



FAMILY STORY

Paying It Forward

A Conversation with Fatimah Jeffery Edison, New Jersey

By Diane Wellman, THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT



In 2016, Fatimah Jeffery was earning a bachelor's degree in school psychology while working full-time as a paraprofessional in the New Jersey public school system. To her amazement, she discovered she was pregnant, at age 40. "I thought my clock had ticked out, and I wouldn't be able to have children," she said. "It was a big shock."

Fatimah had recently relocated to Edison from a neighboring county, and though she'd be facing motherhood alone and as a single parent, she was determined to make it work. After all, years of work experience in daycare and Head Start, and an associate's degree in early childhood education, had given her a good idea of what to expect.

Money was tight, but it became even tighter after an accident in her PreK-3 classroom necessitated an early leave from work, weeks before maternity benefits were obtainable.

She needed help and began searching for resources available to pregnant moms. "I did so much footwork," she said. With the 2016 election in full swing, she sent emails and made phone calls to politicians running for office in her county. "I asked, what do you guys have for working moms who are in a financial bind



like me?" She signed up for WIC but made too much money to qualify for food stamps, so she found and utilized food banks.

Then, Nurse-Family Partnership started calling, offering to send a nurse to her home to help her through pregnancy and until the baby turned 2 years old. "I kept saying no, I'm fine. I didn't like the stigma of someone coming into my home, observing me. I felt like, who are you? I don't need anyone in my business."

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Fatimah did not know how NFP got her name and number; she'd met and talked to a lot of people along the way. But they kept calling and, finally, she relented and accepted their invitation to come into her home. Ultimately, she said, "It was a blessing handed to me, and I am forever grateful."

During Fatimah's pregnancy, "Nurse Aileen" from NFP visited weekly, bringing information on everything from what to pack for the hospital to the importance of staying positive and reading and singing to the baby while pregnant. "This was helpful because I was under depression and felt alone. She showed empathy and relieved a lot of my anxiety." With both her parents and grandparents deceased, and her remaining family out of state, Fatimah said, "My nurse Aileen quickly became family to me."

In addition to services provided by NFP, Nurse Aileen also referred Fatimah to other resources.

She was like, you can get Pampers from this place monthly and here weekly. You can go here for food. You can sign up for this class or that class. Here is an event that's happening, and there you can meet other moms in your area. Here is where you can get help with your utilities. Aileen bombarded me with resources. Whatever encounters I had, there was help for me, and Aileen made sure she found it.

After Fatimah's daughter, Emerald Vanessa, was born, "My nurse also became my daughter's nurse. She came weekly with lots of information about what to expect, what milestones should occur," Fatimah recalled. "She brought educational books, gift cards to grocery stores, interactive toys. The weekly height and weight checks were wonderful. She provided so much, not the least of which was an enormous amount of love."

The most helpful service Fatimah said she received was emotional support. As a single mom working in early childhood education, she pretty much knew how to teach and tend to her baby. Yet, she said, "I had no preparation for the pressures I faced as a single mom."

Once Emerald Vanessa aged out of the program, Fatimah, who had returned to work, decided to stay involved with NFP and joined a parent leaders' group created for parents who have graduated from the program. They meet regularly, along with other parent participants, and are currently brainstorming ways to develop a mommy group for all NFP graduates.

In her own words, Fatimah answered the following questions:

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME A PARENT LEADER?

To pay back, and to pay it forward. As a parent educator that's over 40, I wanted to help those younger than me, to reassure and strengthen their relationship with their child, themselves, and others. With the trials and tribulations I went through, hopefully it can gear others into better decision making for their family.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON HOW TO GET PARENTS INVOLVED IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMUNITY?

Having interactive meetings often helps a lot. Having parents engage with others, sharing ideas, experiences, and feelings of everyday life, and having fun things planned that are also informative will keep parents interested and looking forward to meeting more. Also, the exchange of meaningful, helpful conversations keeps parents at ease and children happy; for example, by exchanging ideas on how to cope during the pandemic or how to keep children occupied during quarantine. Or, what recipes are you using, and how are you tweaking making baked chicken for the third time this week? What shows and movies are you watching? When parents are involved or engaged like that, they're more than likely to tell other expecting parents, hey listen, I'm with this program and this is what's happening. It makes parents feel important and part of something.



DO YOU FEEL THERE ARE OBVIOUS STEPS IN PLACE TO ACTIVELY ENTICE AND ENGAGE PARENTS SHOULD THEY WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Referral resources are very helpful. For the exact reason that I became involved through footwork, I believe that the protocols are working and are very good for those who need help and assistance. Possibly programs such as WIC are gateways to other programs like Nurse-Family Partnership. Situations are different, and what resources one person may use differs from those another could use. I have met other clients through events I attended and also via Zoom, and it's a beautiful melting pot of mothers who just want the best for their family, and to be treated as individuals and not just another "case."

WHAT DO YOU SEE ARE THE BIGGEST NEEDS WITHIN THE EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITY, AND HOW COULD THE EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM BETTER HELP TO MEET THEM?

I believe the biggest challenge in the early learning community is focusing on emotional support for parents. I can't say just moms, because there are also fathers that are actively involved in their children's lives and need emotional support and encouragement. As parents we can never take a day off; it can be overwhelming. Emotional support can strengthen us and also help us push through the process. It's not just a financial issue; it is also making sure people have the right state of mind, for example, to deal with potty training while also helping an older sibling with school work, and juggling household duties, or even caring for a newborn all at the same time. I believe programs should have a staff person or different department set up that's dedicated to emotional support, which would probably alleviate the pressure of those taking on all the responsibility, like Aileen, for instance, who was nurse, friend, emotional supporter all in one.

ON THE FLIP SIDE, WHERE DO YOU SEE PROGRESS AND SUCCESS?

With Nurse-Family Partnership I see caring and loving staff that's been bringing families together in person for fun events, and now virtually, to kick back in pajamas and let our hair down while discussing important issues and laughing about silly mishaps of everyday life. No one has a title, no one is facilitating; it's just a pleasurable meeting to brainstorm. Everyone has an opinion and everyone's opinion is respected. It's a learning experience for us all.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS?

Keep in touch with families, keep them connected, and keep us feeling important and needed. Don't make us feel like a number and a charity case. I personally feel the excitement, love, and general compassion from the staff I have encountered at Nurse-Family Partnership.

Emerald Vanessa, or EmVee, as Fatimah calls her, turned 3 years old in December 2020. While her unexpected arrival, compounded by the pandemic, delayed Fatimah's school plans, she still intends to complete her bachelor's and, if she can, get involved in other programs as a parent advocate. "It's all about having compassion," she said. "It's not a lucrative field financially, but if you wake up ready to work at something you want to do, it sustains you."

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ABOUT THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT

Four national early childhood models—Family Connects, HealthySteps, Help Me Grow, and Nurse-Family Partnership—are exploring ways to have a greater impact on young children and their families in communities where their programs overlap. The project is a multi-year initiative, with leadership and facilitation from [ZERO TO THREE](#) and funding from the [Pritzker Children's Initiative](#). While the four models were the starting point for the project, their local experiences reveal a broad range of community partners who play important roles in early childhood collaboration. For links to additional stories and briefs from the Model Convening Project, see the [Hand in Hand Directory](#).

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