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4-2024

Beginning Eternity: Raising Children in Their Early Years

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Beginning Eternity

Raising Children in Their Early Years

The pre-K room at The Crayon Box Children's Learning Center at Andrews University is a colorful maze of learning centers — one features a wall-mounted rotary phone, play kitchen, and rack of dress-up clothes. Even the bathrooms are built with low sinks and miniature stalls.

The three-year-olds' room is laid out in similar fashion, with bright rugs and interactive toys on tables around the room. In the corner, yellow and red couches invite children to sit a while as their friends host imaginary meals cooked on a nearby play kitchen. This is a world made for children.

Esther Louw was drawn to the way the



By Sarah Gane Burton

Illustration by Karen Jimenez Findley

“classrooms looked like the teachers made it for the children.” She was impressed that the classrooms had a dedicated space for worship and that the curriculum the center follows teaches spiritual concepts. Louw and her husband, Eric, are both graduate students at Andrews University and parents of three-year-old Lauren. Louw knew she could take

classes half-time and keep Lauren at home, but the amount of time required for classes, studying and childcare was unsustainable. It made more sense to study full-time and have Lauren in daycare. Additionally, Louw wanted her daughter to spend time with other children. When a spot opened at The Crayon Box, the Louws enrolled Lauren.

For Louw, the reality of “it takes a village to raise a child” was instrumental in helping her decide to send her daughter to The Crayon Box. “We don’t have a village anymore, like people used to have,” she says. “We don’t have extended neighbors or family members around us anymore. Putting your child in an environment that is safe is no different.”



▲ Children from The Crayon Box listen to a story (top) and to a fire safety presentation.

She is grateful for “the emphasis that the teachers put into the children” and that her daughter is growing and learning in an Adventist environment.

The Louw family represent a large percentage of parents, many from non-Adventist backgrounds, who are entrusting the care of their children to professionals in childcare centers across the Lake Union. In a series of interviews with the directors of the five early childhood centers operating within the four-state territory of the Lake Union, the story is the same: many parents are choosing Adventist daycares for a variety of reasons. Several centers have a waitlist, even though they do not spend money on advertising.

How did we end up here against a backdrop of dueling philosophies on the best approach for raising children? Economic realities, the physical separation of nuclear families from extended family networks, and a host of other reasons necessitate dedicated, professional early childhood educational centers. In response, early childhood education programs have been developed by local churches across the Lake Union. These were initially grassroot programs started by church members that were successful enough to become full-fledged centers specifically serving preschool children. Today, five centers are state licensed/registered and/or NAD accredited and adhere to all health and safety standards.

Sue Tidwell is the associate director of Early Childhood Education at the Lake Union, helping the centers implement the North American Division curriculum, “Creation Kids,” and follow accreditation guidelines. The curriculum is currently being updated and a new curriculum for birth through age two is near completion. With these updates and other changes, the NAD hopes to bring in a level of professionalism and recognition to the field of early childhood education to foster permanence and guarantee the sustainability of these centers beyond their current directors.

“The Adventist church is already known for its education system. We can also be

known for our early childhood education and the curriculum that we have that provides a Bible-based, Christian-based foundation for all their learning,” says Tidwell.

SERVING A UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

The Crayon Box Children’s Learning Center has a unique origin story. Based on the Andrews University campus in Berrien Springs, it began as a child development lab in the 1950s and continues to have a close relationship with Andrews University faculty and students. Students majoring in early education have the opportunity to gain experience with young children at The Crayon Box and may observe and develop lesson plans under the supervision of the staff. Forty-five student workers assist the 13 staff in caregiving.

The Crayon Box has classrooms for children ages 2 weeks old through young 5’s, with a capacity of 150 children. They also offer afterschool, snow day, or holiday care for school age children up to the age of 12. In the summer, they run the Andrews University Summer Camp.

The children of faculty, staff and students are frequent attendees of The Crayon Box, along with children from the community. About 50% of the children come from Adventist families, the other 50% from primarily Christian families, and there is a waitlist for every classroom. Special programs and potlucks provide opportunities for the families to enjoy time together. A “free” table in the hallway of The Crayon Box piled with outgrown clothes and books that parents take from and restock testifies to the community environment.

“The families really buy into us,” says director Kristine Conklin. “Our infant room is already full for the next calendar year, and they are all siblings from current kids. Many of the parents who are not associated with the university are first responders: police officers, doctors, nurses, firefighters,” she explains. “Those people are needing to work; they need us to be here.”



▲ Of the 85 students attending the Troy Adventist Academy in Troy, Michigan, only a handful come from Adventist families. The majority are Hindu, with some Muslims and (non-Adventist) Christians.

The center emphasizes learning through play. “We don’t do ‘daycare hours’ or ‘learning hours,’ we learn all day,” says Conklin. “If you are walking to the playground, you’re counting: how many kids are there? We try to incorporate learning into play so that it’s not stressful for them, it’s fun.”

Conklin emphasizes the center’s goal to prepare children for living well, not just for school. “We want to make them really good people.”

SERVING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

At Troy Adventist Academy Preschool (TAAP), children work on crafts and manipulatives at tables or on the floor in bright, robin-egg blue classrooms. Located in Troy, Michigan, the preschool hosts classrooms for ages 6 weeks to 5 years old, with 85 current students and a waiting list. Due to the long waiting list last year, a second toddler room was opened, totaling five classrooms.

Of the 85 students, only a handful come from Adventist families. The majority are Hindu, with some Muslims and (non-Adventist) Christians. The staff is also widely diverse. “It makes my heart happy that they are willing to accommodate one another and be kind and learn to live together and work together,” says director Terri Morgan.

The center’s positive reputation has spread through word-of-mouth, with parents sometimes registering their children before they even enter the United States. Hindu and Muslim parents particularly appreciate that the center serves vegetarian food. The pre-K classroom is involved in a singing program



▲ Lambs Early Learning Center attracts families from the five Adventist churches in the Hinsdale area, as well as UChicago Medicine AdventHealth.

at Christmas and in the spring. These programs, and potlucks put on by the center, are well-attended by the parents. “The Hindu families are very interested in community,” says Morgan. “They love the potlucks and get-togethers.”

Morgan has facilitated engagement with the Intermediate School District so that qualifying students can receive services they offer, and she was recently invited to set up a booth at the Troy School District Adult Education Fair. “They asked if they could partner with us because they have heard from some of their students that this is a great place to work and very supportive of continuing education.”

Morgan is clear that this is not a business arrangement, this is ministry. Her philosophy is simple, “We teach the little children that God created them, that God loves them, that God expects them to love others, and that God sent Jesus. It’s like Sabbath school time every day. Not only do the children hear all of that but the staff do too. We are not here to take away what other people believe in. We are here to make what we believe so attractive that others want it. Let’s make this place a place of compassion, refuge and peace.”

BIBLE-BASED CURRICULUM

Children pose for a photo in the Gurnee Christian Preschool hallway in front of a festive red and pink bulletin board that says, “God is Love.” Like all the centers in the Lake Union, the preschool in Gurnee, Illinois, uses the “Creation Kids” curriculum. “A lot of



▲ Children from the Illinois Gurnee Christian Preschool learn Christ-centered lessons.

parents are looking for a safe place for their kids,” says director Delmy Jimenez. “First, they hear about the curriculum we are teaching, that we are teaching about Jesus, and they start asking about the program. They can see that we are not only here to teach their kids but that we show them love.”

Jimenez and six staff provide care for 20 children, with over half coming from non-Adventist community families. The preschool is full, with a waiting list, even though they have not advertised. “People find the program,” says Jimenez.

Jimenez tells prospective families upfront about the purpose of the curriculum in teaching young children about Jesus. “We always tell the parents, that what we want to do is help the kids come close to Jesus. I’ve never had a parent say, ‘I don’t like this place, I don’t want to bring my child here.’”

The preschool operates in the same building as Gurnee Christian Academy. When Jimenez began as director two years ago, only three children transitioned from the center to the kindergarten on site. “Right now, 14 of the kids are candidates to go to kindergarten and parents are asking about the program.”

When the church does activities, the preschool sends out information and sometimes the parents come. “We all have a mission,” remarks Jimenez, “and that’s to show others the love of Jesus. So, we try to show the kids that we love them and care about them.”

BUILDING CHARACTER AND COMMUNITY

Parents in Hinsdale, Illinois, are also looking for a safe place for their children to learn and grow. Ashley Robles directs the Little Lambs Early Learning Center, which currently has 24 students enrolled between the ages of 3–5 and six staff members. The center also shares space with the only pre-K to 12th grade Adventist school in the state of Illinois — Hinsdale Adventist Academy — serving the five local Adventist churches and UChicago Medicine AdventHealth. Of the 24 students, less than half are children of Adventist church members. Robles notes that many of the parents are highly educated, “so when we explain that the children are learning through play, they want to know if they are learning their letters and numbers. They have been impressed by how much their kids are learning through our curriculum.”

Robles views the Little Lambs Early Learning Center as a true community outreach program. The school is very engaged in the community, including walking around the neighborhood and picking produce from a garden maintained by community ladies. For Robles, “our mission expands to our community. We also strive to create an environment where parents are involved in the school community.” The church has a Monday morning prayer with parents when pastors come and pray with them; all parents are invited to stay. The church is also involved with Week of Prayer and other activities.

Robles credits the center’s success to the wholistic nature of the program and the positive environment it offers. “Parents are looking for a safe environment for their children. Parents are looking for that character development they might not see in other schools.” They are impressed by the curriculum, which teaches through play and includes social-emotional learning (SEL). If issues arise, the school community manages conflict resolution by inviting the parents to partner in discovering solutions, making parents “feel they are seen, and their kids are important to us.” “We are trying to implement a loving and caring environment.”

A PLACE TO PLAY AND LEARN

Door Prairie Christian Daycare is located on a beautiful 16-acre campus shared with Door Prairie Adventist Christian School in LaPorte, Indiana. The school is located at the edge of the city and the children enjoy two playgrounds and a big gym equipped with toys and balance bikes. “The kids run even during the winter,” says Elizabeth Rassi, daycare supervisor and acting director. One of the playgrounds was recently built entirely with the donations of parents and church members and volunteer effort from the parents.

The center has preschool and daycare classes, with children moving fluidly between the two. Usually, parents must choose either a preschool or a daycare program, Rassi explains, so the center is unique in offering both together. This, along with the potty-training offered in the 2-year-old class, is a big incentive for parents to enroll their children at the center. The two strictly preschool staff are certified, and the other eight staff members move between preschool and daycare.

About 50 children attend the daycare weekly, none of whom are from Adventist families. The Door Prairie Adventist Church doesn’t have many little children, but they decided to continue operating the center. When the daycare participates in school programs hosted by the church, there is standing room only as community families and church members gather to enjoy the performance.

“The staff are kind of like family,” says daycare director Lee Whitman, who also serves as an Indiana Conference pastor. “One person in the preschool has been there for 15 years. People tend to stay there once they come because it’s a good environment.” Rassi, who has worked at the center for five years, agrees, “It’s not only a good place to send your kids it’s also a great place to work.”

Rassi strives to create a transparent environment for the parents. “The parents have all our cellphone numbers,” she says. “We are really big on communication.” The transparency, uniqueness of the center’s offerings, and the spiritual curriculum make the center

an attractive place for community families to send their children. As with several Lake Union centers, there is no need to advertise — families learn about the program through word-of-mouth and there is a waiting list. “I like to think that since we are a religious facility, we can help the parents feel comfortable that we are a Christian environment,” says Rassi.

LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME

For Adventist families who do need childcare, Adventist early childhood education centers provide an environment with an Adventist worldview. Community families sending their children to Adventist daycares and preschools can trust that their children are learning, playing and growing in a loving, Christ-filled environment. Sue Tidwell sees the need for quality childcare as an incredible area of mission and outreach. “It introduces these little children to Jesus,” Tidwell says. The goal is not to create a daycare-to-elementary school pipeline, but to model Christianity and help these little children understand that Jesus loves them. “We don’t know the outcomes,” she says. “They will be known in eternity.” ■

For more information about these programs, please visit the following websites:

- The Crayon Box Children’s Learning Center: andrews.edu/services/crayonbox/
- Door Prairie Christian Daycare: dpacs.org
- Gurnee Christian Preschool: gurneechristian.school
- Little Lambs Early Learning Center: haa.org/preschool
- Troy Adventist Academy Preschool: troymi.adventist-schoolconnect.org

Sarah Gane Burton is a freelance writer based in Berrien Springs, Michigan.



▲ Door Prairie Christian Daycare in LaPorte, Indiana, attracts families from the community.