

Providing Quality Care in Faith Based Programs

Kathleen Roth, Director

Diamond Street Early Childhood Center Akron, Pennsylvania

Presented at the Mennonite Early Childhood Network Assembly San Jose, California

July 4, 2007

Early childhood facilities are a lot like bodies of water; some are small like ponds and some are big like lakes or seas. They are all filled with life and activity. If they become stagnant, they become messy and may eventually begin to stink. A body of water needs to have new water, movement and change or even the most beautiful lake, pond or sea becomes dead. If it goes long enough without those things it will eventually evaporate, dry up and disappear and no longer meet the needs of the surrounding countryside. If a church responds to the child care needs of their surrounding community in a good way, that facility can become like baptismal waters, a source of blessing to the community and the church.

Diamond Street Early Childhood Center, DSECC, has been a ministry of Akron Mennonite Church in Akron, PA since 1969. Over the years it has changed and evolved until today it is a center that serves approximately 130 children through four pre-school classes, a pre-school kiddie kamp, a summer and academic year wrap around school age program for children through fifth grade, a full-day kindergarten and five daycare classes serving children ages eight weeks through pre-kindergarten, taught by a staff of approximately 30 regularly scheduled and seven substitute teachers. Locally, DSECC has been able to stay fairly full because of its reputation for high quality, loving care of the children it serves. In recent years DSECC has become involved with the PA Keystone STARS, a quality improvement and assurance program modeled somewhat after the AAA Four Diamond rating program for travelers, and are currently awaiting designation for the fourth (and highest) STAR. I'd say we are in the lake category.

As the years have passed DSECC has developed a mission and a vision for the ministry that provides guidance for the day-to-day management and education of our program. This mission has a focus in five areas of service. These are a call to serve, to the best of our ability, the children, their families, the staff, our congregation and our neighbors, both near and far, or as we say at Akron Mennonite Church, "across the street and around the

world".

One might say that our call to serve children is obvious, and in many ways, it is. But, I would say that it is broader than that. We have come to believe that our call is to do all that we do to the best of our ability and at the highest quality that is possible for us to do. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who heard this saying when we were children, "if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right." Believing that made our becoming involved with the STARS program a natural response to that call.

Initially our commitment to high quality was expressed by finding a curriculum that matched our values, one that helped us to see each child as a unique individual with a right to express themselves in many areas, including helping them to be aware of other people in their lives. As the state began to work with early childhood education, guidelines were set up for inspection of sites for health and safety checks. The state came in with a measuring tape and told us how many children we could have for the room size and guidelines for child to adult ratios. After working with these standards for a time, it became clear that these were "bare minimum" standards and didn't reflect high quality care. So, our staff and board adopted a policy that lowered the number of children we could serve in each classroom and also lowered the adult to child ratio in each of our age groups. Making these kinds of adjustments means a center needs to look closely at what their designation will be lowering the numbers and ratios guaranteed that DSECC would have to be a non-profit center.

We also had to look at whom we could serve, if this was going to be a ministry, we needed to be available for the children in our congregation, but we also needed to be available for other children as well, children who might come from families with fewer resources. The decision was made that no child would be turned away from care at DSECC with a couple of exceptions. Children who required one on one care or who represented a safety threat to themselves, other children or our staff while in our care were the only exceptions. So, our classrooms each have a sprinkling of children who have some sort of special need. Indeed, it has been our experience that by making accommodations for children with special needs, all of our children have benefited. A case in point is that we have a child at our center who has Down's Syndrome and has a variety of therapists coming in to the classroom throughout the week. At one point the teachers in that room said it was so interesting that all of the children in their classroom were starting to speak at about the same time, they were all speaking so clearly and engaging each other in conversation so much earlier than usual, after thinking about it for a while, we realized that this started happening after our little boy with Down's Syndrome's speech therapist started coming to the classroom. The accommodations we had made for him had benefited all of the children in that class. That class is now in the three year old room and will all be moving on to the four year old class in the fall, and it is a class that each teacher looks forward to having for they not only communicate well with each other and adults, they display a tenderness of spirit that makes them a joy to be around.

Obviously, if we have smaller class sizes and more teachers in the classroom we aren't really making very much money, but we still need to charge the families for the care we give them. We have committed ourselves to not turning any child away and providing the best quality care we can despite their family's ability to pay. What that means for us is that in the state of PA there are public funds available for child care to families where the parents are working at least 25 hours a week or are in school or job training programs and there is a demonstrated financial need. This agency then tells the families what is the minimum they are expected to contribute to their child's care, and we have committed to accepting that amount, even though it never covers the true cost. We have made a pledge that all of the children in our care deserve the best quality care that we can provide whether the children come from rich, poor or in-between families.

Another conviction we work with is that peace is possible, so you often hear comments like, "did you use your words?", "gentle touches", "let's talk about why you are feeling that you would like to hurt someone" and "we are all friends in this classroom and so we need to be kind and helpful to everybody in the room". This ideal is also played out by our involvement with the MCC International Volunteer Exchange Program. Our children are learning that they have friends all over the world, and we try to not only learn about the volunteer's country, but also to learn to eat their food and enjoy their culture.

Our commitment to provide the best quality possible service is extended to the families of our children in simple ways. We try to include the families in various extra curricular activities and there are parent representatives on the board of directors. Most importantly, is the effort to provide a welcoming environment for the families as they walk through the doors. This can be shown when a family comes with a child with a special need, to families who have limited funds, to families who don't fit traditionally accepted models of family life or to single parent families. When relating to families from a ministry mind set, what should one do when a family comes with problems in behavior management or ability to care for their children in the manner that you feel is appropriate or spend money unwisely when their children are in need? These are tough questions. What we have come to is that if there is a question of abuse we know that we are legally bound to report, but we always start with a call to the parent to let them know that is what we must do, and then seek ways to provide help with parenting skills or workshops, we also may try to find other services like clothes or food or in one instance financial assistance and budget counseling. This has been a way that we can connect our congregation to needs of families. There are many social services in our area, but sometimes a family may be so overwhelmed that they need support to make the calls or have someone else make the calls on their behalf. What it all comes down to is that we strive to treat the families of our children as we would treat our own family.

The third area of focus for our mission is to the staff. It has been important for us to ask our staff to complete many hours of professional development. Each of our regularly scheduled staff completes 24 hours of professional development each year. There has been a lot of research that makes the direct connection from amount of quality training

the staff receives to the quality of care the children receive. While, it seems clear to those of us who work in the field that this is arguably the most important work there is, it is also one of the lowest paying professions. We have made the commitment to pay as much as our budget allows, as I said earlier we are definitely a non-profit. There is more to the ministry to staff than just the salary; there is also the sense of value that a teacher feels from the office. One way of working at that is to assist with education. Pennsylvania has a program called T.E.A.C.H. that helps teachers working in early childhood education to complete their education themselves. In this way, staff are able to continue working and complete their education at the same time. Initially this program offers a CDA (Child Development Associate) certificate and then teachers can take courses toward a degree at a local college. Our responsibility in this program is to provide 10% of the tuition and time off for the teacher to attend class and study. Access to health insurance is also an important element to work at. There are other benefits that can be offered that express to staff how important they are.

Most importantly would be the sense of respect and appreciation that is offered to teachers, as well as the expectation that the teachers will do the best possible job they can at loving and caring for the children in their classes. It is crucial that teachers and parents and administration recognize that staff in an early childhood education center are teachers and not babysitters.

The fourth focus of quality early childhood education is to the congregation itself. If a church decides to offer their space as a location for an early childhood education space, there are issues that will need to be dealt with. First of all is the idea that the physical space will be used during the week, and probably used hard. By the same token it is important to remember that while the early childhood center uses the facility for up to 55 hours each week and the Sunday school probably uses it for about an hour each week, the center is a guest of the church. [f these thoughts can be kept in mind and communication is open and frequent, the sense of ministry can be good and strong. For many congregations, the early childhood center in their church building is their one sure contact with the community outside of their own congregation. Conversely, the community sees the church through the early childhood center. This is another reason that it is important to work at having a top quality program, this is a direct witness to others that this kind of service is taken seriously. The people of the community are watching how you care for the children. Our center made the commitment to offer our services to children of all faiths. So, while our curriculum was written by Christians, and we teach Christian values and pray before meals and snacks and teach the reason for Christmas and Easter, we do not have a child evangelism curriculum. Children at our center are not pressed to make a commitment to Christ or to attend church. However, every family that is given a tour at the beginning of their enrollment is invited to come to our church and it is interesting how often they do come.

Our neighbors are a key element of the ministry focus. The neighbors of the church in the area can see and hear what is happening at the center. It is wonderful when children of

nearby neighbors send their children to our center, or if families need to move, they look for a place close to the center so that they can have easy access to our center for their children. It is also true that some neighbors may not like children for their noise and general messiness, these are people that need to be reached out to and here is a time when the church and the center can work together to address this need.

There are also ways of helping the children to learn that their world is global, this is one reason that our center has been involved with the MCC IVEP program and is becoming involved in the MCC Global Family program, hoping that we can have a hand in helping our children learn that they have a responsibility to serve the rest of the world. Another way to work at this is to have plans and programs that address the issue of waste and consumption, recycling goods and respecting property are concepts that children are especially receptive to. At Our center, we feed our children breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack. For a number of years we hired a local concessionaire who brought in the meals already prepared. It was always way too much food and everyday we ended up throwing away a lot of food waste. We decided to see if we could find an alternative. Recognizing that we provided the only nutritious food that some of your children consume, we hired a nutritionist who now makes Our meals. She is a wonderful cook, we waste less, we help introduce our children to new and nutritious foods that cost less than we were paying before. We are no longer showing our children that it is O.K. to throw away good food.

There are other neighbors that can be connected to as well. There is the broader relationship to others in the early childhood education profession. These are people who it is important to see as colleagues and not competitors. These people can be a Source of connection and support and provide input when one is facing difficult decisions. The neighbors can also be members of the broader educational field. Our center has been enriched by our involvement with colleges in the area who send their students to us to do internships, observations and student teaching. In this way, not only does the center have access to the cutting edge of research in the field, we also have an impact on new early childhood education educators showing them how our program functions. Also, it is important to relate to the fellow educators within the Mennonite Church. These relationships have been a Source of fellowship and an inspiration to keep our focus on the best quality that we can.

There has been a lot of research about the fact that teens and adults who have been in early childhood education situations have a far lower arrest rate and there are fewer teen pregnancies in this population. If we can have that kind of impact when the emphasis was on simply providing the service, imagine what kind of impact we can have if our emphasis is on high quality, loving care. There are currently 13 states involved in a similar kind of STAR program as the one in Pennsylvania, which provides guidance on improving quality and incentives to accomplish these ends. There are another 15 states involved with other Star rating programs for early childhood centers. These kinds of quality improvement efforts are mere tools to use with our programs. If we match our call

to serve the least of God's children with the call to serve God with the highest quality at our disposal the Mennonite Church could be known around the world as the leaders in early childhood education, just as we are known for relief and service and disaster response.

The new children, the families, the staff and their professional development, the congregation and the neighbors, both near and far, are some of the things that fill the life of an early childhood education center and keep it a living and vibrant environment. These relationships and ideas need to be tended and nourished so that the "waters" of the center can be healthy and life giving.

It is clear that we can't fix all of the problems that children have in this world or address all of the needs of the children in our care, but we can be faithful to the task that we have been given. Our job must be to provide the best quality care possible for our children that we are capable of and committing to improving at every step.