

# the carole robertson center for learning

Chicago, IL

## Overview

In 1976, a group of concerned parents and residents on Chicago's west side came together to establish a center to provide after-school programming for neighborhood children. What evolved was the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, a multicultural, nonprofit partnership among parents, youths, and the community. The center is dedicated to nurturing, supporting, and strengthening family life through quality child, youth, and family development programs. Named in memory of Carole Robertson, one of the four girls killed in the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing, the center is committed to racial unity and respect and justice for everyone.

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning actively involves the entire family, supporting healthy family functioning and stable home environments. Its approach to child abuse and neglect is preventive in nature, with a strong emphasis on parenting education, support for parents, and comprehensive social services. The center offers families a wide range of on-site social services, health-related activities, education, and social and recreational outlets, as well as referrals for more intensive or specialized services.

Programs serve children from the age of six weeks through high school, their families, and other adults in the community. The center has a site in each of three urban neighborhoods—North Lawndale, Little Village, and the Near West Side—that rank high in their

## Profile

### Staffing

Total: 190

### Children & Families Served

- Infant-Toddler Development Program: 140
- Head Start: 34
- Preschool: 220
- Home-based Childcare (0-5): 60
- School-Age Program: 225
- Youth Program: 150
- Adult Learning Institute: 120

### Budget

Total: \$9 million

### Per Child

- Infant Toddler Development Program: \$19,343
- Head Start & Preschool: \$8,845
- School-Age Program: \$4,080
- Youth Program: \$2,030
- Family Childcare Home Network: \$9,612

concentration of impoverished families, face multiple challenges, and have few economic resources and social supports. Families served by the center earn 40% or less of the Illinois median family income. Of all families served, 63% are at or below the federal poverty line; however, 90% of families served are working, most of them full-time. Of all children served, 73% live in female-headed, single-parent households.

## How the Program Builds Protective Factors

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning builds five key protective factors that reduce child abuse and neglect. Programs, services, and characteristics contributing to each protective factor are listed below:

### Parental Resilience

- Access to Social Services
- Adult Education
- Emergency Support
- Family Home Care Network
- Parent-to-Parent Mentoring
- Parent Participation in Decision Making
- Social and Stress-Relief Activities
- Strengthening Multiethnic Families and Committees

### Social Connections

- Adult Learning Institute
- Volunteering
- Parent-to-Parent Mentoring
- Play for Peace
- Social and Stress-Relief Activities
- Strengthening Multiethnic Families and Communities

### Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Adult Education
- Adult Learning Institute
- Annual Staffing
- Family Arts Activities
- Family Literacy Activities

### Services Provided On-Site

- Developmental screenings
- ESL classes
- Family field trips
- GED classes
- Health care counseling
- Life skills workshops
- Literacy materials
- Parenting education classes
- Referrals to social services
- Social and self-esteem–building activities

### Partners

- Anti-Defamation League
- Chicago Children’s Museum
- Chicago Symphony Orchestra
- Day Care Action Council of Illinois
- Harold Washington College
- Malcolm X College
- Old Town School of Folk Music
- Ravinia Festival
- Shedd Aquarium
- A Sporting Chance Foundation
- Umoja Student Development Corp.

### Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Staff are trained on indicators and warning signs and to observe kids in the classroom and listen to what they say.
- Social service workers conduct regular classroom observations.
- Regular health checks are conducted in classrooms.
- Special outreach is done to families with:
  - Children with special needs
  - Multiple children in the home

- Health-related Services
- Learning Baskets
- Lending Library

## Volunteering

### Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Adult Education
- Emergency Support
- Family Home Care Network
- Family Literacy Activities
- Health-related Services
- Intake Process
- Real Benefits
- Social Services

### Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Creative Curriculum
- Family Arts Activities
- Family Home Care Network
- Good Touch/Bad Touch Workshops
- Group Activities
- Head Start
- Infant-Toddler Development Program
- Intake Process
- Play for Peace
- Preschool
- Social and Stress-Relief Activities

## Key Program Features

### Adult Education

The Carole Robertson Center for Learning is committed to creating opportunities for advancement within the community. On-site, the center provides basic adult literacy, GED, and ESL classes; college classes; academic support and mentoring; and a learning lab.

Parents wishing to learn about child development in-depth can take free college-credit classes at the center

- Multiple stressors
- Few outside supports
- Irregular attendance

### Response Protocol

If a staff member is concerned about a family, he or she:

- Observes the child
- Talks to the parents
- Fills out a “concern sheet”
- Submits sheet to immediate supervisor and Center’s social services department
- Calls together classroom and social service staff

Staff then:

- Decide on classroom response
- Bring parents in to talk about what is happening in home
- If parents seem overwhelmed, conduct orientation session on stress, make efforts to emphasize strengths of child, and hold de-stressing sessions for parents
- For children with challenging behavior and other special needs, provide play therapy through Catholic Charities and/or occupational or speech therapy through Pediatric Potentials (which places a toddler advocate on-site at the center)

If staff suspect child abuse or neglect:

- Staff member fills out concern sheet, submits to immediate supervisor and the center’s social service department, and continues to observe child
- Member of center’s social service department observes child in classroom

on evenings and weekends; childcare is provided. The classes are offered through Harold Washington College and the Erikson Institute. They promote career mobility, thus supporting economic self-sufficiency for families as well as personal and professional development.

### Adult Learning Institute

Parent workshops are offered on a regular basis and include instruction, group activities, individual reflection, and time for parents to solve problems together. The center's staff and visiting presenters lead child development workshops on the types and stages of development, appropriate behavior for each stage, major developmental milestones, age-appropriate activities for children, building literacy, and ways to foster healthy development. Other workshops cover basic parenting techniques, abuse and neglect, anger management, positive discipline, coping with stress, communication, and talking with children about difficult issues such as "stranger danger," good touch/bad touch (training is provided to children as well), puberty, violence, illness, death, and sexuality.

Additional education sessions provide information on social services, health, and safety. Topics include domestic violence, substance abuse, nutrition, cold and flu prevention, asthma, diabetes, depression, ADD/ADHD, fire safety, family exercise, kitchen and food safety, car and bike safety, and household safety. Training series are offered throughout the year using specialized curricula such as *Plain Talk* and *Strengthening Multiethnic Families and Communities*.

### Annual Staffing

Once each year, the parents of each child have an opportunity to meet with the child's teacher, program coordinator, and social service worker. At this "staffing," they discuss the child's strengths, future goals for the child, techniques for working with the child, and services that may be helpful. Staff convey positive messages to every parent about his or her

- Member of center's social service department contacts parent and asks about incident
- Staff ask parent to come to center
- Staff explain reporting process
- Staff call to report with parent in room, providing a balanced account that includes the family's strengths and relationship with program
- Staff serve as advocates and coaches, helping families understand how to respond to investigation

A staff member formerly was a caseworker with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and uses that experience to help the center advocate.

### Staff Resources

When staff are concerned about a family, they can get support and information from:

- Therapist in classroom for children with special needs
- Mentors (for new classroom staff)
- Veteran staff and training specialists, who model best practices
- Social service team that conducts observations
- Therapists in classroom working with children and teachers

Parents, teachers, social service staff, and supervisors meet about each child to discuss how to promote development.

### What People Say

"I have three children with very complex special needs. Before I came here, my kids were kicked out

child, involve the parent in his or her child's development and assessment, and promote positive behavior management.

## Arts

The center has strong partnerships with local arts organizations, allowing it to provide creative programs that promote children's social and emotional development and engage parents. When children engage in creating art in various forms, they learn healthy ways of exploring and channeling their emotions.

The center's two music teachers are provided by the Old Town School of Folk Music. They work with teachers to integrate musical activities into the classroom, give music classes to children and families (Wiggleworms for infants and toddlers and Making Music with Families for those with children 3 to 5), and meet with parents to help them use music at home to help with transitions and the sharing of feelings.

Through partnerships with the Shedd Aquarium and the Chicago Children's Museum, families take free monthly field trips and receive passes for museum admission and meals. Partnerships with the Ravinia Festival and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra provide opportunities for families to attend concerts, and the orchestra sends ensembles to play at the center. A partnership with the local public library has brought librarians to each site to help create a lending library.

## Emergency Support

The center makes clothing, food, household items, furniture, children's clothes, baby furniture and equipment, and family assistance funds available to those in need. Referrals are made when needs exceed the center's capacity to help.

of a for-profit childcare. Staff assured me that it wouldn't happen here. They worked with me to help me learn how to work with my kids. They learned how to operate all of the special equipment my children need. They have written grants to ensure that they have the resources on-site to care for my kids. I would not be working today if it were not for this program."

—Parent

"Our resource and referral policy can be summed up by the phrase *no blind dates*. We refer families to people we know will treat them well."

—Gail Nelson,

Executive Director

## Family Home Care Network

Because many families prefer home-based childcare, in 1998, the Carole Robertson Center for Learning launched a Family Home Care Network that supports licensed and license-exempt home care providers in the community who provide care for children up to age 5. Center staff provide the 17 providers (who care for a total of 60 children) with monthly training sessions on issues such as child development, business planning, health and safety, publishing, writing grant proposals, and licensing. Providers also participate in networking dinners, quarterly family activities, and initiatives such as the *Learning Basket* pilot. They are encouraged and supported in getting a Child Development Associate's (CDA) degree and are eligible for the center's free on-site college courses in child development. The Family Childcare Director visits providers in their homes once a week to build skills and provide oversight and support. The center also hosts monthly meetings for parents of children who receive care through the network. There is a waiting list of both families and providers.

The center also supports area childcare providers through a partnership with the Day Care Action Council of Illinois. Center-based, home-based, license-exempt, and kith-and-kin providers may participate in any one of the council's 50 trainings per quarter or may enroll in the CDA program. Those working on the CDA get support filling out their paperwork, receive preparatory home visits, and are provided with to peer support. There are currently 100 providers on the waiting list for this program.

## Health-related Services

At any time, parents can request a family conference with the center's Family Health Specialist to discuss the illness of a child or other family member, common risk factors, and habits and lifestyles; to get referrals to local health care providers, including specialists with whom the center partners; and to gain support. The center's health services are holistic, including mental health and dental care. Regular health education

promotes healthy lifestyles, prevents illness and injury, and fosters relationships with primary care physicians.

Each month, a campaign on a health or safety topic presents information at an age-appropriate level to children and parents. Topics have included nutrition, asthma, heart-healthy lifestyles, car safety, family exercise, diabetes, cold and flu prevention, and playground safety.

When a child participating in the center's programs becomes ill or is involved in an accident, staff call a parent immediately. The parent decides whether the child needs to go home immediately or can stay. Staff also provide the parent with a sheet explaining how the illness was contracted (if known) or the accident occurred, symptoms, expected duration, recommended treatment, and methods of prevention.

### **Infant-Toddler Development Program, Head Start, & Preschool**

The center provides an Infant-Toddler Development Program, half-day Head Start, and full-day preschool, all of which use the Creative Curriculum. The curriculum emphasizes creativity and exploration in young children, yet incorporates assessments that ensure that children are learning the skills they need to begin school. Facilitated group activities allow children to experience cooperative learning, learn to work together, and resolve problems positively.

### **Intake**

A comprehensive intake process engages parents in their first contact with the center and demonstrates the important role parents play in their children's lives. It provides an opportunity for parents and staff to set goals and a plan for each child's development. Staff complete an in-depth survey with parents, collecting information on the child's strengths and needs, the child's routines and behaviors at home, parenting practices, wishes for the child, the parent's concerns, family and household structure, and the parent's interest in various services available. Staff recognize

that parents know their children best and want to learn as much as they can about each child so that they can forge consistency of care between home and center. The intake process helps staff and families identify and meet child and family needs quickly.

### **Learning Baskets**

Using the Learning Basket curriculum, parents with children ages birth to five gather a set of everyday objects into a basket and then learn how to use them to engage their children in developmentally appropriate activities. Classroom staff lead children in some Learning Basket activities; children then take the baskets home, where they continue activities with their parents. The program helps parents understand the importance of interactions with their children and seize “teachable moments” each day. It emphasizes the unique ways in which young children learn and communicate through play and provides a firm foundation of knowledge in child development.

The curriculum was designed for programs that focus on parenting education. The center is part of a pilot using center-based childcare staff as parenting education intermediaries, to engage parents who have limited time.

### **Lending Library**

The program lends families children’s books; books, videotapes, and other materials on parenting; toys; and activities for parents and children to engage in together at home. These resources help parents work through specific parenting issues at home, facilitate parent-child interactions that promote learning, and give families access to resources they may not be able to afford. Video- and audiotapes and other materials provide important information to parents with limited literacy, and materials are provided in the primary languages that parents in the program speak.

## Literacy

Numerous programs provide parents with tools and resources to foster their children's literacy development. In addition to monthly literacy breakfasts, family resource lending libraries, computer labs, and quarterly distribution of books to families, each family can check out a book bag that includes a children's story book, materials for literacy activities related to the story, an object that matches the story's theme, and a journal. The books are age-appropriate for children up to age 12 and cover a range of themes; many have a cultural focus or are bilingual. A literacy specialist at each of the three sites leads activities with parents and children and trains staff.

## Male Involvement

The center has created an environment that honors and welcomes male nurturers. There are 15 male direct-service staff at the center, and they serve as much-needed positive role models for children, especially those being raised by single mothers.

The center hosts a male appreciation day annually, and a number of social activities are geared toward men. Every quarter, fathers and male caregivers meet for an informal exchange and to build networks. The center makes an effort to involve fathers in intake, screenings, and annual staffing, even when the child's parents are not together.

## Parent-to-Parent Mentoring

Veteran parents mentor newer parents to help them take on leadership roles in the center.

## Parent Participation in Decision Making

The center's by-laws require that constituents make up the majority of the board of directors of the Carole Robertson Center for Learning. As of this writing, 68% of the board is comprised of current or former program participants. The board plans the long-range future of the organization, adopts policies to govern

the organization, evaluates program and organizational effectiveness, and hires and supervises the executive director.

All board members participate in committees—finance, resource development, personnel, program policy, board development, and executive—which report to the board at bi-monthly meetings. Parents can also join program advisory committees or create ad hoc committees on specific issues or projects. Parents of children enrolled in Head Start can also participate in the Head Start Program Advisory Committee.

### **Plain Talk**

Plain Talk is a community-based initiative through which neighborhood groups and residents address issues affecting youths in their communities. Created to address teen pregnancy, the process used in Plain Talk helps adults develop the skills and tools they need to communicate effectively with young people. The curriculum focuses on parents using tools such as television, radio, and music to start discussions on drugs, alcohol, gangs, sex, and other topics. Plain Talk helps parents build relationships of open communication with their kids.

### **Play for Peace**

Started in collaboration with other community childcare centers, Play for Peace uses cooperative games to build community and promote nonviolence across cultures. Youths at the center are certified as Play for Peace trainers; they then facilitate cooperative games among school-age children of different cultures. When kids learn to cooperate, work together, and make friends across cultures, nonviolence and conflict resolution are promoted. The youth facilitators also acquire leadership skills and experience.

## Real Benefits

The center is piloting Real Benefits, an on-line system that helps families access public benefits. When data such as name, social security number, family size, and income are entered, the system responds by generating a list of public programs for which the family may be eligible. It then prints applications for these programs, which, in the future, community members will be able to complete and submit on-line. At this writing, the system can help families apply for food stamps and KidCare (Illinois' Children's Health Insurance Program), but there is a plan to expand it to include the Earned Income Tax Credit; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; and Women, Infants, and Children's assistance.

## Social Services

Classroom staff are often the first to be aware of family emergencies; they share information and concerns with on-site family and social service workers when they see signs that a family might need support. These staff have daily contact with parents and support families in times of need.

Family workers perform intake with parents, which includes carrying out a needs assessment (an asset inventory is being added) and helping to develop a family plan (see *Intake*). This joint planning helps staff and families get to know each other. Family workers keep records on each child and follow up with the family if there are any attendance issues. Family workers also assess each family to determine eligibility for childcare subsidies from the state and federal government.

Social service workers provide one-on-one parent support and short-term counseling on-site. They also play an important role in monitoring children's healthy development. They conduct regular classroom observations of children, perform developmental screenings, provide parents with updates on their children's growth and development, assist with developmental evaluations, offer support for those with special needs, and coordinate on- and off-site

services for children. These services help identify and address developmental delays and special needs to promote healthy development among at-risk populations.

In addition to providing on-site services, social service workers refer parents to collaborating health organizations, counseling and emergency services, youth agencies, and advocacy groups. Families generally follow through on these referrals because staff have earned their trust and confidence, and because staff walk them through the process and advocate for them in other systems when necessary.

### **Social and Stress-Relief Activities**

In 1985, some parents were sitting on a couch at the Carole Robertson Center for Learning—where their children took part in childcare and preschool—talking about how they felt “fat and ugly.” They couldn’t afford to join the YMCA, but they knew there was a gym there at the center, so they approached the director and asked if they could use it once a week. Soon, 30 parents and their 40 kids were participating in informal athletic and arts and crafts activities at the center.

These activities instigated a full program of social and stress-relief events. Parents now plan and carry out activities including dances, craft projects, holiday celebrations, volunteer projects, aerobics classes, volleyball games, multicultural events, and a carnival and an awards banquet each year. They also organize family trips to sporting events, concerts, and plays; bring in speakers to address issues of interest to them; hold weekend camps for adults and for families; and organize spa days, poetry workshops, and other activities. The exercise classes now take place twice weekly.

In 1985, youths said they wanted be having as much fun as their parents were. A comprehensive Youth and Service Learning Program was born, which now serves 150 community teens.

In addition to offering these planned activities, the center brings parents together to meet and get to know each other informally on a day-to-day basis.

### **Staff Development and Training**

In 1998, the Carole Robertson Center for Learning launched a welfare-to-work program that placed community members in positions working with children and families and other jobs at the center. Participants took part in three months of training and six months of paid internship in the center's classrooms. Forty participants gained entry-level, living-wage positions at two new sites opened by the center, and many have earned a CDA or other college credit and received promotions and raises.

Some graduates, however, required additional support to move beyond entry-level employment. The center provides them and other staff a range of supports to help them climb the career ladder, including basic education, GED courses, four college courses annually, a customized CDA credential program, music and art training, first aid and CPR training, tuition reimbursement, and opportunities to attend conferences.

The center provides many career development opportunities that are open to staff and program participants. These include seminars and programs dealing with financial literacy, budgeting, Individual Development Accounts, first-time home buying, tax preparation, legal issues, and tenants' rights. Each staff member has his or her own professional development plan, which is reviewed annually. All classroom staff take part in a monthly training session, and staff working with infants and toddlers receive stipends to participate in weekend trainings regularly.

### **Staff with Specialized Skills**

One staff member is a certified substance abuse counselor and leads education sessions for parents on substance abuse issues. Two staff are trained advocates on domestic violence and work with parents to obtain orders of protection and create safety plans,

attend court with parents, provide referrals for services, and otherwise provide support related to domestic violence. Two staff members have prior experience as child welfare specialists; having worked in the child welfare system, they provide crucial support and information to foster parents and to parents dealing with allegations of abuse and neglect.

### **Strengthening Multiethnic Families and Communities**

These parenting education and support groups, offered at all three center sites, focus on the issues facing multi-ethnic families and communities. Sessions occur twice each week for 13 weeks and focus on understanding and preventing interpersonal, community, and societal violence.

In addition, children, youths, and parents regularly participate in group discussions and projects to address community violence and gangs, and the center has a contract with the Anti-Defamation League to provide diversity training twice annually.

### **Support for Special Needs**

All parents with children who have special needs receive priority placement on the center's waiting list and are encouraged to access the supports their families need upon enrollment in any program. Parents are involved in planning the programs that will support their children's development. They also play active roles in on-site services and therapy, observations and screening, and developing individual family service plans. Through regular check-ins, staff provide parents of children with special needs with support, informal education, literature, and links to other parents with similar concerns. They also model for parents behaviors that help support their children's development.

An infant/toddler advocate provided by the Chicago Public Schools ensures that children with special needs participating in the center get therapeutic supports. Whenever possible, he or she secures on-site therapy and engages the child's regular classroom staff in the therapy sessions. This helps to build the

capacity of classroom staff and ensures that they are mindful of the child's therapeutic needs when planning everyday activities.

### **Volunteering**

Parents are strongly encouraged to volunteer at the center, and most do, in some capacity. Volunteer opportunities include classroom assistance, field trip chaperoning, administrative support, fundraising, special event planning, and facility improvements. Those who volunteer in the classroom are able to learn songs, stories, games, and activities that they can use with their children at home. A number of parents are members of the board of directors and of organizational planning committees. Over 30,000 hours of volunteer time are logged each year.

