

Preparing children to learn begins with Norwalk Home Visiting program

By Roz McCarthy Feb. 1, 2020 Updated: Feb. 1, 2020 5:07 p.m.



1of16Family Children's Agency Parent Educator for the Parents as Teachers program, Jennifer Giraldo, left, conducts a home visit with Rocio Marcelino and her daughter Lesly, 4, and other daughter Emily, 9, Friday, January 24, 2020, at their home in Norwalk, Conn. Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media



2of16Family Children's Agency Parent Educator for the Parents as Teachers program, Jennifer Giraldo, conducts a home visit Lesly Marcelino, 4, Friday, January 24, 2020, at her home in Norwalk, Conn.Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media



3of16Family Children's Agency Parent Educator for the Parents as Teachers program, Jennifer Giraldo, left,

NORWALK — Four-year old Lesly Marcelino threw herself into the arms of Jennifer Giraldo, a parent educator from Family and Children’s Agency. The hug was so tight, Lesly’s big pink bow almost fell off her head. When Lesly pulled herself away, Giraldo was smothered with hugs from 9-year old Emily and the girls’ mother, Rocio. Giraldo’s monthly visit to the Marcelino family had begun.

The Marcelinos are among 175 Norwalk families who participate in the Home Visiting program. Every month, more often if the family’s need is greater, a parent educator goes to the home, plays with the child and mom, talks with the mother about parenting issues, and connects the families with other services.

The goals of the program are simple, said Mary Kate Locke, director of Child and Family Development at FCA. “To promote early childhood development, help parents understand they are their child’s first and best teacher, and recognize that the early years are really hard when raising young children,” she explained. “All parents, no matter who and where, need support.”

The key is to educate and support the parents, so the child enters kindergarten ready to learn.

“A visitor working with a child for one hour a month can’t change a child’s trajectory,” Locke said. “But a parent can. We give parents the tools to understand their child’s development.”

And it seems to be working. Of the 27 children who entered kindergarten this year and whose families participated in the program, 75 percent were on track to learn, based on the Ages and Stages Questionnaire that all families complete as part of the kindergarten registration process. More long-term data is being collected and analyzed.

But a 2012 national study by Washington State Institute of Public Policy found that the program realized a \$765 return on investment per child. How? Fewer children needing special education services, fewer children suffering from child abuse and neglect, fewer children having developmental delays, and fewer children suffering from social emotional problems.

“We realized that if we talk about having Norwalk’s children ready to learn when they enter kindergarten, we had to partner with parents to help the children reach that goal,” Locke said.

Giraldo, the parent educator, is that partner. Once the excitement of her visit subsided, she took out the Memory Game. Many of us remember it fondly. The goal is to find matching pairs of cards — in this case, the capital letter with the small letter. Cards are placed face down on a table. Each player turns one over and looks for a match, trying to remember the location of the matching card.

Lesly, Emily, their mother and Giraldo played. When Lesly turned over an N, Giraldo said, “N is for?” “Nail,” replied Emily. When Lesly turned over an L, Giraldo said, “L is for?” “Lesly!” Lesly yelled. When their mother got a match, Lesly jumped up and down in excitement and there were high-fives all around.

Later, Giraldo went over a handout with Marcelino in Spanish. The sheet explained the skills the children were practicing — concentration, sustained attention, naming the items to create a mental image, taking turns.

Twice a year, parents complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, which Giraldo went over with Marcelino during one visit. Marcelino filled it out and Giraldo reviewed it with her at the next visit. The ASQ asks questions like: Does your child use five-word sentences? Do you think your child talks like other kids his/her age? Can other people understand most of what your child says? Can your child count up to 15? Does your child know the letters

in his/her name? What colors does your child know? Can she/he throw a ball overhead? And so on.

In the past, Locke said the parent educator completed the ASQ, but now the parents do it. As a result, parents understand what a child should be able to do, and the parent educator can see where there are gaps.

"If there is a low score in one section of the ASQ," Giraldo said, "we bring activities that focus on that."

Locke said this change has shown results: when the parent educators were filing out the ASQ, 54 percent of the kids were on track developmentally; now that the parents do it, it's up to 75 percent.

"We empower the parents," Locke said. "These are not buzz words to us. These are the words we live by."

But helping parents is more than just teaching them skills; it's also about providing a network of support for them.

"I know how much I wanted to be with other mothers when my children were small," Locke said. "If we want to prevent social isolation, we have to offer groups."

Marcelino loves groups. Giraldo called her the mayor of Norwalk because she participates in so many: Moms groups, Zumba classes, art sessions, and lots of parties.

"I love when I have a chance to talk to other mothers," Marcelino said. "They help explain things to me."

FCA also offers fatherhood groups.

Lindsay Perry, FCA communication director, said that when a parent educator works with a family in their home, the visitor can create a close

bond with the family.

Judging by the numbers of hugs, the amount of laughter, the whispered secrets, and the lap-sitting that Giraldo shared with these kids, it seemed that she was much more than a visitor from a social service agency — she was a member of the family.

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