

## Insights

# A Grandfather's Passion to Transform Early Childhood Systems

DeAndre was born into a neighborhood where drug use was common, and poverty and gang violence were pervasive. He was born into a home where his parents struggled with substance abuse and where their fighting sometimes ended in domestic violence. He is one of too many children born into circumstances that illustrate why families need better supports and better systems.

DeAndre's grandfather, David Armstrong, is a family partner on the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([ECCS CoIIN](#)), an initiative seeking to improve [early childhood systems](#) so that more families have access to coordinated services. There's an important message here that he wants to spread.

Comprehensive and coordinated services are critical during early childhood because it's a time when comprehensive supports can have the biggest impact. During the first years of life, children's brains are developing at a rapid rate, laying the foundation for future success. It's also a period when children are at their most vulnerable, and a time when their health hinges on the health of their families.

"Millions of children, like DeAndre, start out on unequal footing because their families don't get the support they need," says NICHQ Project Director Colleen Murphy, MSMOB. "We can change that by taking a multi-generational approach to systems change, one that acknowledges that the health of children, especially during early childhood, often depends on the health and wellbeing of their caregivers. We need a system that supports parents, grandparents and all caregivers, a system that understands that health largely depends on access to transportation, housing, mental health and substance abuse—any of the social determinants that can adversely affect the health of families."

The early childhood system Murphy describes could have changed DeAndre's life, says Armstrong. It's this conviction that has made him a champion for early childhood development in his community and it's this conviction that continues to inspire his work on ECCS CoIIN. We're sharing his story because it not only illustrates the critical importance of early childhood systems change, but it reaffirms the need to keep family voices and family needs at the center of improvement strategies.

### **David Armstrong's Story**

"DeAndre's father was involved with a rough group for a lot of DeAndre's early life," says Armstrong. "The kind of people he hung out with... well in the end, I'm sad to say he was shot. And DeAndre was around for all of it."

Not long after his father's shooting, DeAndre's summer camp counselor was murdered behind a local elementary school. The murders, which became known as Newark's schoolyard shootings, were highly publicized as examples of the dangerous conditions facing families in Newark, New Jersey and surrounding communities.

"He went through so much trauma, so early in his life," says Armstrong. "Looking back, I've realized that a lot of the problems DeAndre experienced later on—acting out, getting into trouble at school—were a result of what happened to him during his early childhood. Domestic abuse, drug abuse, gun violence... DeAndre was affected by all these experiences before he even started school. If there had been better services to support him and his family—to support us—his future might have gone differently."

Experiences like those DeAndre faced can have a devastating effect on a child's rapidly developing brain, leading to chronic health and behavioral conditions, and making it difficult to form healthy relationships and succeed at school.

For DeAndre, these troubles began as early as pre-school; he started getting into trouble, fighting with other children and disobeying the rules. By the time he finished kindergarten, he'd already been forced to move among three different schools. Armstrong tried to talk to DeAndre's mother about getting him supportive services, but she didn't understand why they were needed or see how they could help.

"Knowledge is power," says Armstrong. "Many families don't know how important early childhood development is. And even if they do know, they don't realize that there are programs and services that can help their children reach their full potential. DeAndre's experience proves this. He did receive supportive services, briefly, and during that time we noticed a 180-degree turnaround in his behavior. The help exists, and the help works. Families just need to know about it and be able to access it."

When DeAndre was ten years old, his mother passed away. Armstrong and his wife, who had always been involved in their grandson's life, now became his sole guardians. DeAndre was still struggling at school and had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).

“Getting DeAndre the supports he needed wasn’t easy,” Armstrong shares. “He needed an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to address his ODD, and it just didn’t exist.”

Confronted with an overly complicated system, Armstrong set out to learn about his rights as a caregiver, arming himself with knowledge so that he could advocate for DeAndre to receive and benefit from the services he was eligible for. Because of his grandfather’s efforts, DeAndre now attends a therapeutic school specializing in behavioral health. He is on track to graduate from high school with his class and decide what he wants to do next.

Thanks to his grandfather’s efforts, DeAndre can pursue the future he wants.

“I’m passionate about improving these systems because I know what will happen if we don’t,” says Armstrong. “I saw what DeAndre went through. And I keep seeing what the other kids in our community are going through. With kids, I’ve realized it’s almost like building a house. You have to build that strong foundation while they’re still young. And to do that, families need a better system in place.”

Now, Armstrong’s working to help develop that system. As the community liaison for Essex County Council for Young Children (birth-8), he supports other parents and caregivers, helping them take an active role in their child’s early development. Moreover, for the past two years, he’s provided the ECCS CollN team with an invaluable family-based perspective.

“Decisions shouldn’t be made on policies and statewide change without talking to the families whose children those changes will affect,” says Armstrong. “I mean, without hearing from the people living in the trenches, how can anyone determine what changes need to be made? The CollN has given me and other caregivers that seat at the table—and I’m proud to be an advocate for families in my community and across the state of New Jersey.”

*Interested in hearing more from Armstrong? Watch a recording of [a panel presentation](#) from him and other family partners on the ECCS CollN. Interested in hearing other families’ story? Check out [this article](#) where a mother shares why she’s passionate about early childhood systems improvement.*