



Rights, Resources, and the Next Generation: An Interview with Smart from the Start



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Background

MLPB has convened a planning process with 3 partner communities invested in *Building Legal Problem-Solving in the Early Childhood Sector*, thanks to support from [The JPB Foundation](#). One of these partner communities is [Smart from the Start](#) – a trauma-informed, multi-generational family support and community engagement organization with a mission to promote the healthy development of young children and families living in the most underserved communities of Boston and Washington D.C.

This blog interview series elevates perspectives on [legal information and rights education](#) from our partners. Our first interview was with [First 5 Orange County stakeholders](#), and the second interview was with [colleagues from the RIDOH Office of Family Visiting](#).

Here’s our interview with Smart from the Start parent-leaders **Dounia Belmir and Erin Connors** – alongside “echoes” of their valuable thinking from CA and RI stakeholders interviewed earlier in this series:



Erin Connors (left) with her son Daniel, and Dounia Belmir (right) with her son JJ

Question 1: Smart is not your typical "early childhood program." What makes its work in communities in Boston and Washington, D.C. so unique?

- “The staff at Smart are unique because they **genuinely care** about the families they work with. Whether it be because they have lived similar lives[,] or they see the potential in us that we have yet to discover. Not only do **they see our potential**, but **they help us set goals and reach to attain, said potential.**”
 - **Dounia Belmir**, Smart from the Start parent-leader
- “Smart is definitely not your typical program. They are the type of people who **stick by you when things are tough**. Smart doesn’t just give you a resource and say ‘here you go’, they **see the process through**. They are always there to support their families, whether it’s help with IEPs or . . . mental health [support] or more.”
 - **Erin Connors**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

An “echo” from Orange County, CA of these reflections on
the importance of a relationship of caring and trust:

- “Per conversations and experiences, one of the first challenges faced by many is **language and lack of empathy** from service providers, especially those of their own race. Although entities hire bilingual staff, written information is not in native language, and bilingual staff is limited. When they connect with someone in their own language, some feel a lack of understanding or support. . . .
 - **Benjamin Juarez** (Parent, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)

Question 2: Do you see legal information and rights education as an important ingredient in healthy and flourishing communities? If so, why? If not, what other tools are on your mind right now?

- “I do see legal information and rights education as an important factor in creating healthy communities. As a community we should be able to have access to legal information for [day-to-day] situations. Not everyone is aware of their rights, [and] some families . . . are not aware of resources for legal information. **These resources can save families from being illegally separated, evicted, jailed or even deported.**”
 - **Dounia Belmir**, Smart from the Start parent-leader
- “Families need to know what can be done to prevent uncomfortable situations, such as **eviction, [child welfare authority] involvement, family separation** and more. Not every family is aware of their rights and resources in every community.”
 - **Erin Connors**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

An “echo” from Orange County, CA about the
very high stakes people are navigating with without sufficient information

- “Some of the barriers . . . families face stem from: (1) **Not being aware** of the community resources within their communities; (2) If they do hear of resources, they **do not know who to contact** and solely rely on the information from friends, family, neighbors; (3) General understanding of programs and services and how the service is beneficial. Whether it’s the client not understanding the information or the program’s communication regarding the services, **some families may need additional support navigating resources**; and (4) Depending on the area . . . , **language** is a barrier when trying to advocate for their children.
 - **Yolanda Alvarado** (Early Childhood Coordinator, Garden Grove Early Learning Taskforce)

Question 3: One aspect of civil rights work is holding systems accountable for the commitments they've made to individuals, families and communities. Another aspect is raising the bar on what those commitments to people are. And there are many more dimensions of course. What barrier to family health and flourishing in our country are you most concerned about right now?

- “The barrier to family health and flourishing that I am concerned with is **rights and equality**. **Every family deserves to be treated with care and respect**. There are families being ripped apart because of **racial injustice, immigration status, wealth [gaps]** and so much more **unfairness**. The only way to create flourishing communities is by having families . . . create said communities. **We can’t have families if we tear them apart.**”
 - **Dounia Belmir**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

- “The barriers I am most concerned about are **special education . . . , housing, [child welfare authorities] and their involvement in families, and the racial barriers in schools**. All of these factors are impacting my family and families . . . in my community.”
 - **Erin Connors**, Smart from the Start parent-leader

An “echo” from Rhode Island regarding
fundamental challenges to family unity and thriving communities

- “The pandemic has continued to shine the light on inequities for families. State-level policies need to break [down] barriers to allow better access to basic needs, [such as] quality higher education at affordable prices for all. In addition, workforce opportunities and [the] ability to expand leadership roles to individuals across SES [socio-economic status], race, and education levels, to be more inclusive of leaders that represent the communities where they may live, work or identify with.”
 - **Sidra Scharff** (Implementation Specialist, RIDOH Office of Family Visiting)