

An Orientation “Encyclopedia” for Children and Families

Donna King is the founding teacher of Children First, a small nonprofit part-day preschool in Durham, NC. Throughout the program’s 28-year history, it has focused on helping children develop into confident and expressive individuals who are also caring and responsible participants in the community. Programming is based on the belief that young children should spend their days deeply engaged in play with each other and with materials, and that they thrive when a lot of that play happens outdoors in nature.

CHALLENGE

Our program is small—12 children and their families with two teachers—and we know it takes a collective effort to provide quality care and education. We make sure families understand that their engagement is an essential part of every family’s experience here. We explain that we give a lot and will need them to give a lot, too. As explained on our website, “Every child’s ‘program’ at Children First is different, because it grows out of the families’ and teachers’ shared understanding of the child’s strengths, challenges, and potential. That understanding grows and evolves as families and teachers communicate about their observations, their theories, and especially their feelings and hopes for the child.”

STRATEGY

Our comprehensive orientation begins when families first show interest in Children First and continues through the first day of attendance. In April of each year, children are accepted for the next school year. For each new family, we create a Welcome Book, a print and photo-illustrated “encyclopedia” of Children First. Current children help create the books, and new children and families have all summer to explore the contents together. We also ask continuing families to buddy up with a new family for a playdate so the child will begin the year with a friend. In August we hold individual meetings with incoming families. One teacher sits with family members as they share what they want us to know about their child, while the other teacher explores the environment with the child. During these meetings we also “walk” the family through the morning routine so they are prepared for their child’s first day.

RESULTS

Families who enroll their children in our program understand our goals and our strategies for achieving them. They know we will spend a lot of time outdoors, that their children will tackle challenges and take physical risks, and that their children will do a lot of thinking, wondering, and theorizing. When their children come home a little dirty and filled with interesting, engaging experiences, families are not surprised because their orientation prepared them for these outcomes.

UPDATE

Our careful and structured orientation continues, with adjustments made as we learn more about what’s effective. Before family conferences in October, we invite new families to reflect on their orientation experience and make suggestions. When we start the new Welcome Books in the spring, we again invite families to share: “What do you wish you had known before you started at Children First?” Those responses get incorporated into the FAQ document we share with next year’s incoming families.