Illinois Parent Ambassador Program
2019 - 2020

Real Parents
Real Stories
Real Impact
Hello, my name is Daisy Loa. I’m a Mother of three wonderful amazing children: Eduardo (17) a high school senior, Millie (15) a sophomore, and Mateo (2), who has been enrolled in Educare West DuPage Early Head Start now for a year and two months.

I was a young mother at the age of seventeen with no support from family members. Going through so many emotions myself from all of this new learning. As I walk through that Head Start building and see those other Moms; I give them a special smile, as I feel my own personal gratitude. It gives me great comfort – knowing their children are getting the services they deserve. Knowing those parents are also receiving the mentoring which is very necessary when we are so young. Sometimes even giving them a simple smile, from one who already knows Head Start, might be just the thing to help them feel they are doing a great job. I know how I love to hear that once in a while!

Since having my son Mateo enrolled in Educare West DuPage EHS, I have seen him grow and become very independent and social. It’s very rewarding seeing him say “bye” in the mornings and blowing me a kiss during our morning drop-offs. I know he is being looked after and also being given new opportunities of learning which will enhance his years of kindergarten learning. I am 100% certain of this, because there is good research which states when a child is exposed to experiences from an early beginning, they will have that eagerness to learn more and more from fresh, new experiences, ideas, etc. I’m so thankful for Educare West DuPage EHS because it’s a program that not only gives children a Bright Future, it also gives the family of that child a voice of empowerment - to reach its full potential.

Thank you, Educare West DuPage, for the many Family Engagement Programs (Abriendo Puertas) -- monthly parent meetings / Parent Policy / Healthy West DuPage – they all are opening many doors of opportunity to my son Mateo and my family.
Hi, my name is Courtney Parker. I’m from the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Head Start Program (SIU-E HS). SIUE Head Start / Early Head Start serves over 1300 families in our district ranging from birth to age five. That number is divided into fourteen different centers.

I am a mother of four beautiful girls, with much love and support from their father. My girls are Londynn (8), Brooklynn (5), Kourttnii (2), and Peytynn (1). They all have experienced Head Start at an early age and in some way benefited from the program. I first got involved with Head Start back in 2012 when I met Mrs. Kathy and Mrs. Margaret. They were the most welcoming ladies I ever met. They informed me about the program and what it had to offer and eight years later I am still a part of the program.

Head Start has helped my girls overcome a lot of obstacles and challenges they were facing at an early age. As outgoing and energetic as my girls are, I never thought they would be shy in a school atmosphere once they were enrolled. With the time, love, and patience from the teachers, my girls loved it. They would walk through the doors smiling and greeting everyone they walk past.

What got me more involved with the program was that I realized the time I put into my girls’ education would make a difference in their lives. So, I spent some time at the center throughout each month to get a better feel of what they do on a daily basis and to see how my children were doing in their classrooms -- I was not disappointed.

I love the program so much that during one of our parent meetings, I was elected president for my center. I knew the role was going to have a lot of responsibilities, but I was ready. I knew most parents didn’t have as much time to fully get involved in the program like myself. I KNEW I had to step in; I had to be the voice of the parents that don’t know the program as well. I’m happy that parents come to me for advice or just to talk.

One day during a home visit, I asked questions about Kourttnii’s speech (who at the time was one year old), because she wasn’t talking like she was supposed to at her age. My older girls were talking on a higher level for their ages and I was expecting the same for Kourttnii -- but that wasn’t the case. So my home visitor made a call to get a speech teacher to come visit and within a week they were at my home. After testing they diagnosed her with select mutism.

While Kourttnii had a very good understanding of what was going on around her, she just wasn’t quite sure how to voice it. That made her ineligible for speech therapy. So, I was given tools to work with Kourttnii to get her to talk more. After some time of working with her, she’s talking more than ever. I was really worried about Kourttnii starting school, because she wasn’t speaking, but now I am confident that she’s going to do great! I appreciate everything Head Start has to offer. They helped me overcome something I had no idea how to handle.

As of right now, Head Start has encouraged me to work towards getting my Child Development Associate (CDA), so I will have the opportunity to continue working with our children in Head Start.
Hi. I am Sarah Pines, and I am a Parent and Child Together (PACT) Head Start Parent in West Central Illinois. My husband Chris and I have three beautiful children. Our son Tucker is nine years old, our son Turner is eight years old, and our daughter Temperance is four years old. We first got involved with Head Start when Temperance was three years old. Early Intervention recommended she apply to Head Start so she could continue to receive IEP services, and because being around peers her age would be beneficial as well.

Temperance was such a great baby when she was born, but shortly after, we started seeing some signs that were concerning. Right away we realized that she would not wake to eat like a normal newborn. I would have to set an alarm to wake up to feed her throughout the night. Then, she was not talking when she was supposed to. Temperance had only a handful of words when she was 15 months old. When she would pick up one word, she would drop another word and not be able to say it anymore. So the doctor ordered she be evaluated by Early Intervention. Just as we thought, she qualified for Speech Therapy and Developmental Therapy.

Just before Temperance’s 2nd birthday, she woke up and couldn’t walk anymore; she couldn’t stand and would just fall down. We went to many doctors and we didn’t receive any answers. They would say “Oh, it’s this …” – do the test, and it “… wasn’t that.” Over and over again, this happened. While this was going on, Temperance started receiving (in addition to speech and developmental therapies), physical and occupational therapy. Temperance had five therapy sessions weekly. Even with therapies, Temperance still had ups and downs and was never consistent.

As a stay-at-home Mom, I was always focused on her, so I could tell the therapists and doctors everything that might shed some light on what was going on. We never spent time apart. Temperance had a separation [anxiety] problem, even with me stepping out of the room in our own home. I knew that when she started school, it was going to be an issue. Head Start helped to make the transition as smooth as possible. The teachers there really care and have a personal relationship with both the children and the families.

PACT Head Start takes care of the children, not only educationally and emotionally, but also with regard to nutrition, health, and oral care. The Family Advocate helps families when they are in need, to find the resources to assist. They make you feel like you are a part of their great big family.

Temperance receives all of her therapy services at school. She has really started to blossom in so many ways. Temperance can write the letter “I” and identify it. She has learned how to interact with children her own age and now is very social. The other children accept her exactly the way she is and they don’t make fun of her shortcomings. The teachers are very patient with her and are excellent about informing me how her day was. They tell me if she did something new that day, since she can’t really communicate with me well. Her communication has gotten better since starting at Head Start. Temperance loves her teachers and is always excited to go to school.

When we were new to Head Start, I joined a group called the Policy Council. The Policy Council is made up of parents and some staff members. We meet once a month and go over many different topics. They can include attendance, budget, financial reports, employee status, and much more. We get to hear from other parents and help make some decisions. The Policy Council is a very important part of Head Start. I was voted to be the policy council member who is a representative to the board members. This position really connects the parents to the people who make decisions that affect our lives and our children’s lives. I serve on the Planning Committee as well. This committee has the fun job. We get to plan family events. For Halloween, we had an event where the kids and families dressed up in costumes and ate together. Christmas we had pictures with Santa and made goodies to take home. Valentine’s Day we had a family dance, and for Easter, we had an egg hunt. These events allow parents to connect with one another.

At first, I thought Head Start was going to be like a daycare. After I got involved with Head Start, I quickly realized it is like a school, but better – in so many ways.

I want to give my daughter the best opportunities in life and in education. Head Start is doing that for her and I couldn’t be more pleased. My only hope is that more people become aware of the great benefits Head Start has to offer, and that more children get to benefit from it. These children are our future and as parents, Head Start gives us the help and support we need to succeed.
Hello, my name is Flor Fuentes and I come from Alexandria Center Head Start Program at Joliet, IL. I am a proud mom of six kids, Ivan (17), Aaron (15), Ingrid (13), Sophia (4), and (2 year old twins) Joselyn and Caroline.

The first time I knew this program was in 2005 when we moved from Chicago to Joliet, and I was needing to find a safe place for my kids, to be able to work. I found an expensive private day care where they told me they will help my kids (Aaron & Ivan) with the language because they just speak Spanish - but they didn’t. When I came back to pick them up, I found my young son Ivan in a corner and when I asked why, they said because he pooped his clothes. The reason was, because they did not show him where the bathroom was in time (he did not yet speak English). I removed the boys from there. Again, I had to look for another place.

Somebody recommended a home day care, but when I went there, I found out the lady in charge left the kids with a man when they are sleeping, to go to the store! I didn’t feel that was safe. I was having a hard time, because I needed to work, but I could not find any safe place for my kids.

At work a girl told me she would help watch my kids until I found a daycare. So, I decided to say yes; but it was bad. She put my kids in a room with cats and the cats scratched up my kids. She also didn’t feed my children. It was sad to come back to pick my kids up and find them like that, so I kept looking.

Finally, someone told me about Catholic Charities Head Start Program. That was a response to my prayers because it was there that we found a second home for my children. They now have a Head Start Program for free, and if you need a day care, they offered it at low cost. They helped my kids with language, but not just that – they make them feel part of the classroom.

By that time, I found out I was pregnant with my daughter Ingrid. They also had a program for pregnant mothers. They helped me find an obstetrician and they really took care of me, with appointments and with everything I was going to need with the baby. Later, when Ingrid was 6 weeks old, she started at the center, too. So there is where I see the difference between Ingrid and Ivan and Aaron. She was learning to be independent, secure, and she was learning to speak English and Spanish, so she was not struggling. I love Alexandria Center and the program because they really offered a safe and loving place to help my kids. That was my first experience with the program.

Now, I have three little girls on the program: Sophia (4) and two year old twins Caroline and Joselyn. I came back to the center because I trust in them. My twins were born with cranial problems, so Early Intervention helped with the helmets. Then Joselyn needed therapy because she wasn’t growing well; her bottom muscles needed help to get strong so they guided me through all therapies. Now she is walking, jumping, and running! I feel if they were not there, I would not have been able to find out about the problem that early.

That was why I decided to be a part of the Parent Meeting and learn more about the program, and how I can re-create all the help they gave to us. Also, I am the Policy Council President where we learn how they spend the money in the centers. We make important decisions, but the most interesting thing I’ve learned is that – as parents- we can make a difference in the federal and state decisions to keep Head Start programs running. That is why my husband and I are Parent Ambassadors – because we know without the program, the kids would not be prepared for kindergarten as good as they are going to be with Head Start.
My name is Johana Caballero. I am a Head Start Parent Ambassador from Educare West DuPage, which is an early childhood education program in West Chicago. Educare West DuPage is a Head Start program which serves 181 children and their families.

I have two boys who attended Educare West DuPage, from infants to five years of age. Jayden is now seven years old in first grade, and Jason is five years old in Kindergarten. The Head Start services that they received at Educare West DuPage helped them and myself in preparing them for Elementary School. Head Start was and will always be the “eye-opening” experience for me, they saw confidence I didn’t know I had in me. Being a parent is not easy, especially for a first time teen parent. I had no clue of what to expect. All I knew I had to do, at that time, was love a tiny human unconditionally.

Head Start helped me grow as a parent by becoming my child’s first teacher; they provided support, parent involvement, and helped me find my voice. Throughout the years, I finally got to see myself as an advocate for my boys, unafraid to speak out for what I believe. Both of my boys need special accommodations to succeed. Jayden has Sensory Integration and Jason has Disruptive mood Dysregulation disorder (DMDD). I now have a voice, and am not afraid to fight for what my boys and all children deserve to succeed in life.

Personally, as a Parent Ambassador I would like to support fellow parents and help them find their voice. Without Head Start, children will lose the opportunity to learn in a high quality environment which supports children's growth in areas such as language, literacy, cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development.
My name is Karen Arreola. I am a Parent Ambassador from Educare West DuPage, which is an early childhood education program in West Chicago, IL. Educare West DuPage is a Head Start program. We also get funding from the State of Illinois for our operations.

I had three children who attended Educare West DuPage from birth to 5 years of age. Juan 10 years old in 5th grade, Marco 8 years old in 3rd, and Jesus 5 years old.

Jesus, at the age of 7 months old, was not able to crawl, for me that was normal, and I thought he would be able to do it at one point of his early months. Little did I know - that was a very important developmental milestone he needed to meet. Jesus’s primary teacher approached me to inform me that Jesus needed to be referred to the Early Intervention Program for him to start get services to help him with his gross motor skills. After six months of services, Jesus was a new child. The Head Start services that they received at Educare West DuPage were the most critical to help my children succeed the first years of elementary school, as they were prepared for a new transition in their lives.

Without that program, I would have not been able to obtain a fulltime employment, pass the state board exam for my cosmetology license, and become a first time home owner, and provide a safe place for my children, which they surely deserve. I am very proud to say that my children are closing the achievement gap thanks to Head Start funding, which helps programs like Educare West DuPage provide quality teaching for children under the age of five years old. I have become a Parent Ambassador to help families find and get the same services my family had.

Our Parent Ambassador Program is just starting. Educare West DuPage believes the Program will succeed if the strengths of the parent ambassadors, like me, are recognized. We are working hard to learn what it means to be an advocate. We are looking at how we can help others understand how important it is to advocate for their children’s needs. We are learning how other parent ambassador programs have made a difference. We are also learning how to connect and communicate with other advocacy organizations. We are working to connect with politicians in our community to share our experiences with early childhood education.

Personally, as a Parent Ambassador I would like to connect and engage with new families at Educare West DuPage; share my experience as a Parent Ambassador with others; answer questions and give support to fellow parents, and most importantly, tell Illinois politicians to support early childhood education.
Hello my name is Renée Rodriguez. I am from Tri-County Opportunities Council (TCOC) Head Start Program. The TCOC program serves up to 633 families. We currently operate 26 Head Start classrooms (30 classes), and 4 Early Head Start Classrooms. We provide services to 9 Illinois counties, and employs up to 200 people. I am a single mother to 3 beautiful girls Mya (age 10), Hailey (age 9), and Olivia (age 5). All three have been through the Early Head Start and Head Start programs. I was first introduced to Head Start in 2011 when I was attending Cosmetology school. I was able to enroll my then almost 2 year old and 9 month old girls.

I was a young mother who had come from a challenging childhood and young adulthood. As my girls progressed in the program, the teachers and I started to see some concerns in the girls. Mya was having a hard time focusing and sitting still, and Hailey (oh my haya) was having a hard time all together. With the help of Head Start we began services at Sinnissippi Center, where Mya was diagnosed with ADHD, and Hailey at that time, was diagnosed with ODD and PTSD due to a past trauma. [Later to be diagnosed with Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder / Bi-Polar (DMDD) in 2017.] Head Start also helped teach not only me, but also my girls, coping tools to help them succeed using conscious discipline and other tools, which we still use to this day.

Fast forward 5 years and surprise! My Olivia came along. Olivia enrolled into Early Head Start at the age of 1. At this time, I was struggling with past choices I had made in my life that led me to addiction. Olivia was in her second year of Head Start when I made the choice to get help. I placed myself into rehab. It was the first time not only Olivia, but also my other 2 girls were away from me. The girls were struggling, especially Olivia, but Head Start was there for her. They provided her with additional emotional support and also the coping tools she needed to get through that time. Head Start continues to be there, assisting my family in any way they can. This organization has provided the foundation for my family to grow upon, to succeed in everyday life.