



Cesiah Hernandez

Family, friend and neighbor caregiver in Aurora.

✦ COLORADO

Building Bridges for Children, Families, and Caregivers

As a family, friend and neighbor (FFN) caregiver and the founder of Connected by Roots, a small business dedicated to supporting caregivers and strengthening the early childhood workforce, I believe every child deserves quality care, every caregiver deserves support, and every family deserves access to the resources they need to thrive.

Caring for children has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. I was born in Mexico, where it is common for older children to help care for younger siblings and relatives. Formally, I started working with children at 15 after my family came to the United States. While many teenagers were beginning high school, I went directly to work caring for children for local families.

Today, more than 20 years later, caring for children is still one of the most meaningful parts of my life. I currently care part time for several of my nieces and nephews. I also care for a 2-year-old boy who has experienced tremendous loss. His mother passed

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away when he was only 8 months old. His grandmothers reached out to me because they were concerned about his development and speech. I care for him for four hours each week while his grandmother runs errands or makes meals. I often bring educational materials, create learning activities, document observations, and help his family understand ways they can support his growth. I earn \$50 for my half days with him, but my motivation has never been financial. My goal is to help children reach their full potential and to empower the adults who care for them.

My experience as an FFN provider has shown me how important these caregivers are to families and communities. Many parents rely on relatives or trusted friends because they need flexible, affordable care while they work. I first became a caregiver for my own family because my siblings needed help. One of my nieces came into my care when she was just 3 months old because her mother had to return to work. Today she is almost 12 years old, and we still share a close bond.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my role expanded even further. Several young children in my family missed out on traditional preschool experiences, so I created what we called our "Escuelita," or little school, in my home. My nieces and nephews gathered together for learning activities while the older children helped teach the younger ones.

At the time, I was completing the Providers Advancing Student Outcomes (PASO) course to get my Childhood Development Associate credential through

the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition, so I was able to apply everything I was learning directly in our daily routines. Those experiences reinforced my belief that meaningful learning can happen anywhere when children are surrounded by caring adults, and that mixed-age groups like children have in home-based child care create a natural and healthy setting for all ages.

One of the areas I am most passionate about is helping children develop healthy eating habits. Food is an important part of our culture and family life. I primarily prepare Mexican food because it is what I know and love, but I have also worked hard to make meals healthier and more balanced. Through my child development education, I learned the importance of introducing children to a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, and balanced meals that support their growth.

When my nieces and nephews are with me, I focus on offering nutritious meals while respecting the foods and traditions they are familiar with. I know their family uses the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), but they don't always purchase healthy food. So, I often introduce new fruits or vegetables alongside foods they already enjoy. Sometimes children are hesitant to try something unfamiliar, especially if it is not commonly served at home. I have learned that even a small taste can be a success because it creates a positive experience and opens the door to future acceptance.

I also try to model healthy habits in my home. Many children today are surrounded by sugary drinks, chips, and processed snacks. Rather than completely banning these foods, I teach moderation and balance. I make healthier options more visible and accessible while limiting the temptation of less nutritious choices. My goal is not perfection but helping children develop a positive relationship with food that will serve them throughout their lives.

In addition to my caregiving work, I am deeply committed to strengthening the early childhood workforce through my business, Connected by Roots. The company was founded to address a challenge I saw repeatedly in my community: Resources exist, but many caregivers do not know how to access them.

Connected by Roots creates an educational curriculum focused on child development and

provides workshops on topics such as early learning, mental health, self-care, and family support. We collaborate with professionals who volunteer their expertise and share practical knowledge with caregivers. Many of the people we serve are Spanish-speaking FFN providers who are passionate about caring for children but face barriers when trying to navigate systems designed primarily in English.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned is that access is about much more than translation. A document can be available in Spanish and still be difficult to understand. A website can contain valuable information and still feel overwhelming. Many caregivers need someone to walk alongside them, show them where to start, and help them build confidence in their ability to navigate systems independently.

That is why my work often involves serving as a bridge between Spanish-speaking caregivers and the organizations that support them. I regularly review resources, request translations when they are missing, and share information with providers in ways that are practical and accessible. I have spent countless hours helping caregivers understand applications, training systems, and professional development opportunities. What many people see as a simple online process can feel intimidating or impossible for someone who is not comfortable with technology or who does not speak English fluently.

I believe FFN providers are among the most important and least recognized members of the early childhood workforce. They care for children, support working families, preserve culture, and strengthen communities. Yet many of them struggle to access professional development, financial supports, and opportunities for growth. Through Connected by Roots, I want to change that.

My vision is to help create a stronger network of informed, confident caregivers who understand child development, know how to access resources, and recognize the value of their work. When we invest in caregivers, we invest in children. When we help one provider succeed, we strengthen entire families and communities. I want caregivers to feel seen and empowered. And I want every family to know they belong and that they have the tools they need to thrive.