

## Advocate Profile: Cara Sutliffe, Parent leader, Think Babies Michigan

### *Busy mom of four is a strong voice for the power of home visiting services*

When Cara Sutliffe was pregnant with her oldest child, she assumed she knew everything necessary to raise a baby. After all, she had had extensive experience as a nanny.

But after her son was born prematurely, it became clear that she and her husband needed help with feeding issues and an emerging hearing disorder. With their own parents living an hour away, she and her husband were left struggling on their own, worried and uncertain about their next steps. “We didn’t know what to do with a tiny baby who couldn’t eat and hear,” she said.

Fortunately, the Grand Rapids woman was connected to Early Head Start consultants who arrived on her doorstep with insights and expert knowledge. Her confidence as a new parent grew.



Cara Sutliffe

“Home visiting stepped in and at the time it was a lifeline for me, a guide and so reassuring. I came to believe, ‘You got this.’ I took it day to day and had someone to talk to.”

**Today, Sutliffe** is helping Michigan become a better place to raise a family through the [Think Babies Michigan](#) collaborative. She joined the group, which now has more than 2,400 members, when it was still formed under the Michigan PN-3 Policy Initiative. In recent years, Sutliffe played an important part in helping to draft the Think Babies Michigan policy priorities, lending her valuable parent voice and perspective. “It is awesome to see how much goes into one document and how important everybody’s voice is,” she said.

Now a busy parent with four children, spanning ages 11 to 3, she’s still making time to become an active participant in the cause as co-chair of the Think Babies Michigan Home Visiting Workgroup. She stays centrally involved in a variety of ways, including helping onboard new parents, writing letters to lawmakers, and attending the Capitol Day advocacy event on March 15. Governor Whitmer recently appointed her to serve on the Michigan Interagency Coordinating Council for Infants and Toddlers with Developmental Disabilities.

Because of her own experiences as a new parent, Sutliffe can speak first-hand on issues that are prioritized by Think Babies Michigan, among them the need to expand home visiting services to more families. Sutliffe’s family had help early in the children’s development with speech delays, hearing issues, sensory processing concerns, and autism. Her children have benefited from Early Head Start home visiting services, and three are graduates of Head Start, the preschool program. Home visitors through *Early On* also came to her aid when her second son was born and experienced a life-threatening event in which he was deprived of oxygen and required resuscitation. Occupational and physical therapy followed to address resulting muscle delays.

**“I’ve become a real fan** of home visiting. And I highly suggest it to any parent. They were very helpful for our family. They connected us to resources, and brought resources into the home.”

For parents, a powerful way to learn about such programs is by word-of-mouth, from other parents, Sutcliffe said. A priority of Think Babies Michigan is to encourage greater public awareness of programs that provide essential health, developmental and social-emotional support services for families with children prenatal-to-three, and to increase the number of families receiving these supports through services such as Early On and Home Visits. Toward this goal, the collaborative works to ensure that government leaders support increasing investments in these programs so that delays that could be dealt with efficiently and early don't lead to more expensive long-term problems impacting a child's life and school success.

"People using these systems need to be heard, particularly by policymakers," she said. "I think a lot of policy-makers' intentions are generally good. But many have never been in a position to need to use these resources, or experience the benefits they're offering. I know what struggles are like, and I don't want other people to struggle."

**Sutcliffe added** that the power of Think Babies Michigan is found in its growing collective voice. "It's about knowing one voice can be strong, but more voices can be better. It's harder not to listen when you're hearing from 100 voices not just one."

*More than 950 Michigan families, advocates, researchers, government officials, service providers and parents convened to create the Think Babies Michigan 2020-2025 Policy Agenda. Michigan is the only state in this national movement to intentionally prioritize having parents co-lead and co-design our policy agenda-setting process.*