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## Her toddler has been slow to speak; help showed up at her door

BY NINA SHAPIRO

Seattle Times staff reporter

ISSAQUAH — Ana Nuñez was relieved when she found out Kinderling would come to her Issaquah home to work with her toddler, Steve, who has been slow to speak. She thought she might have to bundle up the three kids she's raising on her own and take them somewhere, or ask her mom to drive from Auburn to babysit.

Life could already feel overwhelming. Newly separated from her partner, Nuñez had recently moved to Washington from California and had to find housing, child care and a school for her oldest, 10-year-old Jason. On top of that were the worries about Steve, now almost 3, who not only wasn't talking but also was crying for prolonged periods and, at times, pushing around his baby sister, 18-month-old Kamilah.

"He would get so mad," said Nuñez, 33. "I don't know if he was getting frustrated because he couldn't communicate."

Helping families where they are is a priority for Bellevue-based Kinderling, the largest nonprofit in the Pacific Northwest providing therapy and related services for young children with disabilities and developmental delays, and among 13 beneficiaries of The Seattle Times Fund for Those in Need.

Families the organization serves, including those who are homeless, have enough to worry about without adding transportation to the list, said Kinderling



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*Kinderling speech and language pathologist Kaitlyn McClain, left, helps Steve, almost 3, learn letters in the family's Issaquah home. At right is his mother, Ana Nuñez, who is holding his sister, Kamilah, 18 months.*

CEO Lisa Greenwald. The nonprofit's therapists have carried out sessions at parks, community centers, transitional housing and even in a family's car.

Kinderling also holds preschool and group classes at its four campuses, in Bellevue, Bothell, Redmond and Renton. It's best known for services for children from birth to age 3, funded largely by the state as part of its special education system.

The early investment pays off, Gre-

enwald said. About half of kids Kinderling serves close the development gap by age 3 and no longer need special education, saving Eastside school districts about \$14 million a year, according to Greenwald.

For those who continue to need therapy, Kinderling offers services through age 10. It's one of the rare organizations that accepts Medicaid for those services, covering about half of insurance reim-

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bursement, according to Greenwald. Donations help make up the difference and go toward other costs not covered by government funding.

Demand for Kindering's services is rapidly growing, fueled by the Eastside's population boom, and by possibly yet another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic: Beginning research suggests children born during the pandemic are more likely to fall behind on motor, problem-solving and social skills.

Why isn't yet certain. The first group of researchers to come up with this finding started out comparing babies exposed to COVID in utero versus those who were not, explained Morgan Firestein, a Columbia University postdoctoral research fellow who worked on the study. The researchers found no developmental differences.

But then they looked at the developmental scores of babies born before the pandemic. They scored an average three to six points higher, out of 60, than babies born during the pandemic.

"We were frankly quite surprised," Firestein said. Given the earlier finding, something besides COVID exposure was going on.

Instead, researchers are considering the role of pandemic-related stress and isolation. Many babies born in the last few years spent the beginning of their lives at home, with just a few family members and caregivers, limiting their social development and ability to learn from peers.

"Pre-pandemic, if you think about going to the grocery store, some of those normal experiences ... we used to see kids in those settings a lot," Greenwald said.

Sarah Huntley, a Kindering special educator, now sees part of her job as introducing kids to the outside world. "We do a lot previewing: showing pictures of a place we're going to go visit or people we're going to interact with," she said. She'll also have kids role-play with stuffed animals, or she'll have a session in a park to facilitate interactions with other children.

Kindering's therapists help families deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic too, delivering necessities like diapers and formula through a partnership with Eastside Baby Corner.

On a larger scale, Kindering is gearing up to meet the increased demand.

The nonprofit reached a major



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As her 18-month-old daughter, Kamilah, picks up books, Ana Nuñez plays on a laptop with son Steve. Kindering therapist Kaitlyn McClain said moments like these, when she can step back and let parent and child interact, are important.



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Kindering speech and language pathologist Kaitlyn McClain helps Steve build a structure with magnets. She holds his sister, Kamilah, who is also receiving therapy from Kindering.

milestone in 2021 by serving more than 10,000 families, up from 6,500 in 2019. It expects to serve roughly 50% more by expanding its Bothell campus, completed this year, and opening a new, larger campus in Redmond next summer that will be part of a "Together Center" housing more than 20 social service agencies.

When Huntley, Kindering's special

educator, initially arrived at the Nuñez household in April, she focused on Steve's speech. The 2-year-old was saying just a few words, and inconsistently using them. In weekly sessions, Huntley worked on building his vocabulary by having him imitate her.

"So if he was eating and I noticed he

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*Steve holds magnetic shapes that Kinderling speech and language pathologist Kaitlyn McClain has brought. She narrates their activities to encourage his speech development.*

was out of tortillas, I might say: ‘Do you want more tortillas?’ And I would pause for a second. If he didn’t say anything, I might say ‘más’ — Spanish for “more,” a word used in the bilingual household — “and wait for him to imitate saying ‘más’ before giving him more pieces.”

Huntley also taught him sign language for key words. Physical gestures are easier for some kids than verbal articulation and can be a jumping-off point for speech, she said.

Meanwhile, she coached Nuñez on strategies to address Steve’s behavioral issues. Huntley suggested Nuñez sit between Steve and Kamilah when they play, making it easier for the children’s mom to have face-to-face interaction with each and to prevent Steve from pushing Kamilah and grabbing her toys.

With Nuñez looking on, Huntley also encouraged sharing by using toys with lots of pieces. And Huntley showed Nuñez how to give Steve choices when faced with something he doesn’t want to do. Transitioning from playtime to mealtime can be tough, for instance, but it can help to ask the toddler what he wants to eat or where he wants to sit — giving him a measure of control.

“There’s so many things she helped me and taught me,” Nuñez said. “It’s amazing.”

About six months into Huntley’s time with Steve, she brought on a speech

and language pathologist to work more intensively on language.

Kaitlyn McClain walked into the family’s apartment for her weekly visit one Tuesday afternoon as Steve and Kamilah were finishing an after-child care snack of tortillas and scrambled eggs.

Steve turned to see her come in, his eyes brightening.

“I have some markers,” McClain said as she sat down at the table. Steve smiled.

“What color are we going to do today?” McClain asked.

He picked one out, wordlessly.

“Greeeen,” McClain said, drawing out the word.

And so it went, McClain narrating Steve’s actions to encourage him to imitate her words. “One, two, three, four, five,” she said as Steve made big colorful dots with the markers. “Oh no, fall down!” she said, when a cap fell on the ground. When they switched to playing with magnetic shapes and Steve chose some, she observed: “Triangles, there’s two.”

Knowing Steve likes music, McClain also sang: “One little, two little, three little bubbles.”

Steve usually takes 15 minutes or so to warm up and then will begin talking. Likely inhibited by having a reporter and photographer around during this visit, he said only a couple words,

however, including a whispered “yellow.”

But Nuñez gave McClain an update on Steve’s increasing ability to say not only words but also phrases: “I want shower. I want eat. I want go outside.”

“That’s great because then he can work through and communicate what he needs in that moment,” McClain said.

Nuñez still struggles to meet the needs of all her kids. Bedtime is a particularly complicated ritual. She’ll put Kamilah to bed first, then Steve — who until recently would sleep only in a bouncy chair but has now moved to the living room couch, as long as his mom is beside him. Once he’s asleep, she’ll slip away to Jason’s room to spend time with the fourth-grader and tackle math problems together before returning to the couch.

“Pick your battles,” a Kinderling coordinator told her. “You can’t change everything right away.” It’s been a calming thought.

Meanwhile, Kinderling offered help with Kamilah, too. While visiting Steve, Huntley heard Nuñez’s worry that her youngest wasn’t crawling yet. Kinderling evaluated Kamilah and determined she would benefit from sessions with an occupational therapist.

And she has. Last month, Kamilah started walking.

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*Kaitlyn McClain, right, narrates Steve's actions while he plays to encourage the toddler to imitate her words.*

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*Steve likes to match and trace letters on an iPad.*

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