

# educare center

Chicago, IL

## Overview

The Educare Center, located in the Grand Boulevard community on Chicago's south side, provides full-day, full-year early education (Head Start), childcare (Early Head Start), and family support. One hundred and fifty-eight children and their families receive individualized care and support through the center's interdisciplinary model. The center has served a large number of families from many different communities living in the Robert Taylor Homes public housing development, which is in the process of closing down (see Challenges).

The Educare Center was developed to create a calm, safe place in which children could learn, play, and grow and in which parents would feel welcome. Its layout is conducive to the individualized care that is essential for healthy development. There are 13 classrooms: seven for children aged 0 to 3 (who total 56), and six for the 3-to-5 age group (totaling 102). Classrooms are clustered around a "village square"—an enclosed courtyard in which children can run and play out of harm's way. Children also develop their large motor skills by playing in the center's two enclosed gymnasiums. Staff and parents take part in training in a large training room, and families visit and talk in a family room.

The Educare Center is a program of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that invests in the healthy development of babies, children, adolescents, and families. The Ounce of Prevention Fund is able to recruit, hire, and train highly skilled staff for the Educare Center in part by combining

## Profile

### Staffing

Total: 64

### Children & Families Served

- Early Head Start: 56
- Head Start: 102
- Home visits: 35

### Budget

\$2.5 million

### Services Provided On-Site

- Developmental screening
- Doula
- Emergency food, diapers, and formula
- Family support
- Medical and mental health and diagnosis
- Parenting education
- Referrals to social services

### Partners

- Erikson Institute
- Virginia Frank Child Development Center
- Hayes Family Health Center

federal, state, and local funding. The organization brings a number of other resources to the Educare Center: Its Kids Public Education and Policy Project advocates for family-supportive policies and assists the center's family support specialists. Research and evaluation personnel staff functions such as program management, evaluation, assessment, and family surveys. Development, communications, human resources, and employee assistance are all provided centrally through the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

In meeting the complex needs of at-risk children and their families, the center calls on the latest child development research and the Ounce of Prevention Fund's 17-plus years of community experience. The Educare Center reflects the organization's longstanding commitment to ensuring that vulnerable young children and their families receive the high-quality, predictable, and continuous care and support they need to be successful later in life.

## How The Program Builds Protective Factors

The Educare Center 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

- Disability Services
- Doula Services
- Family Support Services
- Parent Involvement
- Mental Health Consultation

### Social Connections

- Doula Services
- Parent Involvement
- Safe Havens Training

- Juvenile Protective Association's Parent-Infant Services program

### Response Protocol

If a staff member is concerned about a family:

- Concerned staff member consults supervisor immediately
- Supervisor helps determine next steps, which may include:
  - ✚ Minor concern: raise at next teacher-family support specialist meeting (twice per month in each classroom)
  - ✚ Serious concern: hold case consultation with site manager and other staff
- Staff develop plan including designating person to work with parent
- Staff person reaches out to the family and makes internal or external referrals
- Follow up occurs in case consultation and / or family / child reviews

If staff suspect child abuse or neglect after above steps, site manager contacts VP of direct services, director of grantee operations, and / or family and community partnerships manager to determine if report call will be made to state child welfare department. If so, staff person:

- Calls family and asks them to meet with family support specialist and / or supervisor that day at pick-up time

## Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Doula Services
- Parent Education

## Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Doula Services
- Family Support Services
- Health Services

## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Arts Program
- Disability Services
- Individualized Services
- Language and Early Literacy
- Mental Health Consultation
- Social-Emotional Development

## Key Program Features

### Arts Program

The Early Childhood Arts Initiative engages infants, toddlers, and young children and their families—as well as staff—in developmentally appropriate music and arts experiences. These experiences are valuable opportunities to promote cognitive, social-emotional, and fine and gross motor development among very young children. Professional artists lead weekly classroom-based arts activities, regular small-group music and dance lessons, and monthly live performances.

### Disability Services

The Educare Center provides on-site developmental, occupational, physical, and speech therapy for children who are diagnosed with developmental delays or disabilities. Providing these services in the context of early care and education makes them easily accessible for families with working parents and also ensures that children's developmental needs are met early on.

- Calls department with parent so he or she can participate in developing safety plan and sense staff's commitment to family's protection and safety
- In unusual circumstances, gets technical assistance on anonymous state hotline
- If investigation occurs, remains available to family and works to ensure well-being
- Documents call and plan in confidential family file
- If risk factors continue, closely observes and supports family
- Follows up in case consultation and / or family child / reviews

### Staff Resources

Staff get support in strengthening families through:

- Child abuse and neglect manual including all policies, procedures, protocols, and forms
- Annual training on responsibilities regarding reporting suspected child abuse and neglect
- Support from administrators and supervisors
- Funds for emergencies
- Consultants from relevant disciplines
- Supervisors who "go the extra mile"
- Training and consultation on child welfare system when families are in need

## Doula Services

The Educare Center employs doulas—birthing assistants—who reach out to pregnant teenagers during pregnancy and assist during childbirth. These specially trained, community-based staff provide pregnant teenagers with essential information and emotional support before, during, and after delivery. Many of these teens lack a strong, caring, and trusting relationship with an adult. Doulas help them gain the confidence and information they need to fully nurture, support, and build strong relationships with their newborns.

## Family Support Services

The Educare Center has five family support specialists (one licensed, two with master’s degrees, and two with bachelor’s degrees). Supervised by a master’s-level licensed social worker, these staff provide participating families with counseling, case management, support groups, and referrals. At enrollment, they work with each family to complete a Family Partnership Agreement, helping the family identify its goals, aspirations, strengths, resources, and concerns. Families receive ongoing support from the specialists toward the accomplishment of their goals. For the many families in the community who are struggling with challenges, this support is especially valuable.

## Health Services

In partnership with Cook County Hospital’s Ambulatory and Community Health Network, the Hayes Family Health Center provides early intervention services, diagnostic screenings, and medical care to all qualifying Educare Center participants.

## Individualized Services

Educare Center staff work to meet the individual needs of children and families. Family support specialists each work with a small number of families, to ensure that they have time to develop relationships. And in the classroom, low child-to-staff ratios (8:3 in infant / toddler classrooms and 17:3 in preschool) ensure that teachers have time and resources to individualize learning opportunities. Each

## What People Say

“When we come to the [policy council] meeting, we are prepared to make decisions because we have had an opportunity to talk about issues beforehand.”

—Parent

“*Like* is not the word for how I feel about this program—it’s *love*.”

—Parent

“Parents expect that we will help them identify options and ways of solving problems. That we will empower them to ask for themselves. That we’ll give guidance and respect. That we’ll be good listeners and offer encouragement. That there will be no finger-pointing or judging. That they can ask us anything. That we’re there for the family, not just the child.”

—Family support worker

“Relationships are so important here. It’s not the developmental psychologist or the disabilities coordinator that is going to get the parent to come back and take on a difficult issue; it’s the family support worker or the teacher that sees that parent every day.”

—Staff member

classroom is staffed by three teachers, including one with a bachelor's degree, who are supervised and coached by teachers with master's degrees.

In partnership with parents, teachers, and family support staff, a Child Strength Plan is developed for each child. Staff use these plans to develop classroom activities that respond to the developmental needs of children in each classroom. They also assess children's strengths and needs on an ongoing basis. For infants and toddlers, staff use assessment tools such as Ages and Stages and the Ounce Scale™, developed by the Ounce of Prevention Fund with the president of the Erikson Institute, Sam Meisels, M.D. Staff also use the Social-Emotional Checklist and Early Screening Inventory-Revised (ESI-R) developed by the Ounce of Prevention Fund.

Staff receive ongoing training and mentoring in conducting assessment.

### **Language and Early Literacy**

To promote literacy development, the Educare Center provides a language-rich environment for children and families that includes storytelling, singing, and conversation. Staff use expressive language with very young children and model "school language" for older children. In spring 2003, the Ounce of Prevention Fund, which runs the center, became one of 30 programs nationwide to receive a new Early Reading First grant from the U.S. Department of Education, providing the center with additional resources for hiring staff, providing training, and obtaining resources for its language and early literacy activities.

### **Mental Health Consultation**

The Educare Center provides infant mental health consultation in collaboration with the Virginia Frank Child Development Center and the Juvenile Protective Association's Parent-Infant Services program. Mental health specialists from these partner organizations come

to the center weekly. They meet individually with children who may be experiencing social or emotional difficulties, and provide support and counseling to their parents. They also provide consultation to classroom teachers to develop their knowledge of infant mental health issues.

### **Parent Education**

Educare Center staff host monthly training sessions on topics of interest to parents. Topics have included: child development, child abuse and neglect, social-emotional developmental milestones, preventative health, first aid, lead poisoning, magnet schools, résumé writing, and parent leadership. All of these sessions provide parents with the opportunity to explore and internalize information with a depth that is not possible during day-to-day interactions with staff.

The Educare Center is located in a community in which child abuse and neglect are reported frequently, many families have become involved in the child welfare system, and many families find that system bewildering and threatening. The Educare Center provides parents with training sessions on child abuse and neglect that help them understand the system, reporting mandates, and the definitions of abuse and neglect and prepare them to detect child abuse and neglect in the community. Parents have appreciated the training and have requested more.

### **Parent Involvement**

The Educare Center offers many opportunities for parents to become involved through Head Start and Early Head Start decision-making bodies, training, and family activities.

The policy council, which meets once each month, provides a way for parents to be involved in developing program plans and policies, hiring and dismissing staff, and governance. In addition, parents are encouraged to participate in parent committee meetings to discuss classroom activities and program curricula, among other things.

Parents are also invited to volunteer in the classroom and to participate in activities such as art projects, family field trips, and literacy activities. The leader of the arts program provides art lessons to parents and grandparents, and parents also attend performances and plays made possible through the donation of tickets.

### **Safe Havens Training**

Safe Havens training helps the Educare Center address the high level of violence in its community. The Safe Havens curriculum was specially designed for early care and education providers working with young children who have been exposed to violence either at home or in the community. Through the training, teachers become skilled in talking with children about violence, dealing with children's responses to violence, and helping children who have witnessed violence feel safe again.

### **Social-Emotional Development**

Nurturing a child's emotional development in the early years is essential for promoting overall development and later school-readiness. Educare Center staff work in partnership with parents to create an environment at the center and at home that optimally supports children's emotional development. The founders of the center created a "continuity-of-care" model that, unlike traditional childcare centers, allows each child to remain with the same caregiver and peer group from the time he or she enters the program until age 3. This practice reduces children's stress and promotes continuity across developmental stages. In mixed-age classrooms, children of various ages from 0 to 3 are in the same classroom. In same-age classrooms, children are grouped by age. Each model presents unique opportunities and challenges with regard to staff training and development as well as administrative and classroom logistics.

## Staff Training and Development

The Educare Center promotes quality in its programs by promoting quality in its staff. It blends funding streams to pay competitive salaries, thereby attracting staff with relevant knowledge and skills. It also devotes significant resources to ongoing formal training as well as informal coaching and mentoring on topics related to child development and family support. These include early detection of developmental delays, recognition of child abuse and neglect, language development and literacy, observation and assessment, and integrating the arts into curricula. Training expands the staff's understanding of sound principles of early childhood and fosters the incorporation of these principles into their work with children and families.

Additionally, staff engage in "reflective supervision": At a regularly scheduled session, each staff person meets with his or her supervisor or another staff person. This gives staff a chance to step back from their work, sort through their thoughts and feelings, and call on a partner to help make some of the tough decisions required by their challenging work. Reflective supervision also helps promote professional development.

## Challenges

### Changing Community Demographics

The Robert Taylor Homes, the public housing community surrounding the Educare Center, is in the process of being torn down and may be replaced with mixed-income housing. Many families in the neighborhood, including those who bring their children to the center, are being forced to relocate. The relocation will take some families many miles away and challenges the center's outreach efforts. Plans include expanding to adjacent communities that have a great need for childcare.

## Teen Parenting Support

The Educare Center's support groups for teen parents, provided through Early Head Start, have supported and strengthened vulnerable families headed by teen parents, but many more groups are needed.

## Transition from Center to School

The transition from the Educare Center to elementary school is difficult for children, families, and staff. As families relocate out of the Robert Taylor Homes, they enter many different elementary schools. Staff feel that developing partnerships with some schools would help ease children's transition to kindergarten and elementary school.

## Underlying Social and Economic Issues

As a result of welfare reform and changes in the Grand Boulevard community, parents are no longer able to provide full-day care for their children. More parents are either in school or working, which makes it difficult to schedule meetings, support groups, and family activities. Staff seek to address each family's social and economic challenges to better promote children's development.