

# Parent Panel

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This panel consisted of parents who had participated at some time in programs serving vulnerable parents with young children. They were invited to attend the symposium with representatives of their organizations. One panel discussion was set aside for them to tell their stories. Lisa Lee of the Parent Services Project facilitated.

## AVANCE: Rita San Miguel, speaker

I just wanted to share my adventure with AVANCE and how it changed my life. Gloria was only 25 years old when she came to my door. I was young and had dropped out of school after I married and had my son. I stayed with my mother, but she said, “Do not open the door to anyone or they will hike up the rent.” So, Gloria knocked on the door, and being a teenager, I opened the door. Gloria said, “I am looking for people just like you.” She told me that she had a program to help me and my son. I called my husband to tell him about it, and then I called my sister to see if she wanted to come. We walked to the school, and Gloria was there with the children in the school. I learned about being a parent and about what children needed. At that point, I was good with my child’s basic needs. I bathed him, fed him—attended to his needs—but I wasn’t talking to him and didn’t know that he needed other things to help with his growth.

However, to make a long story a little shorter, my husband and I got divorced because he couldn’t accept the changes that he saw in me as a result of the AVANCE program. When he began to accept it, we got remarried, and this year we would have been married 27 years if we had stayed married. While going to school, I had all the support for my son, and for me, to do well in school. I even learned how to drive. Gloria helped me study and lent me her car to learn. Because AVANCE believes in hiring from within, I eventually took over the day care and continued to grow until I begin to work at the national office. I have had adventures that, prior to participating in AVANCE, would have been unbelievable to me.

I started [when] AVANCE had a staff of three people. They combined all their duties and were willing to help with anything. I really thought that it was

impossible to get out of the [welfare] system that I was in, but my son who is not 30 years old has a better life. My daughter is attending community college to obtain her associate’s degree, and my son is a very loving father and good provider. With the core AVANCE staff, the door is open all the time. Incentives were provided to families to continue, and there was a lot of encouragement. Staff welcomed us from the very beginning without judging. They became like a family. They were trusting and not negative. We were guided but in a disciplined way. We could socialize during class and bring soft drinks or fruit and become “comrades.” Various professionals came to teach us different things, like doctors about health care, and nutritionists about food, and what to look for when purchasing food. For me, all of this had to be learned—it was not part of my life.

**HIPPY USA: *Merle Greene and Stacy Blais, speakers***

*Merle Greene* (Early Childhood Education Director of HIPPY USA): HIPPY is a home-based school readiness home involvement program. It is designed to meet individual needs of parents who have low-income and low socioeconomic levels with the philosophy that all children do learn and all parents need support. Some parents may need more support to learn how to be their child’s first teacher. There are four essential features:

- Home-based curriculum—30 weeks of activities in activity packets are included.
- Professional coordinator and home visitors—Trained staff including a coordinator oversee the program and recruit and train the home visitors.
- Role play—Role play is the instructional method of training between the coordinator and the home visitor.
- Group meetings—Home visits are interspersed with group meetings on alternate weeks, although many HIPPY programs reserve the right to have home visits 3 weeks a month. There is tremendous flexibility for HIPPY programs to structure them based on what the community needs.

There is often training going on at the local and national levels to help parents and staff to continue to grow. We offer our families a lot of enrichment and extension materials, including a lot of outreach. The curriculum is in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

*Stacy Blais* (former HIPPY parent and home visitor): I started HIPPY 4 years ago with my son. I heard about it from the public schools, with my kids bringing home handouts about the program. The HIPPY home visitor came over to my house and showed me some of the skills that I could teach my child. Somehow, the idea that I should be teaching my 4-year-old was new to me, because with my older children I didn’t get that message. It was my first exposure to the type of skills my child needed before he started kindergarten. My older children started school, and they really weren’t ready, but when I started working with my younger child, it was easy to work with him and play the games and the activities. The HIPPY program was fun. There were games and a lot of movement. When my son started school, the teacher

asked which nursery school he went to, and I said that he wasn't in a school—he was just home with me. He could take directions, he could think logically. Also, because I was involved with HIPPIY, I had access to other services that were also helpful for my other children. I really see the difference between my child who did get the learning before school and those who didn't.

### **MELD: Kay Gudmestad and Zachary Tift, speakers**

*Kay Gudmestad* (president and CEO of MELD): MELD's mission is to enhance the ability of parents to raise nurturing children. We work with many different organizations, including HIPPIY and PAT. We have a variety of publications and training, and we train many practitioners in service community. However, we're really focused on school-related issues and the ethnically diverse communities.

*Zachary Tift* (MELD parent and Young Dads and Hmong Parents Coordinator): I became a parent at 18 years old. Mariah was born just 2 weeks before our high school graduation. Mariah's mother and I definitely did not do that senior slide thing. However, when we found out that we were pregnant, I had the support of my family, including my mother and the women in my family. They taught me a lot of the "hands-on"—how to hold the baby and the child development issues. My father and the other men in my family prepared me and helped mentor me into fatherhood. There is a saying that a woman's role is to bring a child into the world, but a father's role is to bring the child up in the world. My father also helped with a father's resource center (which is still going) so that young fathers could learn where to place their priorities. Last year, we worked with 180 fathers, and 146 fathers attended a conference. MELD gives a stable program that has helped for over 30 years, and MELD grows and changes where needed. They have the young fathers and young mothers program as well as programs for ethnically diverse groups. It just keeps growing.

### **Parents As Teachers (PAT): Sue Stepleton and Samantha Fishman, speakers**

*Sue Stepleton* (president and CEO of PAT): I am really struck by some of the similarities in the programs. Our vision also changed to focus on children, with the mission being for parents and the focus on parents' needs. We (in our guiding principles) believe that parents are the first teachers; we emphasize the importance of the early years and that all children and families deserve the same opportunities. Personal home visits, developmental screenings, and group meetings are all methods that we use to find problems early. Sixty percent of the children and families served would be considered high needs. We also thought you might be interested in some of the things that we struggle with. For example, PAT is a universal access model. We want the service to have both intensity and quality. We hope that the same quality is maintained across the country. We also try not to be all things to all people, but we understand when other groups work better with ethnically diverse people.

• *Samantha Fishman* (former PAT parent and PAT Coordinator): When I first  
• heard about PAT, I was a teen parent with two children 14 months apart. I  
• also had a 13-year-old brother living with me at the time. So, basically there  
• were four children living in the household. I was involved in a family center  
• that wrote a grant for PAT services. We were approved for the grant, and  
• eventually the program hired their staff. The staff were called Developmental  
• Specialists. I remember one of my first experiences with my specialist  
• coming out to the house with little bags of things and seeing her pulling out  
• scissors. I didn't understand, and I thought she was crazy. Why would  
• anyone give a young child scissors? However, over time I realized that you  
• could give children scissors and other things, and they could learn from that.

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• Eventually, we had both children assessed. My older child was tested and put  
• into a program for academically advanced children, but it was frustrating  
• because the younger child couldn't seem to do some basic things. My home  
• visitor suggested that she should be tested for a learning disability. When we  
• realized that she did have a disability, then my home visitor explained that my  
• daughter wasn't doing these things to frustrate me but she just wasn't able to  
• learn in the same way as my older child. However, we were able to get the  
• help that she needed to make progress.

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• I became very involved with the government work that I learned about at our  
• center, and our parents are very vocal and will come forward for things like  
• school bills. My involvement in PAT has helped me improve my advocacy  
• skills for special needs children. You can also see the impact with my older  
• child. For example, my older child was with her stepmother when she had  
• her first child. It was my daughter who explained to the stepmother what the  
• new baby needed. So it was really clear to me that my daughter has ben-  
• efitied from PAT in ways that we didn't expect.

### • Questions from Symposium Participants to Parents on the Panel

• *Participant:* What would you suggest as being the best practices in the  
• program that you were involved with?

• *Stacy:* I would like see parents get the information much sooner than, for  
• example, when an older child starts school. In my situation, I heard about  
• HIPPIY because my older children brought home a flyer about the program.  
• However, if the information was in clinics, doctors' offices, or other places  
• that young parents visit, they would get the information earlier so it would be  
• more helpful.

• *Samantha:* The personal connection and courtesy are so important. If a  
• parent calls an agency to get more information, and the person who answers  
• them puts them off, then that parent may never call again. Establishing a  
• personal bond or relationship with someone in the program is so important.

• *Rita:* Not only the parents of the group attract us to stay involved, but there  
• are others involved like the fathers in the fathers' classes. There are evening  
• classes for those who are working.

*Zachary:* Programs need to stake their claims in the community because it shows their commitment to the community.

*Participant:* What should programs be covering?

*Rita:* We were told that we would be learning about how to prepare our child for school and also about how to be a part of that, including how we can get ready for school, too.

*Stacy:* I was told that I would learn more about my child. I knew my child was learning something, but I didn't know exactly what, so the program helped me realize how my child was learning. Also, there is the curriculum that explains the skills that the child is learning, and there is a standard in education and everything that you learn from your child. It really changes things at home—the way you talk to your child changes. Basically everything changes. You begin to see that everything you do is a lesson.

*Samantha:* I was very isolated with my children, and none of my friends had children at that time. I was pretty convinced at 18 that I knew what I was doing. For me, the community type of atmosphere was really important. I realized that there was something to this when my children didn't cut each other up with the scissors. I started doing the activities and then seeing some positive things coming out of them. So, at that point, I thought okay—maybe the specialist wasn't really as crazy as I thought that she was. It took me doing that and seeing how it worked.

*Zachary:* I didn't attend a group. However, MELD staff did talk with me to make sure that my needs as a young parent were being met. Through the MELD peer-modeling program, I realized that we could really relate and empathize with that experience of being a young parent.

*Participant:* What has the staff learned from the parents—what growth and changes did you see in the staff?

*Samantha:* A lot of community support and resources came from the parents. Many of the specialists that started at our center didn't live in the area. They have a lot of academic and developmental knowledge, but they didn't know where to get things in the community. The professionals had a very clear picture of how the center was going to look and when a parent group was formed. Then we essentially said, "That's a good vision, but that's not what we want." That's when we sat down with staff and explained why our community didn't need certain things that they had put into the center.

*Stacy:* The staff of our program is really well trained and followed the model exactly as it is, so I'm not really sure what I can say about whether or not the staff learned anything from us.

*Participant:* What is one thing that the program does where you know it is really helping?

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. *Zachary:* One of the things that helps is when the guys come back. You can  
. tell that it builds confidence—and you can see it when they keep coming back.  
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. *Samantha:* A large part of the current discussion at our center is about  
. advocacy and helping parents to get their children involved before school.  
. There is a lot of feeling from parents that they are being judged at school.  
. Sometimes teachers send the message that you are the “token” mom.  
. Learning advocacy skills helps parents work past that and become better  
. advocates in their child’s school.  
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. *Stacy:* Relationships between parents are helpful, because by forming those  
. relationships, you are building a repertoire that is comfortable.  
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. *Rita:* In AVANCE, the parents are made a part of the system right away. By  
. the end of the program, the parents are feeling a part of AVANCE and  
. inviting staff over to their homes, and the relationship is reciprocal.  
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. *Zachary:* Young fathers feel judged and think that others feel they won’t  
. make it—that they will run out on their family. In the schools, it can be  
. frustrating. For example, if something happens to their child, then the teacher  
. or principal won’t call the father. Despite the fact that the father has talked  
. with the school, they still don’t call. When other young fathers first get  
. involved, they often feel judged, but being part of a group will help them  
. realize that everyone has difficulty and it is a process. You don’t graduate  
. from fatherhood.  
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. *Participant:* Were you approached by other groups that you did not get  
. involved in?  
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. *Samantha:* Yes, I was involved in a program before PAT but stopped going,  
. mainly because of the staff and the feeling of being judged. When I was in a  
. literacy program, the teacher had parents write in a “confidential” journal  
. and then she asked me about something in the journal. That was enough—if  
. I couldn’t trust her that the journals were confidential, then how could I trust  
. her to give advice?  
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. *Rita:* Yes, I was approached by the local high school and asked to attend  
. school, since I hadn’t graduated. However, I couldn’t bring my son with me,  
. so I was unwilling to leave my child with a baby-sitter to attend school.  
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. *Participant:* Do you know others who would have benefited from the  
. program but have not gotten involved?  
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. *Samantha:* Yes, there are moms who are overwhelmed—too young and too  
. tired. They tend to be the most frequent “drops” from the program because  
. they are unable to work it all together.  
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. *Rita:* Some parents have to work longer hours to maintain their benefits, and  
. they just don’t have the time to maintain the same level of involvement—they

are just exhausted. Also, parents with children who are fussy, sick, or who just are having difficulty maintaining certain basics.

*Stacy:* Sometimes the home visits work out fine, but the parent doesn't make it to the center or vice versa, so they have a type of partial involvement.

*Zachary:* For the fathers, many of them need help just stabilizing their lives because they are low income. They have all the challenges of basic needs—housing, food—and they need to cope with that before they can come to a fathers' meeting. The guys who are incarcerated actually have better attendance because at least they have “3 hots and a cot,” or have their basic needs met.

