

Strengthening Family Bonds

An Interview with Karina Pavone, Executive Director, Amigos For Kids

EDITORS' NOTE Karina Pavone joined Amigos For Kids, a Miami-based nonprofit organization, in early 2020 as its Executive Director. She has a robust and eclectic blend of professional experiences. In the early days of her career, Pavone began working in a variety of clinical settings – first as a therapist at a partial hospitalization program where she worked with older adults experiencing mental health issues, and later with AIDS patients. After a brief stint as a consultant for an Employee Assistance Program, she provided counseling to hundreds of individuals affected by 9/11. Pavone then worked at Miami Dade College (MDC) where she served in various roles of progressively higher responsibility for nearly 17 years before assuming her role with Amigos For Kids. Pavone earned a B.S. degree in psychology from Florida International University, an M.S. degree in Mental Health Counseling from Carlos Albizu University, and is ABD (All But Dissertation) for a Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology.



Karina Pavone

Will you provide an overview of Amigos for Kids and how you define its mission?

Amigos For Kids is dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. We work toward this mission through a variety of programs aimed at strengthening family bonds. One of our most well-known programs is our Nurturing Parenting Program. This program received the Program of the Year Award from The Children's Trust, a distinction provided only to top performing programs. The program teaches parents, through an evidence-based curriculum, ways to promote positive parent-child interactions by improving communication with empathy and compassion.

Our Safe Amigos After School Program focuses on children and provides structured out-of-school programming to children ages 5 to 12 in a safe and enriching environment. This type of programming helps ensure that children

are not left home unsupervised when they are not in school which leaves them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Additionally, during the pandemic, we have pivoted to providing concrete support to families in need. Research shows that stress, financial pressures, and poverty are all factors that can contribute to the occurrence of child abuse. Providing families in need with concrete support such as food and other essentials helps build protective factors that buffer against child abuse and neglect. To date, and because of the tremendous generosity of our supporters, we have provided over 5,500 hot meals and over 1,500 groceries to families in need. Working in tandem with other community partners, we also provide care coordination to our program participants to ensure linkages to community resources and help with rent, utilities, job searches, and other benefits for which they might qualify. Now more than ever, these types of services have been critical to our families as they grapple with the consequences of a serious global pandemic.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Amigos For Kids (amigosforkids.org) was founded in 1991 to aid South Florida's most valuable resource, its children. The organization aims to increase awareness of its mission of strengthening families and educating communities in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Amigos For Kids actualizes its purpose every day via key program components, including Education, Awareness, and Advocacy. The Education framework includes an After-School Program and its evidenced-based Nurturing Parents Program. The After-School Program at José Martí Park serves children ages 6 to 11 daily. The educational parenting workshops serve countless families throughout the region. Since its inception, Amigos For Kids has organized one of the city's largest and most meaningful holiday toy drives. The effort, reaching thousands of children over the years, makes their specific holiday wishes come true. To fulfill its mission, Amigos For Kids relies on the support of generous individuals, corporate partners and volunteers.



Amiguitos excited to start school with their new backpacks and school supplies



The Sansonetti kids from Nurturing Parenting enjoying groceries from their friends at Amigos

Will you highlight the approach that Amigos for Kids pursues in order to drive impact?

We employ a holistic approach to our mission because we understand that no single program or approach is sufficient to end the painful cycle of child abuse and neglect. We draw on our network of community partners to help the entire family, while also providing education and support through our various programs. This whole-family approach helps provide the scaffolding needed for families to navigate the serious challenges of parenting.

We help parents through education to build on and develop appropriate parenting practices in a culturally sensitive way, while also empowering children through developmentally appropriate programs that teach them to recognize and report abuse or behaviors that are not appropriate or make them uncomfortable. Education using evidence-based programs has been shown to effectively prevent child abuse and neglect.

We provide safe places for kids to play and learn when they are not in school to ensure they are properly supervised and less vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. We provide concrete support to families when they need it the most to reduce stressors that have been shown to contribute to child abuse while also building protective factors that buffer against abuse and neglect. Research has shown that bolstering protective factors is an effective tool to preventing child abuse and neglect.

We educate communities through outreach efforts and public service campaigns to raise awareness of child abuse and ways to help and report suspected abuse. Building public awareness is an effective tool in educating the community on proactive steps to stop child abuse and neglect.

How critical is creating awareness as part of Amigos for Kids' work and will you discuss these efforts?

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month and the month during which Amigos hosts a series of events designed to create awareness of child abuse and ways to prevent it. Part of this work includes advertising campaigns produced by Republica Havas, an advertising agency led by Amigos' Co-Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Jorge Plasencia, which provides its services on a pro-bono basis. We are extremely fortunate to have creative professionals at the highest caliber producing high-impact public service campaigns for Amigos. These campaigns are instrumental in getting Amigos and its mission in the public sphere.

How important are metrics to track the impact and measure the results of Amigos for Kids' programs?

Tracking impact is not only a best-practice and required by most of our funders, but I believe it is also important to guide decision-making to be sure that the services we provide have the intended outcome. Our overarching goal is to strengthen family bonds through support and education as a way of preventing child abuse. Program participants overwhelmingly show knowledge gains and changes in behavior through pre- and post-assessments as well as post-completion follow-ups. However, these metrics only tell part of the story. We also receive countless, compelling testimonials from program participants who talk about adverse childhood experiences of abuse and neglect and describe how our program has helped them break the cycle of abuse by allowing them to become better parents. These stories breathe life to our work and energize us to move the mission forward.

Will you discuss the strength and leadership of Amigos for Kids' board and how valuable it is to have such an engaged and committed board?

The Amigos board is amazing. Each director is extremely accomplished in his/her respective field and brings unique and valuable

perspectives and experiences that benefit the organization. Our directors are extremely generous with their time and supportive of all of the important work we do at Amigos. They are key to making inroads with prospective funders and supporters which is an essential component to the effectiveness and growth of the organization. Amigos' success is greatly linked to the fundraising capacity of our Board of Directors.

We are also extremely fortunate to have a capable and dedicated staff who are deeply committed to the mission and whose collective and individual contributions to our work with families is critical to the success of the organization. They are what I call "the secret sauce."

What excited you about the opportunity to lead Amigos for Kids and made you feel it was the right fit?

My parents came to the United States from Argentina when I was just a young girl. Like many immigrants, my family was seeking better opportunities and the American dream. The first few years were really hard, but I remember a small community of people who helped us - other immigrants who had been in the country longer than us and helped us in every way imaginable. As young as I was, I experienced and understood the value of community and helping others and this experience stayed with me and helped me eventually decide to pursue a helping profession. I studied psychology and throughout my career helped hundreds of people experiencing mental illness and other life challenges. This work made me feel connected to community and gave my life purpose.

After several years working in the field of mental health, I decided to make a career change and entered the world of higher education. I spent 17 years at Miami Dade College working with non-traditional students in the school of continuing education. My time at Miami Dade College was very rewarding, but I started to feel like I was missing something and after a lot of soul searching, I decided I wanted to go back to social services.

The timing was very serendipitous because shortly after leaving the College, the position at Amigos became available. The mission of Amigos really spoke to me. As a parent of two young daughters, one with special needs, I know first-hand how hard parenting can be. Amigos helps parents learn to manage the challenges of parenting as a way of preventing child abuse. This was work I could see myself doing and really see impact. I knew right away Amigos was my next professional home. I started in January of this year, just two months before COVID-19 hit. Even though this pandemic period has been filled with challenges, having to adapt quickly and try new things really tapped into my creative side and is a space that allows me to thrive. That was even more confirmation that I am at the right place and doing what I love, helping others in an organization that allows me to be creative and innovative. My parents have always been proud of me, but I can tell that, along with the rest of my family, they are extra proud of my work at Amigos. This fills me with joy. ●