

# The Most Powerful Voice Is Yours

## Urging Policymakers to *Think Babies*<sup>TM</sup>

**Brooke Cisneros**

Strolling Thunder<sup>TM</sup> Family  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**Destiney Prieto**

Strolling Thunder<sup>TM</sup> Family  
Phoenix, Arizona

**Jennifer Jennings-Shaffer**

**Amanda Perez**

ZERO TO THREE  
Washington, DC

### Abstract

Decisions being made on Capitol Hill and in state capitals may seem remote from the experiences of early childhood professionals, but policymakers have a big impact on babies and families. Early childhood professionals and parents bring key expertise and passion to policy advocacy and have a powerful role to play. This article identifies the skills that early childhood professionals naturally bring to advocacy and offers stories from two early childhood advocates. Right now, babies need you to Be a Big Voice for Little Kids<sup>TM</sup>. Learn how you can leverage your unique expertise to help policymakers *Think Babies*<sup>TM</sup>.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the youngest children faced big challenges. According to the *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* (Keating et al., 2020), as many as 20% of babies in the US were living in poverty before the COVID-19 crisis, and many families are now struggling more than ever as they face the economic impact of the pandemic. Exploring the numbers by race and ethnicity presents a clearer picture, revealing that as many as 37% of Black babies and 30% of Hispanic babies were already living in poverty compared to 13% of White babies. Because of historical and structural inequalities, children of color face some of the biggest obstacles, such as low birthweight, unstable housing, and limited access to quality child care and early learning.

At the same time, the pandemic laid bare weaknesses in the systems that support children and families, especially child care. Unlike K-12 education, which is largely funded through

public dollars, the United States places the majority of the burden for paying for child care and early childhood education (ECE) on parents of young children, subsidized by the low wages of the early educators who provide care and education. When the pandemic hit, the costs of providing care to young children increased dramatically, due to the additional staffing, cleaning, and protective equipment required to provide safe care. Early childhood providers are serving fewer children, both to accommodate the need for more social distancing and because families are keeping children at home. As a result, in many cases, ECE providers are operating with significantly less income. Without adequate federal investment, half of the child care capacity that was operating as of March 2020 is at risk of permanent closure due to the additional costs and health threats of the pandemic.

In short, the pandemic will have lasting effects on children, families, the people who serve them, and the nation as it recovers and rebuilds.

But policies and programs, nationally and in states, make a big difference in babies' ability to reach their full potential. That's why, 4 years ago, ZERO TO THREE created *Think*

**Competencies for Prenatal to 5 (P-5) Professionals<sup>TM</sup>**

**P-5 (6)**

For more information see page 4, or visit [www.zerotothree.org/p-5](http://www.zerotothree.org/p-5)



Photo: ZERO TO THREE

Because of historical and structural inequalities, children of color face some of the biggest obstacles, such as low birthweight, unstable housing, and limited access to quality child care and early learning.

*Babies™* to urge federal and state policymakers to prioritize the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families and invest in the nation's future. In that time, ZERO TO THREE has engaged with advocates across the country and almost 70 partners to educate lawmakers and to advocate for policies that ensure babies and their families have what they need to thrive, including quality, affordable child care; paid time off for parents to bond with and care for their babies; healthy emotional development; and strong physical health and nutrition. We have reached up to 27 million people over social media, engaged more than 2,500 people in live advocacy events, and facilitated more than 500 meetings with policymakers at the state and national levels. Many early childhood professionals have also engaged in advocacy through emails and phone calls. While it is difficult to assess the impact of this collective action, we can link *Think Babies* advocacy to more than 25 wins at the state level since the campaign launched, and we're making incremental gains nationally.

As the pandemic rolls on, the need for robust policy advocacy on behalf of babies and their families has never been more urgent. **Your voice is especially needed!** But often, early childhood professionals feel uncomfortable with advocacy. In 2001, Susan Grieshaber wrote that while early childhood professionals are encouraged to be advocates, they are primarily trained to be nurturers and supporters of a young child's natural learning. She argued that those skills are opposed to the skills needed for advocacy, and that asking early childhood professionals to advocate is asking them to operate against their training and truer natures.

But in conversations with families and early childhood professionals-turned-advocates, ZERO TO THREE found the

opposite. Destiney Prieto (see Box 1) and Brooke Cisneros (see Box 2) were selected to represent their states as part of national *Strolling Thunder™*, the annual hallmark event of Think Babies. *Strolling Thunder* brings families—with their babies—from across the country to Capitol Hill to meet with their elected officials and share their experiences about what it's like to raise young children today and what they need to support their babies' healthy development. Destiney and Brooke's stories show that advocacy is integrally linked to the work and skills that early childhood professionals naturally bring.

## Advocacy Is Education

Policymaking can seem very removed from ECE programs, clinics, home visits, and virtual meetings, but it often defines, regulates, and funds much of the work that early childhood professionals do. Very few policymakers have experience in the disciplines that early childhood professionals studied or the settings or particular communities where those professionals work. While they may have staff with expertise in human services and sometimes early childhood, that means that, too often, policymakers are making major decisions about programs and services about which they do not have the depth of knowledge that would help them make the best decisions.

In that context, as Destiney and Brooke describe, advocacy is about education. They want policymakers to understand the crucial and formative nature of the first 3 years, and, with that understanding, to increase public support for the youngest children. Early childhood professionals bring crucial expertise to the policymaking process, including deep understanding of target communities and their current resources and needs, day-to-day experience under the programs and policies under discussion, and relevant academic and research expertise.

## Advocacy Is Relationship Building

Relationships are the foundation of the work of every early childhood professional. Nurturing relationships strengthen and stimulate foundational brain architecture and connections that support learning. A hallmark principle of this work is that relationships inform relationships. Reflective supervision, offering nurturing relationships to professionals, impacts the relationships they build with families and, in parallel process, those relationships impact the relationships families build with their children.

In her story, Destiney talked about relationships too, how making a connection at *Strolling Thunder* led her to a key role in *Strolling Thunder Arizona*. Destiney inevitably used her relationship skills to help prepare families for that event, to help them feel comfortable and confident as they met with their state legislators. Not surprisingly, relationships with advocates impact policymakers and inform their work as well. While one brief impactful interaction with a policymaker can change his or her understanding of an issue or a vote, a long-term relationship with a policymaker or a member of his or her staff can make an early childhood professional a trusted

*Continued on p. 49*

## Box 1. Destiney Prieto's Advocacy Story

### How did you get interested in advocacy for babies and families?

I became a foster parent in 2007, with a 6-week-old baby who soon showed signs of having developmental delays. I was super fortunate to be able to get early intervention for her. I quickly realized that other families and babies needed similar supports. Eleven years later, I had a set of twins, preemies, one of whom ended up in the neonatal intensive care unit. We needed developmental services again, but this time, my children were not eligible for early intervention. Again, I realized that it is so important that there be awareness of what babies really need and how to support families during this time.

### What were your biggest challenges in terms of getting involved?

My biggest challenge in getting involved was figuring out how to do it! Where do you even start to get involved and how can you really make a difference in helping? At first, it was challenging finding groups that I could get involved with, but once I learned more about local groups and programs, it was easy!

### Tell us a little about how you have advocated for babies and families. What have been your successes?

When I discovered the value of early intervention for my oldest daughter, I wanted everyone to know about it! I would help other foster parents by telling them about the services and giving them tips and pointers on what I did to navigate the system. By speaking with other families, I felt like I was helping and advocating for children because these families were going to be able to better help the children in their care.

Years later, we got connected with a nurse home visiting program after our twins were born. Our home visitor told us about *Strolling Thunder* in the nation's capital and recommended us for the event. *Strolling Thunder* brings a family with a baby from every state and Washington, DC, to Capitol Hill to meet with their Members of Congress to talk about what they and their babies need to thrive. Our family was selected to represent Arizona in 2019.

In DC, my family had three Congressional meetings—one with each of our Senator's offices and our Representative in the House—and we talked about the importance of the first 3 years of life, and the services our children received early. We were accompanied on our meetings by Ginger Ward, a ZERO TO THREE board member and the chief executive officer of Southwest Human Development, the organization that offered us those crucial home visits. After that day together, Ginger offered me an opportunity to work for the organization to do a state-level *Strolling Thunder* event, the first of its kind in Arizona. On March 11, 2020, at that event, more than 25 parents/caregivers met with their local representatives at the State House to talk about babies and families and what they need to thrive. I helped them advocate for the services and programs that were important to their families. I was proud to help them use their voices. It was an amazing event, and I look forward to doing that work again next spring, if the pandemic allows.



Photo courtesy of ZERO TO THREE Policy Center

*In DC, my family had three Congressional meetings—one with each of our Senator's offices and our Representative in the House—and we talked about the importance of the first 3 years of life, and the services our children received early. —Destiney Prieto*

### What would you tell other families and providers who are interested in getting involved but are not quite sure how?

I would tell families to search online for state and local programs advocating for children, and see what opportunities there are to get involved. Learn about the challenges for children and families in your area and how you can help.

### What do you want your policymakers to know about babies and families?

I want policymakers to know that babies are our future, that families need more public support. If we don't put the effort, and money, and supports in place to meet their needs now, if they don't have adequate programs and policies in place to help them during these most formative and crucial years, then we miss the opportunity to prevent later issues.

As a country, we cannot forget about these babies and their families.

## Box 2. Brooke Cisneros's Advocacy Story

### How did you get interested in advocacy for babies and families?

I began my journey in advocacy for babies and families growing up in rural northern New Mexico, where advocacy is ingrained in the culture. I was inspired by the efforts of my own mother. After seeing the demand and disparities in child care for working families in our small community, my mother opened and operated her own child development center. I joined her on many occasions at our state capitol to lobby for early childhood funding. We held community meetings and workshops in order to highlight the developmental importance of a child's experiences from birth to kindergarten. It was there that I developed the belief that all children should have access to affordable quality education and that early childhood educators are immensely valuable to our communities.

Later, I gained employment at a premier, and highly sought-after, early childhood program. There, I realized that my coworkers and fellow teachers could not afford the tuition for their own children to attend the school. Recognizing the great disparity families face in affording quality early childhood education, I set my sights on studying and completing my course work in political science at the post-secondary level. My studies allowed me great insight into how politics, policymaking, and funding could greatly impact the children of my state. When I became a parent and a lead teacher in my own classroom, I became even more aware of New Mexico's scarce support to families and child well-being. Not only does New Mexico rank last or next-to-last in regard to child welfare and well-being but as a diverse state it is for certain that children of color are being left at a disadvantage. All of these experiences, in addition to my involvement as a parent participant in the Nurse-Family Partnership program, generated a deep desire in me to advocate for children and families in my home state.

### What were your biggest challenges in terms of getting involved?

Sometimes, engaging in advocacy can be a challenge. The process of outreach and advocacy can be daunting. In certain instances, I've felt that a letter I've written to a policymaker lacks key information or citable sources. Finding those can be time consuming! With the hustle and bustle of everyday life I can't always sit down and write a letter or make a phone call. Often, the passion is there but the lack of knowledge or time can stifle some of the initial urge. However, when I've been engaged with organizations such as Nurse-Family Partnership and ZERO TO THREE, I've found many resources and allies that have helped me achieve these goals.

### Tell us a little about how you have advocated for babies and families. What have been your successes?

My work in advocacy spans different areas but with the same goal of creating better conditions for children and families. I've volunteered my time to an organization which offers nonpartisan campaign training for women. The objective is to have more women elected to office, which would bring priorities and perspectives that have been largely absent in policymaking to the forefront, such as early childhood education and paid parental leave. As of late, I have been active in grassroots lobbying of elected officials regarding funding for early childhood education,



Photo courtesy of Brooke Cisneros

*When I became a parent and a lead teacher in my own classroom, I became even more aware of New Mexico's scarce support to families and child well-being. —Brooke Cisneros*

continual support for home visiting programs such as Nurse-Family Partnership, paid parental leave, and support for the early childhood workforce. More recently I've become involved with ZERO TO THREE in the hopes of furthering the mission to give all children the best start in life.

### What would you tell other families and providers who are interested in getting involved but not quite sure how?

I feel I am lucky that I've somehow fallen into the right places and have been presented with many platforms to speak about causes that I care about. I know that not all families have the resources or the information that they feel they might need to begin their advocacy journey. But I would like to encourage anyone who feels the need to speak up to do so in whatever capacity they can. Just sharing personal experiences with authenticity is a start to advocacy. Sharing struggles, worries, and trials in numbers can demonstrate a growing need for change. In my journey, sharing my story has evolved to shed light on issues affecting children, families, and early childhood educators.

### What do you want your policymakers to know about babies and families?

Right now, our country is mired down with an overwhelmed health care system and economic woes. However, I hope that we remember that at the heart of these struggles are families. We are in danger of preschools across the country shuttering their doors. These are the same preschools that families rely on in order to work and sustain their families. It is my hope that policymakers ensure the survival of early childhood education. In the same spirit, I hope politicians acknowledge what needs to be done to ensure quality child care and early learning are accessible to all and that teachers are paid their worth. No child should be denied the best start possible, especially when early years of brain development are so critical. As a nation we want a thriving economy, low crime, low rates of substance abuse, and grand innovation. The good news is we don't need to look very hard for solutions. Early childhood education is the answer.

advocate, someone a policymaker turns to for insight, expertise, or advice. Furthermore, early childhood professionals have relationships with families and colleagues that can inspire them to engage as advocates themselves, adding to the number of voices speaking for babies and families.

## Advocacy Is Reflection

Early childhood professionals in almost every discipline learn the power of reflection, of being intentional in considering a baby, the meaning of that baby's behaviors, and to plan response. Over time, practitioners develop skill in evaluating the impact of individual temperament, environment, family relationships, and culture. In work with families, early childhood professionals position themselves as observer, learner, and coach, and in that work, talk with families or colleagues about the behaviors they notice in the families and their children. The professional may speak for the baby, offering others an interpretation of what they see.

Similarly, in advocacy, early childhood professionals bring policymakers and legislators their insight on the programs and services they legislate and fund. Brooke described her realization that professionals working in high-quality ECE programs cannot afford to enroll their children at the same program where they provide care for others. But policymakers may not connect those dots without help from advocates. Early childhood professionals speak for babies and families, offering policymakers insight on experiences that they are not able to see. They bring thoughtful reflection on the intricacies of systems and the efficacy of particular programs and services in the community. And just as they work to interpret the behaviors and provide meaningful response to babies and families, they bring recommendations for meaningful response in policy as well, important information on how policymakers can use their legislative or executive powers to best meet the needs of their youngest constituents and their families.

## Advocacy Is Storytelling

Early childhood professionals are keenly aware of the importance of literacy in the lives of the babies they serve, and the value of storytelling. This awareness stretches beyond reading books to young children, or even telling them stories. Storytelling in early childhood is centered on making meaning. From a baby's earliest moments, in describing the world around her, early childhood professionals offer the simplest stories ("You are hungry!") and begin to help her make meaning of the world. As professionals work with families, they share stories with them, helping families see a child's behavior for example, through the professional's eyes: "He cried. You saw that he was communicating exhaustion and rocked him to sleep." Some of the most powerful clinical work comes from storytelling, helping families build a sense of themselves as powerful, competent, and nurturing characters in the lives of their children. In administrative roles, early childhood professionals talk with funders, offering them the story of the program and how it helps in the community.



Photo courtesy of ZERO TO THREE Policy Center

*Strolling Thunder* brings families—with their babies—from across the country to Capitol Hill to meet with their elected officials and share their experiences about what it's like to raise young children today and what they need to support their baby's healthy development.

.....

All of those stories can be effectively used in advocacy. Use them to help policymakers understand the experiences of children and families, their powerful motivations, and the value (and deficiencies) of the programs and services that early childhood professionals provide. Brooke reflected that her advocacy begins with telling her story and evolves to sharing insight on an issue. Her story has the power to change a policymaker's perspective, or it can become an important tool for a policymaker seeking support on an issue from colleagues. Remember that policymakers are writing stories as well. For the most part, they want to know that they have had a positive effect on the communities they serve. Investing in early childhood programs and policies may well be an important part of that story!

### Learn More

The following *Think Babies* resources are designed to help you harness your expertise and passion into powerful policy advocacy for infants, toddlers, and their families.

- Sign up at [ThinkBabies.org](http://ThinkBabies.org) to receive updates and action alerts
- *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* (<https://stateofbabies.org>) bridges the gap between science and policy with national and state-by-state data on the well-being of America's babies across nearly 60 indicators. *The State of Babies Yearbook: 2020 Advocacy Toolkit* (<https://stateofbabies.org/take-action>) includes key messages, outreach templates, and sample content.
- *Share your story* on the *Think Babies* website (<https://www.thinkbabies.org/share-your-story>) so that we can use it as we push for the programs and policies that babies and families need.
- The *Think Babies Toolkit* (<https://www.thinkbabies.org/toolkit>) includes a variety of resources and templates designed to help you spread the *Think Babies* message and take action on the issues that matter to you.

## Advocacy Is Passion

Many early childhood providers come to the work with a heart for the children they serve, a passion for the impactful work that they do, and a commitment to the families and communities they serve. Of course, families feel that passion as well. Both Destiney and Brooke spoke with passion for their own children and families and their belief in the value of investment in the early years.

That passion translates powerfully to advocacy, making them—and you!—affecting and effective advocates. Through relationships, early childhood professionals can connect their passions to the passions of policymakers, in simple conversations about their families and communities, and the values that drive their policy.

Babies and families need that passion—and every advocate, new or seasoned—now. The need to make the potential of every baby a national priority has never been more urgent. Americans need Congress and state leaders to prioritize babies and the nation's future, policies built on the science of brain development, and budgets that put babies and families first. Right now, babies across the country need you to Be A Big Voice for Little Kids. We look forward to working with you on their behalf.

---

**Brooke Cisneros** lives with her partner (a police officer) and her young son in Albuquerque, NM. She worked as an early childhood educator for more than a decade before opting

to stay home after her child's birth, due to lack of affordable, high-quality child care. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science and is currently working on a second bachelor's in Southwest studies.

**Destiney Prieto** and her husband have four children. She has been a sales executive for a Fortune 500 company for 21 years and served as the *Strolling Thunder* organizer for Southwest Human Development for 2020. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology.

**Jennifer Jennings-Shaffer, MPA**, the senior campaign manager at ZERO TO THREE, supports the development and implementation of ZERO TO THREE's advocacy strategy to move an infant-toddler policy agenda, working primarily to support state-based advocacy campaigns. Jennifer's previous experience includes serving as the early learning policy director for the Children's Alliance in Washington State and serving as the Head Start state collaboration office administrator at the Washington State Department of Early Learning.

**Amanda Perez, MSW**, senior advocacy manager at ZERO TO THREE, works with the advocacy team to develop and implement advocacy campaigns on infant-toddler issues. Amanda comes to her role with experience as an infant-toddler teacher supported by the Child Care Development Block Grant, an early interventionist under funding from Part C of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, and 16 years as a trainer and technical assistance provider with Early Head Start.

---

## References

Grieshaber, S. (2001). Advocacy and early childhood educators: Identity and cultural conflicts. In S. Grieshaber & G. S. Cannella (Eds.), *Embracing identities in early childhood education: Diversity and possibilities* (pp. 60–72). Teachers College Press.

Keating, K., Cole, P., & Schaffner, M. (2020). *State of babies yearbook: 2020*. ZERO TO THREE.