



FAMILY STORY

Meeting Parents Where They Are

A Conversation with Denise Brown Jacksonville, Florida

By Diane Wellman, THE MODEL CONVENING PROJECT



From the age of 15, Denise Brown was told she would likely never conceive a child due to a condition called polycystic ovarian syndrome. So, when she discovered she was pregnant 11 years later, she was overjoyed. She'd recently started a romantic relationship with Calvin Brown, her best friend since childhood, in their hometown of Jacksonville, Florida. However, with children of his own from previous relationships, he was less enthusiastic about the news.

"For us to have a child so soon, he was super-duper frustrated," said Denise. "I'm like listen, you don't have to be here; I can do it by myself because this may be my only shot."

Early in her pregnancy, while at the hospital for prenatal care, Denise met a woman who told her about the Nurse-Family Partnership home visiting program. She liked the sound of the program but was skeptical about

a mandated reporter coming into her and her unenthusiastic boyfriend's home. "It wasn't exactly the most glamorous situation," she said.

Still, she wanted to give it a try. She knew a few things about taking care of children, having previously worked in child care for seven years, but being a full-time mom was different. "I needed to know everything, because this was probably my one and only time to really get the whole feel of motherhood," she said.

To make herself more comfortable, Denise arranged for the first meeting to occur at her mother's house, thinking "If things go south, at least she won't know where I live." The woman Denise met at the hospital ended up being the nurse home visitor, and "By my second visit Nurse Janet became family," said Denise. "It was an immediate click. She talked to me about everything from giving birth to postpartum to breastfeeding, and she involved Calvin, too."

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Shortly after her son was born, Denise confided in Nurse Janet that she didn’t think they were going to make it as a couple. Before calling it quits, Nurse Janet suggested they seek counseling and provided a referral to a counselor that was free of charge. “That changed everything in our lives,” said Denise. “We really got to see the insides of each other. Even though we’d known each other for so long, I didn’t realize how my past affected me and my relationship with him, and how his past affected us as well. If it wasn’t for my home visiting program, we would’ve never got that counseling.”

Calvin ended up proposing marriage, and Denise accepted, happily.

Another long-term result that arose from an NFP referral occurred after Denise completed the program. Because she had embraced breastfeeding, calling it “one of my best journeys being a mom,” NFP suggested she apply for a position at the Healthy Start Coalition as a peer breastfeeding counselor. “My only job experience had been child care and warehouse. I have a high school education, only a little bit of college, and didn’t know anything about this corporate world, but it was breastfeeding, and as much as I love this journey, I really wanted to share it with anybody else that wanted to know.” She got the job, trained as a breastfeeding counselor, and went on to become a certified lactation consultant.

During the same time, Denise, along with two other women, started a support group for NFP graduates and their families, which continues today. “The only complaint about the program was that we wished it had lasted longer. This was a way for us to continue to be a family outside of the program, and still be there for each other.”

Today, Denise has her own breastfeeding consulting business and is a parent leader, advocate, and avid volunteer for various early childhood programs, including Healthy Start and NFP Florida, where she’s a board member.

It’s so amazing that me, the person who did not think she could get pregnant, the person who did not think she would ever have a family, and with little education, I did not see my life going in this direction. It’s important for me to get out and reach any family I can to let them know, listen, you never know how your life can change or what can happen in the few months you have these programs and people in your life.

Denise’s son, Calvin Demetrius Brown, is now 8 years old, and her extensive experience volunteering as a parent leader and advocate, alongside her work as a breastfeeding consultant, has provided her with valuable insight into the early learning community.

In her own words, she answered the following questions:

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

I think parents want to be involved because we know what’s best for our children. But the approach is everything. The connection. It needs to be sincere. As a service provider, if you don’t get that connection within the first week, you don’t have that person. I need to know that you don’t mind coming in the hood to see me, that you’re not going to be sitting at the edge of the couch watching your car out the window or watching your watch. If time runs over, let it go over. I want to know that your time to meet me is not just 9 to 5, because I’m a working parent, or a single parent.

Meet parents where they are. And don’t judge. Be as authentic as you can, because we can tell when you’re faking. If you’re faking to get us on your roster, we know that. Be very careful how you present yourself. People are so afraid of letting other people in their homes. Assure them upfront that yes, you’re a mandated reporter, but you’re not going to report anything unless it’s very wrong. And don’t be wearing shoes that cost more than anything I have in my closet or carrying a purse I’ll never own.

YOU'VE BEEN A PARENT LEADER IN A LOT OF PROGRAMS OVER THE PAST SIX YEARS. WHAT PROGRAMS CONTINUE TO HOLD YOUR INTEREST, AND WHY, OR WHY NOT?

I'm only at the table right now with people who want to hear my voice. One organization I was with for a while wanted me at the table but really didn't want to listen to what I had to say, including *why am I the only parent at the table? You say you hear me, you take your surveys, then nothing changes. Get some other parents in here and fix what's broken, because you guys are not listening.* Within the past two years, however, I've learned that particular organization has made needed changes, and I'm proud of that.

So, I've sat at tables like that, and I've also sat at a lot of tables that say we need to have parents, to be hearing their opinions and their voices so that we can make necessary changes. I love to sit at tables where people don't think that because I haven't graduated college or I don't have letters after my name I don't know what I'm talking about, because I can tell you more than what you think I can. Currently, I'm excited to be working with Healthy Start and ECCS [Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems] to help navigate different system changes in Florida to make sure people are getting the care they need; for instance, with early detection of depression during pregnancy, and after pregnancy, and for fathers, too, because fathers go through depression and so many people overlook the fathers.

We're doing a story process with ECCS called Story Time, and we have parent leaders that sit on the call and talk about whatever the topic is, like depression, and the providers just listen. In general, it's crazy how providers don't know that a lot of parents already know the questions that providers are going to ask them when they have to do a survey to see how parents are doing, how parents are coping. Because we parents don't want to be labeled, because we don't want to go into the system, we falsely answer the questions, because we don't want people in our homes. You take a look at possibly losing your child if things are too rough, and that's overwhelming. So, you don't tell the truth about that, but you open up to the people that you can relate to.



WHAT'S COLLABORATION LIKE BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT PROGRAMS YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH? DO THEY TALK TO EACH OTHER?

Yes. All these places can work together. Though coalitions are sometimes after the same funding, ultimately, it's about the families and what the families need. Healthy Start, for instance, collaborates with Early Steps and Fatherhood Pride. Even if one place can't help you, they'll be able to steer you to the right place.

ARE THERE ANY BARRIERS YOU WOULD LIKE TO IMPROVE UPON?

The only barrier I can really see is in getting more parent leaders on board and having parents' voices heard more. Parents have to learn how to trust, and I know that that's hard for parents to do, but we have to learn how to trust. And the providers have to go in with the right mindset, not judging. Be mindful of how you conduct yourself for the people that you're providing for, and understand that the parents are the experts. I'm so happy that I'm starting to see that change, and I'm starting to see the parents' voices being heard. Parents are now becoming leaders and are now starting to be at the table. I'm in love with this.

Currently, Denise is in the process of writing a book about her remarkable journey. Her son is “a brilliant third grader and all-around amazing guy.” She and Calvin were married November 4, 2017, and he remains her best friend and enthusiastic partner.

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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](#).

Published May 2021