

Bringing up 'Lele': Group helps great-grandmother settle into mother groove

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Marcella Crosson thought she was done with parenting.

She was 65. Not only had she raised six children of her own, she'd help raise two grandchildren as well.

Then she got a phone call that changed everything.

"The case worker called and said 'You can go get the baby,'" Crosson remembered. "At first, I didn't know if I could do it."

She'd applied just a few days before to be a guardian for her newborn great-grandson.

The day after the call, Crosson picked up three-day-old Leviticus Miller. His mother – Crosson's granddaughter – was incarcerated for shoplifting and other charges. Leviticus' father was out of the picture.

As for the rest of the family, Crosson put it this way: "My record is the only one that's straight."

Crosson was the baby's only chance to stay in the family and avoid foster care. So, just like that, Crosson was a mom again.

"I'm the mama chicken and you're the baby chicken," cooed Crosson, sitting on the floor of her apartment and flipping through a picture book last week.

Nine months after bringing baby "Lele" home, Crosson said she's settled into a groove as a mom again with the help of IMPRINTS, a nonprofit organization that pairs with high-need families to improve child development at an early age.



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Leviticus Miller, 9-1/2 months, plays in the home of his great-grandmother and guardian, Marcella Crosson, Friday, August 8, 2014. Crosson is raising Miller while his mother, Crosson's grand-daughter, is in prison, and receives regular home visits from an IMPRINTS child development specialist.

Twice a month, Mary Beck-Henderson, a child development specialist with IMPRINTS, visits Crosson at home to check in on Lele's development. They usually do a short activity, like making age-appropriate toys, and talk about ways to stimulate Lele's development.

Beck-Henderson usually brings some informational materials and picture books. Last week, they talked about activities to develop fine motor skills and social skills.

"He's extremely social anyway," Beck-Henderson said, watching Lele crawl toward her.

Crosson said she thinks he'll be walking soon. He's already trying, she said.

"He made a little step the other day," Crosson announced proudly to Beck-Henderson. "I think he'll walk early."

Beck-Henderson, or "Aunt Mary," is a de facto part of the family. She's been visiting Crosson and Lele twice a month since the baby was just a week old.

"It's pretty cool," Beck-Henderson said. "I've known him his whole life."

Crosson said she looks forward to the visits, too. Things have changed since she raised her own children; her oldest is 49 and her youngest is 35.

"There was a lot of stuff I didn't know," she said. "It's a good program."

That's the goal, said Berta Andrade, director of IMPRINTS. The purpose of the home visit program is to turn parents into their child's "first and best" teacher. Children from high-need families often start kindergarten behind their peers.

Home visits allow IMPRINTS to provide services in a way that's convenient and comfortable for clients, Andrade says.

It also helps child development specialists to see children in their natural environment. They get a fuller picture of what's going on with the child and family. It can also sometimes signal to specialists other services the family could benefit from.

Through IMPRINTS Crosson got assistance with a stroller, crib and baby clothes. Crisis Control helps with diapers and formula.

Crosson used to have her own hair salon but is retired now and lives off of her social security.

Lele's father, who is in and out of the picture, provides \$50 a month toward Lele's care.

Crosson says Lele's starting to get his first teeth – four on the top and two on the bottom – so Beck-Henderson gave her information on the teething process. She encourages Crosson to find a dentist for Lele in the next few months and says she can recommend someone who accepts Medicaid.

Crosson was connected with Beck-Henderson and IMPRINTS through a referral from the Downtown Health Plaza, one of three clinics that make up the bulk of IMPRINTS referrals. Crosson took Lele to the clinic the day after she picked him up. He was just four days old.

"They said, 'Do you want someone to come out and help you?'" remembered Crosson. "I said 'Oh, yes.'"

It wasn't easy at first, but Crosson said she can't imagine her life without her great-grandson now. She said she intends to fight for custody when his mother is released from prison, which could be later this year.

"I'm fighting for Lele," Crosson said, looking down at the smiling baby on her lap. "This is my little partner."

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