or with a child, really to be understanding one another and really coming to a place where you know what is important to the person who is sitting across from you. I think that that story is such a beautiful illustration of that.

So, talk to me a little bit about your parenting style, Valerie, before -- before and with Sandy, in the beginning.

Valerie: Okay. As you guys know, I'm military. So it's kind of difficult to separate your work from your parenting style. So as military, I'm organized; I'm strict; I'm stern. I'm just spot on, you know? So as a parent, I'm still learning, you know? I don't know anything or everything about being a parent. So I try to take things a step at a time. But I have a short fuse, but I have to remember I'm dealing with my children, you know? So...And that ties into my mental illness. So everything was just coming at once.

So it was minor incidents where I would literally kind of lash out at my children -- and it's not because the children are being bad. It's because I didn't know how to communicate with them, because, mind you, I have a...I have PTSD, which is post-traumatic stress disorder. So I would kind of yell at them. And Sandy, she took notice. And instead of, I guess, lashing out at me, she was professional. She -- She brought information to me. She said, "Well, you know, here. Here's a way to deal with, you know, trying to interact and communicate with your children." Because I was told when you yell or lash out at your children, they -- they kind of crawl back into a shell. And when they do that, it -- it eliminates the communication between you and the children.

Now, I love my children, but the last thing I want to do is to eliminate the communication. So Sandy basically opened up a new door. Because like I said, even though it's a home parent, home visiting program, it's not only the children that's learning. So I was learning, too, so it was reciprocating.

Amanda: Well, and Sandy was learning, too, right?

Valerie: Yes. We want to make sure of that. [Laughs]

Amanda: [Laughs] We were all learning. Everybody was learning in that scenario. Absolutely. And you began to see some real differences in your own parenting but also in your children as a part of this program.

Valerie: Yes. Sultan, when he first met Sandy, he had a communication issue. He was quiet, and he was an introvert. He barely talked to anyone. Virtuous, she was loud. She was the opposite of him. She was just running everywhere. And as time progressed, and like I said, I take my hats off to any Head Start staff in regards to dealing with children, because I was told that some children listen to strangers more than they do their parents. And Sandy was stern. She was professional, and she just had a way with children. So I respected that. I took notice. Because I would like to take that approach when -- I don't want to say disciplining my children, but trying to calm them down. So I love it. I mean, 'cause I would yell at those kids like, "Stop it! Get over there! Sit down!" Whatever. And I would yell at them. And I'm thinking I'm accomplishing something, but I'm not. I would make them cry, and my goal is not to hurt my children's feelings. So, you know, Sandy took notice to that, and she was like, "Well, Valerie, here's an alternative.

You can do this. You can do that." And eventually I started practicing it. But, you guys, I made Sandy proud. [Laughter] Can I tell the story?

Amanda: Yes. Please tell the story.

Valerie: They were at a socialization program. You know, and what that is is when home-based children go to a center and interact among children. At first, Virtuous had a sharing problem. You know how kids are. They feel that that's their toys. All of the toys in the bin is their toys -- all of them, you know? So anyway, the kids are having fun. They're playing. They ate. And it was time to go. So I said in a nice tone voice -- You guys hear me. I'm talking to you guys. I said -- I said, "Sultan and Virtuous, it's time to go." So they're still playing and all that.

Now the old Valerie, okay, I probably would have lashed out. So what I did, I got down on one knee and I got to my children's level. And I said, a little louder but stern and calm, I said, "Sultan and Virtuous, it's time to go." And they listened, guys. [Laughs] They listened. And I was thinking...I was like, "Oh, my God. It worked." And I turned and looked in the back, and Sandy was like... You know, like, "Wow. She finally did it. It took a while, but she finally got it." And it just made me feel good as a parent that the kids understood me and I didn't have to yell at them. I didn't have to lash out at them. And I was just proud.

Amanda: I bet you were. And I bet she was proud, too. As a matter of fact, I know that she was because it says right here -- "I was so very proud of her." A quote. I have that quote from Sandy. I think one of the things that's so lovely about that story, Valerie, is that you talk about the difference between your goal for your child and the way that you were moving toward that goal. And I think as we think about the kinds of things that Brandi and Guylaine said to us earlier today, that part about the family goals and really how do we support families toward the kinds of things that they're hoping for for their children? They want the very best for their children.

Foundationally, they want the very best for their children. So how do we support them in doing that in a way that's respectful, that's warm, that's really moving folks forward? It's just exciting to hear that story, for sure. Now, I want to recognize while we're here on this point, Valerie, I want to recognize that this was not an abusive situation at all. This was not an abusive situation. But I do want to bring in some exciting new research that you all might be familiar with that has to do with children in Early Head Start and interactions with the child welfare community. So we really want to make sure that you guys are aware of this. So in the Early Head start research and evaluation project, they looked at -- at many children that were coming into Early Head Start at the very beginning of this program 20 years ago, right?

And they looked at some of the things that were happening in terms of what was happening with the control group that did not get Early Head Start and what was happening with the kids that were getting Early Head Start. And what they found was this -- that from the ages of... Okay. So, for example... Let me--Let me read what I wrote here so that I don't get everybody confused.

So there were some significant differences between those groups. And, for example, they had significantly fewer child welfare encounters between the ages of 5 and 9 years than did children in the control group. This is children in the Early Head Start had significantly fewer child welfare encounters. Early Head Start children were also less likely to have multiple encounters with child welfare programs and had a longer time before subsequent encounters.

So to go back to you, Valerie, and to think about this story about the crucial parent-child relationship and sort of the gentling -- is "gentling" a word? -- the gentling of that relationship and the incredible impact that Early Head Start staff can have as a part of their interactions with families and doing the kinds of things that Valerie described Sandy doing. We had questions the other day from home-based persons who were saying, "How do we work with families around some of these responsive care ideas that we've been talking about here?" And I think what you've talked about with Sandy is modeling respectful interaction, sharing information, all of those...Patience. [Laughs] All of those pieces that can be so important to practice. Okay. And I think that research tells us in a larger way across programs how impactful that can be. Now, you took a lot of leadership in your program. Can you tell us very briefly in a couple of sentences what you've been doing there?

Valerie: Briefly? Okay. Okay. I was a vice president, secretary, and I took on any role as a parent committee chair. I also am a parliamentarian at the policy council, and I am also on the parent ambassador. I just started that this year, by the way.

Amanda: So many parent ambassadors on this panel. Yes. We're learning something about the foundations of how you get folks involved in that program, right?

Valerie: And like I said, it's just a door opening. Like I said, this program started out with my children, and I just got involved and took initiative. So that's why I'm doing this. I love them.

Amanda: I love it. And we love having you here. So let's tell...let's talk a little bit about what they are doing now. Oh, this is Sandy and the two children right there.

Valerie: That's Sandy. Okay. Sandy is basically...What is she doing? Oh, she's reading. She's reading to the children. Okay. Sandy. Oh, my goodness. She is the most craftiest person I have ever met. I'm serious. I am not crafty. Guys, I'm military. I'm not crafty. Okay? And...

Amanda: And by "crafty," you mean arts and crafty.

Valerie: Arts and crafts. I'm crafty. But I'm not -- I'm not arts and crafty. And Sandy just makes things out of a lot of things. You don't need to go to the store and buy anything. You can take, like, a shoe box, decorate it. You can do a lot of artsy, crafty things.

Like one time, I said, "Sandy, let's go fishing." And we're on our imaginary thing. So what she did, she took one of those empty paper towel holders, took a little -- what you call that? -- yarn. She poked a hole in the paper towel holder and put a magnet onto it, so all the little papers were fishes. We had little magnets, and then they went fishing. Yeah. She just -- just pulls it out of there, I'll tell you. That's Sandy. That's Sandy.

Amanda: [Laughs] I love it. I love it. So tell us about Sultan now. What's he doing?

Valerie: Sultan now...Sultan plays tee ball, actually. He interacts with a community base called Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center. So he interacts with kids his age more. He -- He communicates. He -- He loves...He's just loving, you know? Just likes to just talk to everyone. And this little guy speaks sentences, you know? And I'm just very proud of him.

Amanda: The little guy who you were so concerned about in terms of his...

Valerie: I was very concerned about his communication development because, like I said, I think when you're a single parent, the children cling to the -- the mother or the father, whoever is the parent. So they cling to them a little tightly than you would like to. But as we grow in a society, they...we kind of have to open up a little bit and let them know their surroundings. So, yeah.

Amanda: What about her?

Valerie. Virtuous. She's still feisty, everyone, okay? But in regards to her development... and I have to say, Sandy, I respect her patience, because Virtuous had an injury around 2 or 3. So by that time, her communication developed, but when she had the injury and I was told by the pediatrician that the child will digress. They will focus on the injury more than what they're supposed to do in regards to communication, language development, and so forth.

So we kind of have to go all the way back, you know, after her injury and focus on other issues. So it was like Sandy had to do a repeat with her. And I respect Sandy because she was very patient with that situation. I mean, guys, my baby had to wear a cast for six months. Yes. But the pediatrician, they told me what happened -- because she -- she was focused on that injury so much, everything else went out the door. So Sandy helped her get to where she is. She communicates more now. She shares more. But the attitude is still there. I don't know what to do about that.

Amanda: Well, but you know that's what happens with development, right? They're really focused on one area, and then, you know, it's hard to sort of have all the emotional energy that you need to focus on every area. So Early Head Start was a huge help in that way. I'm so glad to hear that.

Valerie: A learning experience.

Amanda: So, Valerie, you came in with an incredible commitment to your children, we know.

And you took that to really come to a different place of parenting with them, which is a really interesting kind of foundational piece of your story. It has taken them really far, as we think about the learning that they've done here. I wanted to bring back the Head Start framework again. I think the work that you do, that you all do on behalf of children and families and really engaging with families as a part of this work really illustrates the kinds of things that you were describing, about the family as the primary person, the most important caregiver, the most important teacher, the most important advocate. And the work that you do around that is so important. And that story absolutely illustrates that. Thank you so much. Thank you, Valerie, for being here. So last but definitely not least, Stephanie, let's talk with you. So Xitlali reminds us that Head Start hires families. But in your case, it went the other way, right?

Stephanie: It was a little different. Absolutely. I actually started volunteering and working part time in the...at the Northwest Tennessee Head Start program while I was in college. And when I graduated from college, I was offered a position as a child and family educator, making home visits to Early Head Start families, to all of our Head Start families.

Amanda: So before you even had babies.

Stephanie: Before I had babies. Yes. Newlywed.

Amanda: So tell us about Lexi's beginning.

Stephanie: Lexi was a...I had a healthy...blessed with a healthy pregnancy. Lexi was breech but had a successful delivery with her. However, when she was just three hours old, the nurse came into my hospital room to tell me that she had failed the newborn hearing screening. So she instructed me that before I would check out to take Lexi home that I would have to have an appointment for a follow-up in two weeks with the school for the deaf in Jackson, which is where she was born, for a follow-up. At that point, when we went back for the follow-up appointment in two weeks, it was identified that she had profound hearing loss in her left ear, which would likely result in speech delay.

Amanda: But at the time, you were not ready to hear that, right?

Stephanie: Absolutely not. Never. It's one of those situations that you think will never happen to your child. You have to swallow your pride. You have to swallow your pride.

Amanda: And sort of move forward. We have -- We have a photo of Lexi from those early months. She is...She's not unhappy. Stephanie: She's not unhappy. No. No.

Amanda: Not an unhappy baby. So what happened at her six-month appointment?

Stephanie: When we go for her well baby checks, when they would do the developmental screenings as well, when we went for the six-month checkup, there were some concerns that she wasn't babbling and cooing as she should be at that age. So therefore a referral was made to the early intervention services, where she did qualify for services at 6 months of age.

I was real excited, because they had a speech pathologist that would come into my home and work with her one-on-one, work with me as a parent on how to communicate with her, such as talking in her strong ear. At that point, as I said earlier, you have to swallow your pride. I reached out to my own program to find...You know, I needed...the need for the language input. So I applied and was accepted into the Early Head Start program, where she would be in a center-based program every day. And the speech language pathologist would come work with her there at the center as well and with her teacher and then in the home with me in the evening.

Amanda: Wow. So a lot of services provided to her.

Stephanie: Lots of services provided.

Amanda: And let's just back up for a second, Stephanie, because one of the things I want to sort of bring to our conversation is this idea -- So at first, you were thinking, "This is not my child. I don't...This is not gonna be an issue for my child. This -- This hearing issue is not gonna be a problem here." And then eventually you sort of came to another place of understanding about that. We know that a lot of, in your work, too, we know a lot of staff are sometimes working with families who are not at a place where they're able to say, "Okay. You know, this is a diagnosis I can accept for my child. This is something that I am willing to sort of jump in with." And I wondered if you had any tips for folks about what was useful to you between the time that Lexi was born and that six-month visit, when you said, "Okay, it's time to get services."

I think being respectful -- for the providers to be respectful, but be persistent. Follow back up with those families. We all have that piece of denial to where it can't happen to our child. But reflect...But be respectful. Be persistent, and that relationship that you form with that family, I think at some point the family will be open to receiving services or following up on those services that are needed.

Amanda: The foundation of that relationship, right?

Stephanie: Absolutely. And that's -- that's the important piece.

Amanda: Yeah. Absolutely. So Lexi is in Early Head Start. She's working with an incredible teacher. Tell us about her teacher. Miss Roslyn was great. She took a lot of pride in her work with Lexi. She took the guidance that provided with the speech pathologist each day. She worked very hard on her IFSP goals, and the communication that she had with the speech pathologist, with the teacher, and with myself, that collaborative effort just made all the difference with Lexi, and she qualified out of services for speech and language at 18 months of age.

Amanda: At 18 months of age. So this really brings us back to some of the things that were discussed at the first day of this institute, when we...when Ross Thompson was here and he was talking about the incredibly rapid brain development that happens in these very first months of development, right?

We know that that's such an important window, and we really want to support children so they're building those skills at those very earliest moments. Several people talked, too, about that language window that happens in that first year, how critically important it is to hear the sounds of a language and to use those sounds then to start formulating the words themselves. And what you saw within Early Head Start really speaks to that.

Stephanie: Absolutely. It was -- It was just amazing. And -- And just importance of -- of providers reaching out to all those community resources available in their community and having those collaborative partnerships is very important, and it makes -- makes a difference in the children.

Amanda: Absolutely. So after laying that foundation in Early Head Start, Stephanie, let's fast-forward. So Lexi's sister born right after she graduated from that program. There she is. There's Emily. And she didn't qualify for services, so she didn't do Early Head Start. But then your family hit some hardship, right, several years later.

Stephanie: Right. In 2008, their father left. And the children were 10 and 7. I became a single parent. And -- And then in February of 2014, they lost their father to suicide. So that...those social skills that Lexi gained in Early Head Start and Head Start -- and Emily was in Head Start -- were just... They were...They brought them through these profound, tough times, I fully believe -- just that foundation.

Amanda: I think that's such a fascinating idea, that the kinds of -- that the kinds of work that you're doing around relationship building, around confidence building for children, around really helping children feel very solid and able to express their emotions, all of those kinds of pieces, Stephanie, that you and I discussed as a part of what Lexi and then Emily had learned as a part of Head Start are so foundationally important, not just when they're 3 years old or not just when they're 2 years old and they're not having that tantrum. But all throughout life, it's the foundation of their social and emotional skills.

Stephanie: Absolutely. She had...You know, the -- the problem-solving skills, the critical thinking, the ability to work with others is just...It's so important at such an early age.

Amanda: And then it continues to be important.

Stephanie: And they carry it with them throughout -- throughout their life. And you can see the difference in the children that are in these early learning programs versus other children in the community, you know?

Amanda: Here's a picture right before...

Stephanie: That was actually...Yeah. That was right before her dad passed. That was Lexi's eighth grade. That as her last home basketball game her eighth grade year right before she entered high school. That was the last picture she had with her dad.

Amanda: One of the things I think is really beautiful is that Stephanie asked her girls to help identify the pictures that we would use as a part of this event, and Lexi picks...picked this picture. Really wanted her dad represented here. All right. Tell us about your girls now, Stephanie.

Stephanie: This was actually the junior/senior prom this past spring, in April. Lexi was a...She'll be a senior. This was the end of her junior year with her sister, Emily. Emily is 13. She'll be 14 in September. She is an academic student, very involved in the community and our church. She's actually in cheerleading camp this week. She'll be a high school cheerleader. She's my little social butterfly. Lexi will be a senior this fall, in just a couple weeks. She is actually counseling at a church camp this week. She does a lot of volunteering in our church and our community. She's actually working with the city, with the mayor this summer as well. And she's driving. That's the biggest challenge. [Laughter]

Amanda: Stephanie -- Stephanie sat down with us at dinner last night, and she was like, "Toddlerhood is tough, guys, but let me tell you. Driving." [Laughter] And tell us a little bit more about what Lexi is doing.

Stephanie: She is...The two pictures that are shared here, the picture on the top, Lexi is actually speaking, sharing her Head Start story at our annual parent banquet. This is her giving back to our program. This was 2014. And then the picture that's below is actually at the national Head Start conference that was held at Gaylord Opryland in Nashville. She was selected. She shared her story with the Windows of Opportunity, the 16 million Windows of Opportunity. She was...As one of the alumni, she was selected to come speak. And that was actually in April of 2013, just two months after her father had passed. And she -- she presented her story there. And so that's her way of giving back to Head Start for the work and the services they gave her. She has been awarded several academic awards for public speaking in the Voice of Democracy and the Patriot's Pen through the VFW. She's received several awards through that as well.

Amanda: And profound hearing loss.

Stephanie: And profound hearing loss.

Amanda: Pretty remarkable, right? And you are now the education and family services coordinator at West Tennessee, right? And in that role, Stephanie, you provide what I know is sort of the hallmarks of the story that you just told, right? So you really look at coordinated community services marked by that important collaboration and absolutely that early support, those foundations in those critical early years.

Stephanie: Absolutely.

Amanda: Did you want to say one more thing? We've got like two seconds. But if you wanted to say one more important piece, go ahead.

Stephanie: Embrace those newborn hearing screenings. Get those follow-up services. Reach out to those community resources. Those early years do matter, and they're very, very important.

Amanda: And I want to give Xitlali an opportunity, because you really echoed this idea that brain development in these first three years was so important. And I think that's such a hallmark of what we heard from Stephanie's story. So I wondered if you wanted to say a few words about that.

Xitlali: [Speaking Spanish]

Interpreter: Both stories were very moving. And that's what Head Start reflects. ABCD is at the forefront of the...to work with the needs of all the families and all the children. And as a Head Start teacher of ABCD, I'm very proud of our agency, of my family, and of, you know, of all the doors that have been open to us today to be able to move forward.

Amanda: And all of these pieces are so important. As we think about all of those different foundations for learning, all of the things that we've been talking about for the past three days really feed into a program that allows these pieces to happen, right? So if we -- we work with families and children at these early moments of this never-to-be-repeated time, it's so important. I think what we've heard from all of these three stories is how foundational that time is.

And I want to go back just for a second to that outcomes framework one last time. So at this last Birth to Three Institute, we really want to celebrate the importance of those three...those first three years. We've talked about foundations -- the foundation of services, the foundation of family, and now, of course, the foundation of the earliest years. And we want to make sure that we honor the work that families do, that staff do, that programs do during a time when children are growing at this incredible rate of speed, right? During this never-to-be-repeated time, each year serves as a foundation for the rest.

I want to thank all of you so much for being here with us today. The three of you, it has been fascinating to hear your stories and so inspirational, I know, to all of us. And I am so grateful for the work that all of you all do every day to help families, to work with families, to partner with families, and develop relationships with families to make the most of this incredible time. Thank you so much.

Stephanie: Thank you.

[Applause]