

Strengthening Bonds: Alisha and Serenity's Journey with Child First

At just six years old, Serenity is a high-energy, incredibly verbal girl with a curious mind. Her intelligence and enthusiasm shine through in everything she does. "She is always asking questions and loves to be in charge," said Alisha, Serenity's mom.

However, Serenity was struggling with listening, cooperating, and interacting, which challenged her relationship with her parents. Alisha explained, "I talked to Serenity's pediatrician about her behavioral issues, and they referred us to the Child First program." Soon after, clinician Katie Baller and a care coordinator began making weekly home visits.

Katie Baller, a Child First clinician with over five years of experience, supports families in eastern Connecticut through United Community & Family Services. She specializes in supporting children facing developmental, behavioral, emotional, and trauma-related challenges. Katie collaborates closely with her care coordinator partner to provide comprehensive support, focusing on helping both children and caregivers build emotional regulation and resilience.

"I was immediately drawn to Katie," Alisha said. "I could tell she understood how I was feeling and that I was overwhelmed. She has this energy that draws you in."

Katie began working with Serenity and Alisha after completing intake and getting to know them. Together, they discussed their goals moving forward. Katie explained, "Child First is very flexible; families have the freedom to shape their own path toward the goals we work on together."

As a Child First clinician, Katie integrates principles from models that are trauma-informed and relationship based, such as Child Parent Psychotherapy and Circle of Security. Approaches like these strengthen the bond between caregivers and children by addressing a child's emotional needs and reducing family stress by meeting their essential needs. Alisha reflected on her work in Child First, "It's about being there when Serenity needs me, following through, and understanding her feelings, all while maintaining healthy boundaries."

Central to the Child First model is child-led play, which supports positive engagement between the

caregiver and child as a safe space to explore and express their emotions. Katie explained, "I help parents follow their child's lead and respond thoughtfully, ensuring a safe environment." With Alisha, Katie focused on balancing boundaries: how to be firm but not mean, how to be kind but not weak.



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-Child First clinician, Katie



Child First clinician, Katie, worked with Alisha and Serenity as a team to build resilience and strengthen their family bond.

Alisha admits she initially felt uncomfortable with child-led play. "I'm not naturally a pretender—I'm very logical," she explained. "It was challenging because Serenity has such an amazing imagination!"

Katie recalls, "We worked on helping Alisha follow Serenity's lead and stay engaged in play without triggering her own discomfort. We eventually came up with the idea of setting aside an hour to just sit with that discomfort. But Alisha ended up being so good at it. She received a lot of validation and encouragement, and her confidence in play really grew."

Serenity is a sensory seeker who relies on touch to regulate herself, but for Alisha, it can be overwhelming. "I have two kids, and sometimes I feel overstimulated—like they're always on top of me," she said. Katie worked with Alisha to set boundaries to address Serenity's sensory needs. "If Serenity needs touch to regulate herself, how can mom manage this in a way that feels balanced for both of them?" Katie asks.

To balance Serenity's need for touch with Alisha's boundaries, Katie introduced a playful regulation strategy called 'making a pizza.' Katie explained, "Serenity would lie on her stomach while Alisha 'made' a pizza on her back. Serenity chose the type of pizza, and Alisha pretended to knead dough, spread sauce, and add toppings. It made Serenity giggle while meeting her sensory needs." This strategy worked because Alisha was in control of the touch, making it a comfortable solution for both.

Over the 10 months they were in the Child First program, Katie visited Alisha and Serenity at least once a week—sometimes twice—to support them with regulation strategies, parenting skills, setting boundaries, and understanding how to meet Serenity's needs. "My work is not just about providing therapy but offering reflective skills that caregivers can use long-term," Katie said.

"I didn't want Katie to leave," Alisha admitted with a laugh. "But Serenity was doing better and wasn't having as many outbursts and tantrums. Before Katie, Serenity was hitting and spitting. Since being in the Child First program, we haven't had any issues with aggression."

Katie echoed the sentiment, "It was a 'good goodbye' and a happy ending seeing Alisha's confidence grow. I



Six-year-old Serenity's vibrant curiosity and imagination shine as she thrives with her parents' support

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—Child First caregiver, Alisha

saw her change from being unsure to really grasping the concepts and implement them with consistency." Even though they completed the Child First program months ago, Alisha shared, "We still 'make a pizza' – in fact we just did yesterday! Serenity woke up feeling off and I saw she was frustrated. I asked her to take a couple deep breaths, and we made a pizza. She loves it and it made her feel much better."