

Parenting is challenging. Partnering with Parents makes it easier.

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When Michael and Ivette Howland visited their local library for a Parent Resource Fair over a year ago, they had no idea they'd find a program that would offer their family so much support. They had recently moved to Oak Park from Chicago and were newer parents with a son (John) who was two at the time. The Howlands were looking for child-centered activities and like many new parents, were wondering how their child was progressing developmentally. They didn't expect to leave the library

that day armed with resources, reassurance, and next steps but that's precisely what happened.

"The internet can be such a scary place when you're a new parent concerned if your child is where they should be. You can really go down a rabbit hole," says Ivette. "I was finding myself getting more and more concerned without anyone to talk to in an in-depth way. When we met Michelle from Partnering with Parents at the library, she made us feel immediately at ease and supported. She was like, 'Okay, no problem. We can do a free evaluation of John and make sure he is on track and hitting his developmental milestones'."

Partnering with Parents at Easterseals serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford supports children from birth to kindergarten in Oak Park and River Forest through home visiting, workshops, and group activities that focus on helping parents grow as their child's first teacher. Parenting can be overwhelming, stressful, and confusing, especially for first-time parents. Partnering with Parents acts as an ongoing support and resource for concerns and questions, helps parents form connections with other parents, and provides resources and referrals to additional services, as needed.

"We had no idea there are so many resources available to parents of young children like us in Oak Park," says Ivette who never imagined she'd learn so much at the library that day. "I always had the impression that Easterseals' programs were only for those with special needs or for families who were under a certain income level, so it was a great surprise that we could use them as well."

Ivette's husband Michael agrees and adds with a chuckle, "When you first start out with parenting, all the focus is on keeping your child alive. There's a lot of resources for that part, but not so many resources around making sure that children are emotionally connected or prepared for preschool or kindergarten. I'm not trying to raise a robot; I'm trying to raise a human being who is empathetic and socially and emotionally engaged and Partnering with Parents gives us so many lessons and resources on that part of parenting."

The Howlands left the library with a new support system and in the days ahead, they worked with Partnering with Parents during home visits (virtual, once the pandemic hit) where they could discuss any parenting concerns or work on early education techniques with Parent Educator Susanna. Michael and Ivette agree that the support has been a relief, especially now that they are parents of two. When John struggled with jealousy at the arrival of his new baby brother, Partnering with Parents was there. Same with potty training and on positive discipline techniques. They supported the Howlands with strategies to keep John on task in the morning when they need to get out the door, and they've been there to reassure and guide the Howlands through John's (and now baby brother Joseph's) developmental milestones.

"You can ask your pediatrician things, but they only have limited amounts of time to spend with you. Partnering with Parents will work with you on anything really. What is your parenting challenge of the

week?” Ivette says with a laugh. “They’ll work on that with you, one-on-one. They also provide awesome workshops with other experts on topics like creating a peaceful home or taming tantrums.” The Howlands also took advantage of baby yoga and infant massage classes.

Their advice to other parents? Get connected with Partnering with Parents. “All you hear is how important these early years are for children’s development, but you don’t get much guidance beyond being told that fact. Frankly, I wish I had this program when John was first born and I encourage new parents to seek it out because the support, reassurance, and guidance is amazing,” says Ivette.

Partnering with Parents offers high-quality and innovative services that are brought to you by Easterseals serving Chicagoland and Great Rockford with support from the Collaboration for Early Childhood. Services are voluntary and free of charge. For more information, call 708-434-2560 or email partneringwithparents@eastersealschicago.org.

Your gift can make a difference for families like the Howlands. Give to ECR today!