

fairfax—san anselmo children’s center

Fairfax, CA

Overview

Fairfax—San Anselmo Children’s Center is a family-centered agency that accentuates parent involvement. The center provides child care, preschool, and before- and after-school care for children up to age 10. The center considers families—not just children—to be participants, and staff connect with families through activities that reduce isolation and provide individualized support. Children attend a minimum of four days each week, so the program is a consistent part of their families’ lives.

Of participating families, 51% are Hispanic, 32% are white, 8% are African American, 7% are multi-racial, and 2% are Asian. The majority of Asian and Hispanic families are immigrants and have few economic resources or social supports. The center’s activities help children learn to value differences and relate to a world beyond themselves and their families.

The center’s programs actively involve the entire family. The center’s approach to child abuse and neglect is preventive in nature, with an emphasis on parental education and support and links to comprehensive social services.

The majority of families served by the Fairfax—San Anselmo Children’s Center are at or below the federal poverty line, and all are rated as having “very low incomes” according to HUD Income Guidelines. Of

Profile

Staffing

Total: 47 (37 female, 10 male)

Children & Families Served

Total: 145

Budget

Total: \$1,375,415

Per Child: \$8,965

Services Provided On-Site

- Before- and after-school care
- Child care
- Child development information
- Counseling
- Early- and late-hour care
- Family advocacy
- Family support
- Information and referrals
- Male involvement
- Parent education
- Preschool
- Respite care
- Sick-child care
- Social services

the children’s primary caregivers, 88% qualify for childcare subsidies because they have low incomes but are employed. Of all participating children, 73% live in single-parent households.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Fairfax–San Anselmo Children’s 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

- Parent Governance
- Respite Child Care
- Social Events
- Strong Parent-Staff Relationships
- Voluntary and Paid Positions

Social Connections

- Camping Trips
- Group Activities and Discussions
- Parent Meetings
- Social Events

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Mental Health Consultation
- Parent Services Project Model
- Parenting Education Classes
- Take-Home Materials for Parents

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Daily Check-ins
- Emergency Fund
- Job and Life Skills Classes
- Resource Referrals
- Respite Child Care
- Strong Parent-Staff Relationships

- Special-needs child care
- Transportation
- Women’s group

Partners

- Anti-Violence Group fellow-members
- Early Childhood Mental Health Project
- Health Linkages Quality Consortium
- Jewish Community Center
- Parent Services Project
- Police department
- Other community organizations

Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Staff are trained to recognize indicators and warning signs
- Mental health consultant conducts weekly classroom observations
- Staff inform administrators when they suspect neglect or abuse; administrators and staff discuss with parents before making a formal report
- Close relationships with parents help staff offer them suggestions

Staff Resources

Staff receive the following supports in working with issues of child abuse and neglect:

- Regular support and education
- Training in recognizing early warning signs
- Cultural responsiveness training
- Institutionalized ways of building relationships with families
- Annual two-day retreat and training

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Group Activities
- Long-Time Enrollment
- Mental Health Observation
- Social-Emotional Development Curriculum
- Special-Needs Support
- Strong Parent-Staff Relationships

Key Program Features

Adherence to Mission

A carefully developed written mission statement articulates the roles of staff and families in the program and the kind of community the program intends to develop and sustain. The principles described in this statement are enacted in every aspect of the program. Both staff and families refer to the mission statement as a touchstone for their work together.

Early Intervention

Staff members talk with parents at the first indication of risk of abuse or neglect, long before the need for filing any formal allegations. By first working with parents and building on pre-established trust, staff members assist parents before neglect or abuse is a problem.

Father Involvement

The center emphasizes the role fathers play in their children's lives. The monthly men's breakfast is attended by all men who are involved in the lives of children who participate in center programs. The fathers and children eat together, and then the men do work around the center, have discussions, or plan activities such as the center's annual camping trip. In discussions, the center uses the Becoming a Father curriculum written by the director, Stan Seiderman. The center has eight to nine male staff, who act as

- Each staff member can attend the conference of his or her choice each year
- On-site trainings
- Weekly lead-teacher and team meetings

Policies that Promote Child Well-Being

- Conduct background checks on all employees
- Match children with caregivers who work well with them
- Match jobs to skills of employees
- Encourage staff to take breaks and be honest about stress levels and feelings toward children
- Constant vigilance by all staff members

Credentials

The center holds licenses from or is accredited by:

- California Department of Education—Child Development Division
- California Department of Social Services—Community Child Care
- National Association for the Education of Young Children

Evaluation

A three-year evaluation by Philliber Research Associates found improvements in:

- Parenting skills
- Social support
- Adult employment
- Child development

positive role models to the children and make fathers feel more comfortable at the center. Single mothers are particularly grateful to the male role models their children see at the center.

Inclusive Recognition of Parents

All of a child's caregivers, whether they are biological parents or not, are recognized as the "parents" of the child and can receive support and participate in parenting education and other programs. This includes foster families as well as fathers who do not have custody of their children or do not live with the children's mothers.

Job and Life Skills Classes

These classes and workshops, offered regularly, cover English as a second language, beginning computer skills, home ownership, money management, and other job and life skills. The classes and workshops are based on parent input. Childcare and food are provided.

Mental Health Consultation and Observation

A mental health consultant visits the program weekly to talk with parents and staff about child development issues and individual concerns. The consultant conducts weekly observations of children in the classrooms.

Parent Feedback

Twice each year, parents meet with their children's teachers and other staff members to discuss their children's strengths, goals for their children, and services the family might need. These meetings convey positive messages to all parents about their children, involve parents in promoting and assessing their children's development, and promote positive behavior management. The meetings also give the parent an opportunity to provide feedback and voice

What People Say

"We have many opportunities to contribute. They make you believe in giving back."

—Parent

"I don't have to be strong here. ... I can cry here. My daughter can cry here."

—Parent of child with special needs

"They make us feel so important!"

—Parent

"It's like a family here."

—Staff member

any concerns about the program. Additional meetings throughout the year are scheduled at the request of either parents or staff.

Directors meet formally with families twice each year to discuss their educational or job goals and to get updates on the family. Directors are also readily available every day for informal conversation. Once each month, directors greet parents with a morning snack, flyers, and information about upcoming events as well as offering parents a chance to give feedback.

Parents also have input into the program in their capacity as volunteers and as employees.

Parent Governance

The center is committed to and has thrived under parent governance; 51% of the center's board of directors is comprised of parents. Alumni parents are included in the remaining 49%. The board provides the center with leadership and direction. It plans the center's long-range future, adopts policies to govern its affairs, evaluates program and organizational effectiveness, and hires and supervises qualified co-directors. Parents also take part in the Parents In Action Committee, which plans events and activities for the center.

Beyond the board, the center strives to create a climate of involvement in which parents participate in decisions affecting their children.

Parent Services Project Model

The program operates according to the model created by the Parent Services Project, which emphasizes that parents are the first and most important teachers in their children's lives and that staff are there to support parents in that role. The model emphasizes parent involvement, building respectful relationships with families, and lending support to families on a variety of levels. Parents are expected to assume major roles in identifying problems that affect their children and devising solutions to them. Staff work side-by-side with families

to accomplish their goals.

The Parent Services Project model is characterized by:

Strong Parent-Staff Relationships

- The relationships between staff and families are long-lasting and close. The strong relationships developed in classrooms and on an informal basis help parents feel safe requesting and accepting assistance from staff. Staff members show sensitivity toward parents. For example, it is standard practice to not tell parents when a child has taken his or first steps, if this has occurred at the center; this allows parents to experience this “first” at home.
- Staff and parents testify readily to the strength of these relationships: One staff member was “honored” to be asked to care for older children while a parent was giving birth. When a three year-old’s mother had died and left no other relatives, a staff member worked with the foster parents and caseworkers to find the right adoptive family. Staff have served as foster parents for children while their parents were in substance abuse treatment.

Persistence and Patience

Staff adopt a “never give up” attitude. Staff worked with one mother for more than six years as she struggled with a series of difficulties including mental illness and substance abuse. Their role in supporting her child included attending teacher conferences at school and working with school personnel to create an appropriate plan for both mother and child.

Parenting Education Classes

Parenting education classes provide opportunities for parents to learn more about parenting and child development. They occur on a regular basis and include instruction, group activities and discussions, and time for parents to solve problems and share

concerns together. Classes provide information about basic parenting techniques, abuse and neglect, anger management, positive discipline, coping with stress, and talking with children about a range of issues, including strangers, good touch/bad touch, violence, illness, death, and human sexuality. A parent who pursued her college education and master's degree while participating in the center's programs is now a social worker; she teaches a class at the center based on the Catch Them Being Good curriculum.

In addition to conducting parenting education through classes, staff in each classroom distribute age-appropriate take-home materials for parents that build parents' knowledge and skills and give them more ways to interact with their children.

Resource Referrals

Comprehensive social services are available through a network of referrals. These services include one-on-one parent sessions with a mental health consultant, community referrals, short-term intervention and counseling, and coordination of services for children. Staff members have developed trusting relationships with families that enable them to guide families to seek and continue to use needed services. On-site, parents and children can engage in play therapy, counseling, and developmental screening and can sign up for health insurance.

Resources to Support Basic Needs

The center is well connected to community resources and has an emergency fund to assist families with custody costs, food, rent, etc. Through regular donations, the center offers families clothing, food, household items and furniture, and cash assistance. The center works with families to enroll their children in Healthy Families, a low-cost medical insurance plan.

The center also provides transportation to deliver children home from school and provides extended hours for parents who work hours other than 8 am to 5 pm. Staff go far beyond their job descriptions to help parents get to work on time.

The center offers regularly scheduled respite *childcare* to allow parents time to take care of personal business or just be alone. Staff also conduct daily check-ins with at-risk or in-need families.

Sick-Child Care

Children who are sick are usually not allowed to attend programs; however, the center’s Get Well Room provides a place for children who are sick to receive childcare. This enables parents to maintain a routine and not miss work.

Social and Emotional Development of Children

A social-emotional development curriculum is at the center of the childcare, preschool, and before- and after-school programs. These programs include group activities that allow children to experience cooperative learning, learn to work together, and experience positive problem resolution. Children’s long-term enrollment (programs serve children up to age 10) also encourages their development of social and emotional competence.

Social Events

The monthly Potluck Plus brings families together for dinner and a speech by an invited speaker, game, or other activity. Special activities such as the annual Father’s Day picnic and camping trips also provide opportunities for families to mingle. Parents take a leadership role in organizing and implementing most of the center activities.

In addition, parents of children in each program—childcare, preschool, and before- and after-school care—have *parent meetings* twice each year, allowing them to build social connections with each other.

Special-Needs Support

Of all children participating in the center’s programs, 11 percent have been assessed as having special needs. All children are accepted at the center; none are excluded. Staff members meet regularly with the

families of children with special needs and link them with necessary resources outside of the program. On-site, staff provide screening, informal education, and modeling of positive behaviors to support families with special-needs children. Whenever possible, additional help is provided to enable children with special needs to take part in a variety of center activities.

The center recognizes how difficult it is for families to accept that their children need special care. Screenings are conducted on-site to provide the most comfortable setting for both parents and children.

Staff Capacities and Retention

The former executive director and the founder have been involved in the center for many years. Both have made contributions to innovative curricula, including the nationally known Parent Services Project. Their knowledge of the community and of parenting issues is an important source of support for parents and teachers.

The center maintains a stable workforce and limits staff turnover. Many staff members have been there for many years, including the current co-directors. Many staff are parents of children who have attended the center.