

Opening Plenary Session

Jessica Dym Bartlett: Welcome to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement's Family Economic Mobility Institute. I'm Jessica Dym Bartlett, and I share the position of co-principal investigator of the center with my two colleagues, Rebecca Berlin and Mallary Swartz. We couldn't possibly do our work, including this Institute, without the passionate leadership of our project director, Manda Klein, and the guidance and support from our federal project officer, Kiersten Beigel, both of whom you'll hear from shortly. I thank my lucky stars every day to be working with such a smart and dedicated team.

Like you, I have a strong connection to Head Start. I've been working in various ways on the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement since it began. I'm coming up on 30 years of working with and on behalf of Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

As an assistant teacher and a mental health consultant in Head Start, I'm not sure I ever dreamed I would be in the position of leading something like one of the Office of Head Start National Centers. Otherwise, I'd say this is a dream come true. But instead, I'll just say how incredibly honored and moved I am to work with you and to find myself here today.

As the National Center for Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, we have a deep commitment to supporting families' economic mobility. That commitment stems from Head Start's long history of strong leadership and combating poverty among young children and their families from its very inception. At certain times like these, when social injustices abound that we feel this calling more than ever.

As I'm sure many of you know, Head Start came about in the 1960s when President Johnson declared the war on poverty. The program was officially launched as a bipartisan national commitment to give every child and family an opportunity to reach their potential. Head Start's unique two-generational approach is designed to help break the cycle of poverty that often persists across generations and also to promote social justice when families are denied opportunities based on race, ethnicity, or income.

In this way and so many others, the Head Start community has always been at the forefront of social justice. For example, in the mid-1960s, Head Start programs first came to Mississippi and helped inspire a new political and racial justice struggle in a key battleground of the civil rights movement. Today, Head Start has yet another critical opportunity to lead the way in social justice by helping pregnant women, young children, and their families thrive in the face of significant adversities.

I'm sure you share our concern about the well-being of children, families, and the adults who work with them amidst the pandemic and its aftermath, and in the wake of the death of George Floyd and countless other people of color. We developed this Institute with a social justice frame and also with gratitude because we know we stand on your shoulders and on the shoulders of Head Start's profoundly important history.

We thank you for being here, and we hope you'll find and share useful knowledge and strategies that you can immediately put into action. Our goal is for you to leave this Institute brimming with excitement about what's possible, even in the most difficult time. Thank you. Now, I'll turn it over to our project director, Manda Klein.

Hey, Manda, I think you might be on mute.

Manda Lopez Klein: Thank you, Jess. I'm so sorry. Thank you for reminding me that I'm on this digital platform and reminding us all that we're human. I'm honored to stand with you today in this important moment, and I'm thrilled to welcome all of you to the Institute. So much planning and very specific intentions have gone into these sessions. I'm so glad that you are here with us.

As Jess said, we have a rich history in this program, and I'm honored to stand on the shoulders of migrant and seasonal farmworker families who gave me my first introduction into Head Start almost 25 years ago. I'm also thankful to be working with such an amazing team of thoughtful and passionate individuals, none of whom I've met in person yet. But one day I will, and I'm looking forward to seeing you in person too.

I'm hopeful that wherever you are, you are safe and that one day we will meet soon. Thank you for all that you're doing for children and families, and please enjoy the Institute. I'm now excited to introduce to you our next guest, our federal project officer, Kiersten Beigel. Kiersten? I'm sorry, Kiersten. I was going to give you an intro. Kiersten has been a tremendous support to us as we have tackled this work. This institute is a testament to her commitment to families and their economic mobility. Kiersten is a senior program specialist and the lead for Family and Community Engagement with the Office of Head Start.

Prior to her work in the federal government, KB, as we affectionately call her, worked with children of all ages and their families in medical, child welfare, and nonprofit, shelter, and educational settings. She provided mental health and parent services and conducted advocacy and organizational development activities in a variety of capacities and settings. Kiersten holds a master's in social work and a certificate in urban leadership from Simmons College in Boston and has a Bachelor of Arts in international relations from Syracuse University. KB?

Kiersten Beigel: Thanks, Manda. Thanks, Jess. I didn't know you were going to do the full bio work up there, but here I am in my guest room in my house. Good morning, everybody. It is so good to be here. I am enthusiastically beside myself about this institute and all the passion, love, energy that's gone into developing it for you.

Yes, I'm KB. I'm also Kiersten, and I love my job at the Office of Head Start. I know many of you probably already. I work very closely with the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. I just want to let you know that we are working really hard this year, and for the next four, to bring you more training and technical assistance offerings for PFCE managers and ERSEA staff, and family services staff, and families. We really hope that you and so many more join us in the learning and community building that we are going to do.

It's going to be an adventure, and this is a really good kick off to that very adventure. We really do like to stay in close touch with you. We always learn a lot from you – what's on your mind, what's on the minds of families. It's really important that we inform each other's work. I could not be more excited about this Institute, and I will tell you about someone else who is equally so. That is Head Start. I want to introduce you to our Office of Head Start Director, Dr. Bernadine Futrell. For most of you, if you have not had the pleasure yet of meeting her, you should know that she is a real champion of what you do every day in Head Start and really looking forward to working with her going forward as well.

Dr. Futrell, she attended Head Start herself. She began her career, well, you could say she began her career in Head Start as a child, but her professional career really began in Head Start also as an assistant teacher at a Head Start program in Richmond, Virginia. She has led superintendent certification programs at the American Association of School Administrators, and she comes to us most recently from the National Head Start Association.

I am very happy for you to get to hear from her this morning, and I am just excited to welcome Dr. Futrell. Welcome!

Bernadine Futrell: Well, hello, hello, hello, everyone! Thank you so much, Kiersten, for your leadership and your work. I want to say thank you to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement team. It is so wonderful to be with all of you today. Happy spring and good wishes to those of you beginning a celebration of Ramadan this week.

I am Dr. Futrell, and I'm going to introduce myself by telling you a story about my granddad. My earliest memory is about 1 years old, sitting in a highchair, banging my feet on it, making noise, trying to get everybody's attention, as most 1-year-olds would do. We're sitting at the table, and my grandfather was tall and stern and saying the family prayer. As he gives grace, I lay eyes and make an eye connection with him directly. He looks back at me, and I remember feeling in my 1-year-old self that, "OK. It's time to be quiet." But instead of telling me to be quiet, he leaned in, and he winked his eye. That helped me to know. I carry that feeling with me, of love, unconditional, of support and being connected to my family.

What my grandfather did for me and the work that you all do every single day is to make those connections between families in partnership with Head Start and children. I am so proud to be on this team and to do this work for you, with you.

This past year has been challenging for our staff, for our programs and our children's families. I have to start by saying thank you to each of you for your resilience, your flexibility, your innovation. As you have kept Head Start going, you've made home visits attendances, you've held family engagement events on Zoom. You provided such critical services to children and families and important support to each other as the Head Start Forever family, as well. Head Start has always been a school-readiness program.

We have always been a social justice and an antipoverty program. Now is a pivotal time and an important time for all Head Start to embrace this important part of our mission in history.

That's why I am so thrilled and proud of our team and excited that we have an entire Institute dedicated to this purpose to build those strong family foundations for economic mobility.

I am so excited about this opportunity to have this event, but also what has been given and afforded to Head Start through the American Rescue Plan. The ARP has authorized 1 billion dollars for Head Start programs to use to support and partner with children and families during these difficult times. There are additional billions of funds available to families through direct payments and child related tax credit.

Through the ARP, there will be additional resources available for food, for housing, energy assistance, and internet connectivity. For many families, these resources will be a launching point at just the right time. That is why it's so important for us to ensure that every Head Start family gets access and information and receives everything available as they work in partnership towards their dreams for themselves and their children.

Over the next two days, you're going to have an opportunity to learn together about the many different strategies related to family education, employment, career, and financial services. Make sure you come back for Day Two on the benefits for families. That's what we're going to talk about educational opportunities. As we know, educational disparities and inequities have been more pronounced than ever. You're going to learn about these important resources that will be available.

We also invite you to think about how your program can ensure that staff and families receive everything for which they are eligible. As many programs ramp up for the full return to in-person comprehensive services, I want to remind you to stay safe, to get the vaccine when it's your turn, and to make connections in your community so that you can stay safe and be ready. Check out and use our Head Start SleevesUp4HeadStart campaign. You can look at ECLKC, at our COVID pages for your own efforts. Use them. Reshare them. Thank you to everyone who's already posted your stories on our SleevesUp4HeadStart. Let's roll up our SleevesUp4HeadStart's web page.

Finally, we want to say thank you to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement for your incredible work and bringing us this opportunity to learn and connect. We want to thank everybody here today. Head Start, thank you for always doing what it takes and what's necessary for children and families. We thank you so much. We look forward to today and tomorrow. Coming soon, we hope that we can be together. Thank you so much and have a great Institute, everybody. Thank you!

Jessica: Well, hello again. I'd like to thank Dr. Futrell for her profoundly important remarks and inspiring thoughts about our two days together. I did just want to mention a few logistical things. We have everything you need for the next two days. They are located on the Engagement Hub. That will include access to every single session, on demand and live, and session resources, five-to-ten minutes self-care meditation, and yoga activities.

You can do it on our breaks. Information about the COVID-19 vaccine, how to get your session certificates, and the institute feedback survey link, which we really would appreciate if you could complete so that we can make sure to always be putting our best foot forward and meeting your needs. There's also a very fun, welcome video from our team at the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement so that you can get to know us a little bit.

One more set of logistics, which is to review the console. We want to make sure that you can maximize your experience today. Just to briefly to walk you through your session console – if you take a look at the bottom of your screen, you'll see several engagement tools. There's a Media Player, which you can use this tool to watch the presenters and any videos during the session. Questions for Presenters – you can use this tool to share a question or comment during the session. Slides – use this tool to display the PowerPoint presentation slides on your screen.

Related Resources and Links – this tool includes a list of resources available for download and helpful links. You can find your slide deck and session handouts here and on the Engagement Hub. There are also Presenter Bios. Are you curious about your presenters? Use this tool to learn a little bit more about us. Finally, and importantly, the Certificate of Attendance. Use this tool to access your certificate at the end of the session. You must meet the criteria to earn your certificate.

Just so you know, these engagement tools on your console are resizable and movable. If you minimize any of these tools, you can click the icon at the bottom of your screen to make them reappear. I know they sometimes disappear on me, and I have a hard time finding them. So there they'll be. I think that covers it from a logistical standpoint.

Manda: Thank you, Jess. I now want to move us to our opening plenary, which is “Encouraging Conversations in Relationships.” The learning objectives for this session are to demonstrate how conversations can become sources of encouragement for families, even through difficult times, and how relationships are the foundation of meaningful conversations, especially when the topics are difficult.

To lead us through these conversations and share this information, I'm so happy to introduce to you Dana Winters and Junlei Li. You can read their extensive bios in the Engagement Hub that Jess just talked about. They are the co-creators of Simple Interactions. Over the past few months, they have been a part of some of the most favorite meetings that I've had at the center. They are passionate about interactions, and it's no wonder. They are both inspired by the work of Fred Rogers.

For those of us who can recall his pioneering work, we can now say that he mastered virtual delivery before we knew that there was virtual delivery. He was a testament that interactions mattered. Those interactions are at the heart of the work that Dana and Junlei bring to us today. As we start our institute, we found it fitting that we would ground ourselves in strategies that help build those relationships that allow us to impact families the most. Welcome.

Dana Winters: Thank you, Manda. Hello, everyone. We're so pleased to be with you this morning and to think a little bit more about the importance of conversations and interactions and relationships as we open this summit in this Institute looking at family economic mobility. When Manda asked Junlei to think a little bit about what we could talk about in terms of family economic mobility, we were very much looking at the list of the experts that you'll get to hear from over the next two days and thinking, "Wow! What on earth could we do that this team of experts can't provide?" We decided there was very little. We are excited to hear from all of the experts over the next few days.

We thought maybe what we do to start our time together is to ground ourselves in the importance of how these conversations can happen, and the importance of relationships and interactions to our ability to have these conversations – that these conversations around things like family economic mobility, they happen in an environment of relationships, and that is so very important.

As Manda mentioned, both Junlei and I were trained in the land of Fred Rogers. Fred Rogers is Mr. Rogers from Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. A lot of our work has taken place in Pittsburgh, where – at Fred's home neighborhood. As we reflected a bit on what we've learned through our work and also through engaging in the philosophy and the work of Fred Rogers, it definitely came back to that importance of relationships. Through Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Fred wasn't afraid to talk about difficult topics with children, and those communication strategies apply directly to the way we engage as adults, as well.

One of the things that Fred would talk about quite often was the importance of human relationships. He would always remind us that it was through relationships that we learn best, and grow best, and, of course, that isn't reserved just for children, but that's all of us as we grow as grownups and adults, too.

One of the times when Fred was thinking about difficult times and was addressing a speech to a group of social workers, he was talking to them about how important these human relationships can be. He said that when the gusty winds blow and shake our lives, if we know that people care about us, we may bend with the wind, but we won't break, which is kind of Fred's fancy way of talking about what it means to be resilient – that when the gusty winds are blowing, that we've got people around us who can help to buffer those winds but also help us to bend, but not break.

The work that Junlei and I have been so privileged and honored to do over the last [Inaudible] been in service of thinking about what it means to build and maintain and sustain and grow relationships in child-serving spaces. While our work started looking at those direct relationships between adults and children, it has certainly grown to think about how those relationships between adults around children are so important to the learning and growing of children, as well.

We affectionately refer to those who support children and families as the "helpers," and we do that as a tribute of respect from Fred himself, who talked about how the helpers of the world

were so very important, that the helpers were Fred heroes, and that when we see people helping, we know there is hope. Thank you, all of you, for the hope you've given to us, especially over this last year, as times have gotten uncertain and very challenging. You haven't stopped. You continue to support not only children and families, you've supported one another. You've given us that hope.

When we think back to what it means to work in support of children and to do so in a way that builds relationships, builds communities, engages families, we all think about the health and well-being and support of the child. We look to that child and look to the importance of the relationships and interactions that are growing inside the home with family members and caregivers inside the home – that that's the first place where we hope our children are feeling these interactions and beginning to build these relationships.

But also, as children begin to grow, they're building those relationships and having these interactions with helpers outside of the home. Family service workers professionals, Head Start educators, early intervention teams. The list goes on and on, that our children learn and grow best through these relationships. When they're operating from inside the home and outside of the home, we're wrapping our children around those buffers to help them to bend with the gusty winds and not break, and also to support their learning and growing in many ways.

Now, this right here is a really beautiful picture of what it looks like to have those relationships coming from families, coming from outside the home. But we can't forget the importance of the relationship between the big heads in this picture, too, that the relationships that we build with families and the families are building with our family service professionals and our Head Start educators are so very important. That they are creating even broader environments of relationships and interactions that our children are witnessing, that are directly impacting how our children are learning and growing. It's within these relationships that oftentimes hard, easy, and everything in between kinds of conversations happen.

While we can plan for those conversations, I think we all know sometimes our best-laid plans don't necessarily work out the way we would hope. But when we got those relationships present, we can encourage conversations and have very encouraging conversations between our families and our helpers, regardless of what the topic may be.

This morning, Junlei and I would like to share a little bit of some of the maybe unlikely places where we've seen these relationships grow and these encouraging conversations happen, to think about the many contexts and spaces where we are engaging communities and engaging families, and how those relationships and interactions continue to grow and continue to support the learning and growing of children and the families.

The first place we'd like to show you this morning is a street corner from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where we were so honored to watch crossing guards in their daily interactions with children and families and how they support communities and sometimes the simplest of moments in the shortest of times. Take a look at what one morning in the life of Miss Paula

looks like, and look at the conversations and the moments that she has sometimes in the most simple of ways.

[Video begins]

Ms. Paula: Good morning. I like your hair. Go ahead.

Boy 1: Come on.

Ms. Paula: Where's your jacket at?

Boy 2: I'm not cold.

Ms. Paula: You ain't cold? OK. Where's yours? I know, you've got a jacket, huh [Laughing]? He said, "I am."

Good morning. She's growing up to be so beautiful. Look at her, wow!

Mother: She's getting big!

Ms. Paula: I know!

Mother: Bigger than me.

Ms. Paula: [Laughing] She looks just like you. That's your twin, right there. Oh, my.

Good morning.

Girls: Good morning!

Ms. Paula: Ya'll go to the high school?

Girls: Yes.

Ms. Paula: All right. Have a blessed day.

Girls: Thank you.

Ms. Paula: You're welcome, baby.

Hey, your lips are shivering.

Girl: All he wear is [Inaudible].

Ms. Paula: That's him – Yeah, me too. That's the worst time, when my face is cold.

Boy: [Inaudible]

Ms. Paula: Awe, mama. I wish I could just warm you up [Inaudible].

Boy: But my face is cold.

Ms. Paula: Well hurry on in then. It's time to go in, OK?

Good morning.

Boy: Hi.

Ms. Paula: Good morning.

So, how, when are you going to know about the election? When you going to know if you won or not?

Girl: Today.

Ms. Paula: I got my fingers crossed for you, even though I didn't get a cupcake. But I've got my fingers crossed. [Laughter]

Good morning, guys.

Children: Good morning.

Ms. Paula: Your nails, let me see your nails. All right now, let me see yours. All right now. [Inaudible]

Girl: I'm cold.

Ms. Paula: You cold? [Laughter]

Girl: I'm a fall baby.

Ms. Paula: You're a fall baby?

Girl: Yeah, my birthday's November.

Ms. Paula: [Laughter] See, I hold traffic for you.

Good morning, baby girl. I like your little bun. Your mom did your hair?

Girl: Yeah.

Ms. Paula: Tell her I give her 100%.

[Video ends]

Junlei Li: Dana, I remember when you first brought these videos back from the street corners, and I just thought it was just so remarkable. Prior to that, we had been doing work in preschools and child care centers and in classrooms and orphanages. I had always thought about relationship in terms of having a class or having this extended time when people are together.

I don't think we've ever been to a setting where the amount of time that someone had in an interaction and having a conversation is so short. We went back to the video, and we looked at it. The longest she had to talk to a child or to a parent is somewhere between five to ten seconds. She only gets that. But the way she builds connection, using just five to ten seconds of conversation each day, is just so remarkable.

Dana: You're right, Junlei. I want to emphasize something you said, which is the way that she builds connection five to ten seconds at a time. That it's not unlike interacting with families during drop-off and pick-up times when we have a couple of seconds to say, "Hey, I hope you had a great day." Or, "I hope you have a wonderful day. Good morning." That's something that Miss Paula talked about, that there was no moment too short for her to try to plant the seeds of connection.

She told me stories about watching those seeds grow, even in times when she didn't feel like she was making an impact – maybe it was a couple of children who would just generally nod in her direction but wouldn't necessarily engage. But she told me countless stories of those children coming back to her when they had problems, when they had concerns, and knowing that she could be trusted because she was consistent in her interaction.

She was always there, and she worked hard to build those connections, even though it seemed so simple to her. It wasn't difficult for her to say, "good morning," but when she saw how deeply impacted children were by getting that little message, by being seen and heard and acknowledged every morning and every afternoon without fail, we see that power of building connection. That's one of the things, Junlei, I think we've learned the most across our work, is the power of those little connections. That the power of feeling what it means to be connected with another person comes from these simple, ordinary moments.

How many times can we look back across our own relationships? The times we remember may even seem a little silly now. They might not be the grand spotlight moments. They're the simple times when we knew that the person on the other side was listening, that we knew that we were being heard and seen. That's what it means to build connection, that's what it means to help people to bend with the wind but not break. That connection helps us all to be resilient against uncertainty, against adversity, that those connections really matter.

Junlei: I think about what you quoted earlier about Fred Rogers talking about the difference between bending and breaking in the wind and how that's tied to having that relationship. I think about all the research that folks have done in the area of resilience for children, as well as for adults across very different cultural contexts, from war zones to places with historical poverty or discrimination.

The one common conclusion that comes out of these studies of resilience has been that children as well as adults who have experienced adversity, who managed to not only survive it but continued to thrive and strive, are people who have had “at least one” stable and committed relationship, maybe not forever, but at least for a period of time, particularly during a difficult period of time. For children, of course, we want that from parents, from caregivers, from teachers, but often, it’s with other adults. Dana, you were talking earlier about this idea of interactions and relationship isn’t just about children, it’s about between the adults. You can imagine that adults need to have that “at least one” in their own lives, particularly during times that were difficult.

Now, when we think about the challenges of the pandemic over the last year or so, sometimes we feel like it’s been difficult to find or to be that “at least one” in the lives of people that we care about. We don’t want to convey this idea that when everything in the world around us starts to become more difficult, that all we need is one person, and everything magically disappears. It certainly isn’t that case. But I think what seemed to be clear for us on the street corners with Miss Paula or in all the other different places where we have worked with helpers, is that regardless how difficult the world is, that for helpers being at least one, and for children and families having at least one, that matters. And then that matters in making the difference between bending and breaking.

When we think about the kind of relationships that happen from a small street corner with the crossing guard, it’s really a reminder that the kind of trust that we develop in relationships, in Mr. Rogers’ words, the trust doesn’t happen by accident or by magic. It’s not just that we just happen to have just the right kind of chemistry. Miss Paula is on the street corner talking to hundreds of children and parents, day in and day out. It is not possible that she somehow has a magical formula with every one of them.

Fred talked about how all of us are learning and growing best through these relationships. But these relationships don’t come from shortcuts. They come from the painstaking process of investing ourselves in the five-second, ten-second conversations.

With that, I wanted to share a story from our work, as well. Dana and I had the opportunity over the years to travel to China to a very small community in a rural village. The community is unique in the way the children are being served. It’s a community of foster care families. These families over the years have taken in close to 200 children who have been orphaned because of their disabilities – physical and other disabilities. Within this context, these farmers essentially became not only foster parents but teachers and physical therapists for these children.

We wanted to share with you a very simple moment inside their Head Start classroom – they don’t call it Head Start – but it’s their preschool classroom where the children get to go a couple of hours in the morning and a couple hours in the afternoon. We just wanted to give you a sense of the kind of interactions that happen in this small village.

[Video begins]

Teacher: [Speaking Chinese] One, two, three. Good, you blow too. Good, come on, blow hard. That's right. Release it. You blow too. Give it a blow. Blow! Give it another blow. Again. That's right. You blow too. Great! That's right. You're blowing too.

Child: [Speaking Chinese] Ah!

[Video ends]

Dana: Junlei. I had seen this video probably thousands of times before I had the opportunity to visit with you. You get emotion. You get feeling watching the interactions. But it's nothing like being there and seeing how these interactions transcend this one classroom, that as you walk through the village, you see families and educators and children all talking and working together very much in a sense of community for one another.

Junlei: That's right. Dana, I don't want to embarrass you, but I remember we were there together for the first time, and we had students, and you hadn't even gone into the classrooms yet. You were just sitting in the waiting room and watching the families bring their children to the school, and you had tears in your eyes. You're not a crier often, but you had tears in your eyes.

I think you're absolutely right. I think this was one place that really reminded us of the sense of community, of children in community with their teachers, teachers in community with the families. In a tiny village – this was truly a place where it takes a village – in a tiny village, there were really no differences. There was this one neighborhood. The teacher were the foster parents, and the foster parents were the teachers, and the teachers were the neighbors with the foster parents. It just goes on and on.

When this community gets together, the kind of support they have for each other during happy times, during difficult times, when they have to talk about the challenges that each of the children were experiencing and as well as to celebrate the progress. I think that's when learning and growing happens beautifully for everyone. Children and adults alike.

To build on the little picture that Dana was showing earlier, you can imagine that the helper and family and child connection – they don't happen in isolation from each other. You can imagine the families need their community of support, neighbors and relatives and friends in the community who can be there to listen, to hear. Then, of course, the professionals, the helpers in the community also need their community of practice, people who understand what they do, people who value what they do, people who experience what they do, and that they can get their support from each other.

Of course, these communities of support and communities of practice are not mutually exclusive. You can imagine that families rely on helpers to be part of their community of support and helpers sometimes rely on families for feedback, for encouragement as well.

Children, of course, need their own community of peers in the same way. Whether we're talking about a tiny little rural foster-care village in China, we're talking about Miss Paula, the crossing guard on the street corner, or whether we're talking about the Head Start classroom at the schools, I think often the impact that we have on the people around us looks a little bit like when rains start to fall on the pond, and each raindrop starts with the ripple. Within these ripples, we touch the human relationships around us. Then no matter what role we play, whether we are a family or a helper to the families, or whether we are a teacher, no matter what role we play within these little ripples, we start to extend our interactions and our relationships.

Whether we think about the Head Start system or whether we think about even the work of the crossing guards, we think that any kind of professional practice or any kind of educational and services program and the policies that we developed, all those things can help children and help families to learn and grow together if, and only if, those things we do end up encouraging, enriching, and empowering the human relationships around the children. I think that is at the heart of what it means to develop a Head Start system, not just for the children, but for the families as well as to support the professionals.

Dana: Junlei, when you're showing the picture with the ripples and the beautiful system of relationships and support, I couldn't help but think about the last year and a half and how that picture looks slightly different as we've navigated very different times, uncertainties, and challenges that have brought more distance between us, or at least new ways of reaching one another. I think the picture may seem and feel sometimes a little bit more like this, whereas helpers, we're trying our best to be supportive, but the methods that we used to use, our modes of connection, are very different.

Now this has been our reality for about a year and a half now. We have absolutely seen, though, that helpers have found ways to support families, to support children, regardless of the limitations, regardless of the challenges, they have risen to occasions that nobody saw coming. It's almost reminiscent a bit of when we think of what it means for childhood to change, and how we continue to meet the needs of children. Childhood has certainly changed over the last year and a half, and how we're living those experiences have been very different, also.

We're finding now that these connections and these communities can still be possible, even when we don't necessarily have those direct, in-person touch points all the time, that that support is still possible, even through maybe screens like what we're using right now. One of the places that we've been working, especially over the last year and a half or so, has been in supporting those who work with children and families in interactions that seem very different in virtual ways. One of those places has been with early interventionist who have continued their work, despite not being able to be in person with the families and the children that they have served.

We'd like to show you just a brief interaction with one of those families and their early interventionist as they are thinking and talking about their own uncertainties, their own

concerns and worries, and how our helpers are there to listen, to guide, to appreciate, to affirm, even when times feel very different.

[Video begins]

Interventionist: You guys, I just have to say again, you're doing a super job. I love to watch the things that were a struggle for her and for all of us – me to try to describe it and you to figure out how to help her with it – those things from a week or two weeks ago are easy now.

Mother: Yeah. It's exciting. It's encouraging because like we said before, we're kind of home to be able to do the things, and we know that we're practicing. It's like, OK, you know, kind of seeing the fruits of our labor is nice.

Interventionist: You're doing a great job. I know she's coming up, well, she is a year now. But don't worry. She is going to catch up.

Mother: OK. Good. Yeah. Oh, my gosh. Like, you know, when will she walk? When will she, you know – because it's scary. As a parent, you're just like, "OK!" You're seeing kids on social media walking and all this stuff. Just bearing in mind that we're doing the best we can with what we have. Thanks so much for all your help and all of that.

Interventionist: You're welcome. She's going to keep coming along. People, I know, people start asking questions when they see she's a year old: "Oh, when's she going to walk?" "Why isn't she walking?"

Mother: Yeah.

Interventionist: That's one for down the road.

Mother: Yeah. OK.

Interventionist: Yeah. I'm not worried.

Mother: OK. Good.

Interventionist: All right.

Mother: If you're not worried, then we're not worried.

Interventionist: I am not worried.

Mother: OK.

Interventionist: I'll see you next week at 11, our regular time? That good?

Mother: Great. Thanks so much.

Interventionist: Alrighty, take care.

Mother: Say “bye-bye.”

Father: Say “bye,” Cohen.

Interventionist: Bye. Bye.

Father: Bye-bye.

Mother: Bye.

Interventionist: Bye-bye!

Father: Say your “bye-bye.”

Interventionist: There we go. Goodbye! Take care.

Mother: Bye.

Interventionist: Bye-bye!

Mother: Yay! So nice. All right, have a good week.

[Video ends]

Junlei: Dana, when you shared these videos with me, and I was just really struck by what we can't see on the video – just for the parent to be able to just share what she's worried about and to share that she thought maybe she's not doing enough for her child. It reminded me of when my daughter was young, early intervention team came to our house and how much we not only look to them to help us understand our daughter's development, but also to just have that reassurance that we, as parents, are doing what we know how, and that we were actually being helpful.

Dana: You're right. It's so important, the affirmation that the helper in this video, that the physical therapist, provides to the family to say, “You're doing a good job. I'm not worried.” You can hear the family say, “Well, if you're not worried, I'm not worried.” But you can see that this is coming in a relationship because to feel comfortable enough to express that fear, that means that they have been in this place of discomfort and concern and uncertainty together. You can tell just the way that they converse with one another, that that's not possible without the trust that they've built on purpose, intentionally, through that relationship.

What it means to really strengthen the support for families is to be there – again, to listen, to hear those concerns, to reflect back from your own point of view of where you see the family heading, and to provide guidance and offer help along the way. It's something that our helpers do quite naturally. As the uncertainties of the last year and a half have hit us incredibly hard,

that helping has not changed. The way we do it might look a little bit different, but the helpers continue to support families. They continue to support one another and come together for those communities of practice to help those communities of support around families.

One thing that we've learned, especially over this last year and a half, has been that they've brought immense courage to families. It's something that we've seen – and has been highlighted in the last year and a half – but it certainly isn't something that just started in March of 2020. It is something that helpers have been doing all along, is that they bring that courage. They bring heart to another person. They bring just themselves in being there for children and families.

That is the most important thing that they can bring, because through that courage and through that heart and through that appreciation of one another, the relationships grow. It means that these encouraging conversations can grow as well, that these conversations become a place of comfort and support and aren't necessarily as scary and intimidating as they could be. It's something that, to bring it back one more time to Fred Rogers, that he talked about often as the most important thing that we can provide to other people, sometimes can be just a little bit, a simple moment of helpful appreciation.

What does that mean, to be a helpful appreciator? Well, chances are, it's exactly what our helpers are doing all the time. Maybe we haven't had words to put to it, but Fred talked about how there must be time when you wonder what in the world you can do for a certain child or a certain family. Yet you wanted so much to be of service that, little by little, the answer often comes to you, and you discover the way to be that helpful appreciator, which invariably makes the difference.

No matter how primitive our resources may be, the greatest thing we can do is to find what is healthy and laudable about somebody else and reflect that to them. It's a large assignment, to be able to help people look deep within themselves and find what is wonderful there. Because at the core of everyone is someone wonderful – and that's exactly what you just saw in that very short video, was the physical therapist being able to bring courage and bring heart, bring appreciation to reflect the goodness that sometimes, as families, we have trouble seeing in ourselves. But bringing that mirror of helpful appreciation invariably makes all the difference, and sometimes it happens in the very simplest of moments.

Junlei: When we think of everyone who's gathered today here online, over the screen for this institute, we imagine the work that you do. You don't do everything, but whatever it is that you do, whatever role that you play, you touch one or more of these connections and relationships among children, families, family services professionals, educators, and all the people in the community who are involved in supporting children and families. Those important, encouraging conversations that Dana was talking about takes place within the context and on the foundation of these connections and relationships.

While none of us perhaps have the power to take away all the winds that are blowing around children and families at this point, I think all of us can be reassured that what we do and how

we ripple out within the connections we do have – through conversations, through just being there – really matters to the people around us. When we think about the work that all of us do, and regardless of whether it touches a practice or a program or a policy, we collectively make the difference in deciding whether the practices and the programs and the policies that we have end up encouraging, which means “bring courage to,” enrich, and empower to give resources and power to the human interactions around children and around the families and, of course, around their helpers, as well.

As we proceed in this institute, we wish all of you the opportunity to think, to reflect, and to be together to think about how all of your work and all of your very simple interactions day in and day out contribute to the relationships around you.

Just three key takeaways from the talk today: simply being that “at least one” for somebody matters, because for somebody out there having that “at least one” matters. Whatever we do in our programs, whether it’s big or small, they work because the human relationships we build is working. Lastly, as important as it is to support children, to support families through this difficult time, let’s also to keep in mind that we need to help, to support, and to lend our appreciation to all the helpers who are out there doing this work. Thank you. It’s been wonderful for us to be with you today.

Manda: Junlei, thanks for joining us today and for this powerful message as a way to ground our institute.

I want to remind everyone that we have certificates of attendance, resources, and the institute survey. You can download your certificate of attendance there on the Engagement Hub, where you can see the handouts that are related, and we’ll continue to answer questions that have been coming in. I also want to remind you to please at the end of the institute, to complete that two-day survey.

I also want to remind everyone to dig into the vaccination resources that we have. They’re also on the platform, and we’re looking forward to everyone being vaccinated. We know that it’s safe for adults, it’s effective, and this administration has prioritized our Head Start programs. Please look into that. I have so many colleagues – I’m waiting for my vaccine – but I have so many colleagues that have been vaccinated. There are downloads for backgrounds for Zoom and that you can take a look at and add to your Zoom background library, to either support the campaign to get vaccinated, or there are some that show that you have been vaccinated. I encourage you to do that.

Also, I want to remind you to take those self-care breaks. We have taken a lot of thought and inspiration into including those in the Engagement Hub, and I hope that you’ll take advantage of that. We know that in this time there’s a lot of information going to be coming to you over the next few days. We want to make sure that you also take time for you.

As Junlei and Dana were reminding us [Inaudible], whether they’re virtual or when we get back to being in person. We want to make sure that we’re [inaudible] and making sure that we take

care of our breaks. I appreciate everyone for joining us today, especially Junlei and Dana, Jess for helping with the session. Kiersten, of course, Dr. Futrell. Have a great institute. We look forward to connecting on the Engagement Hub and further. Thank you so much.