

# fort belvoir child development programs

Fort Belvoir, VA

## Overview

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs are part of a system of services for families connected to Fort Belvoir Army installation. The programs serve those on active duty, reservists, and civilian employees and contractors of the U. S. Department of Defense. The Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs' mission is to support military readiness by reducing the conflict between parental responsibilities and military requirements. The programs increase soldier satisfaction with the Army as a way of life and contribute to families' quality of life and wellbeing. To achieve these goals, they stress each child's development and support the child's primary relationship with his or her parent(s). The curriculum strengthens bonds and attachments within families while respecting families' cultures.

The Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs offer childcare and child development to suit families' needs and schedules, including:

- Full-day, part-day, and hourly programs
- Care during a parent's work shift
- Extended care
- Respite care
- Military contingency-related care

## Profile

### Staffing

- Child development teachers
- Family childcare providers
- School-age program counselors
- Trainers
- Program directors
- Administrative / clerical

### Children & Families Served

- Infants and toddlers: 213
- Preschoolers: 330
- 6- to 10-year-olds: 144
- Total: 687

### Budget

\$2.94 million

### Services Provided On-Site

- Child abuse prevention, reporting, & response
- Parent Advisory Council
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Parenting classes
- Resource library

Eighty percent (550) of participating children are 4 weeks to 5 years old. Of families participating, 51% earn less than \$50,000 per year, and 25% earn less than \$24,000. Forty-four percent are Caucasian, 42% are African American, 10% are Hispanic, 3% are Asian, and 1% are of other ethnic backgrounds.

According to the National Women's Law Center, a family's best chance of getting guaranteed, affordable, high-quality childcare is to join the military. In 1997, the President declared Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs a model for nationwide childcare reform.

## How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs build five key protective factors that reduce child abuse and neglect. Programs, services, and characteristics contributing to each protective factor are listed below:

### Parental Resilience

- Communication with Parents
- Developmental Plans
- Family Advocacy
- Parent Advisory Council
- Parent Surveys
- Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Resource Referral
- Social Activities
- Support Groups

### Social Connections

- Community Crisis Management Team
- Family Advocacy
- Parent Advisory Council
- Parent Orientation
- Parenting and Relationship Classes
- Resource Referral

- Resource and referral
- Special-needs services
- Web pages, e-mails, and newsletters

### Partners

- Army Community Service
- Army Family Advocacy Program
- Army Social Work Services
- Dewitt Army Hospital
- Fairfax County Office for Children
- Fort Belvoir Counseling Center
- Local agencies (various)
- Military Exceptional Family Member Program

### Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Observation of parent, child, and interaction between them
- Injury with inadequate or conflicting explanations
- Frequent late pick-ups, late or unpaid fees, or shortness with staff
- Sudden changes in child's behavior

### Response Protocol

If staff are concerned about a family:

- Staff share concerns with parent (except re: abuse or neglect; see below)
- If concerns persist, staff go to management
- Trainers may observe child for consistency with developmental norms and make recommendations

- Social Activities
- Support Groups

### Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Communication with Parents
- Family Team Building
- Parent-Child Projects
- Parent-Teacher Conferences
- Parenting and Relationship Classes
- Resource Library
- Resource Referral
- Support Groups

### Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Chaplain Outreach and Counseling
- Childcare Assistance
- Childcare and Development Programs
- Child Risk Prevention and Management
- Community Crisis Management Team
- Counseling
- Employment Readiness
- Family Advocacy
- Financial Readiness
- Military Contingency-Related Care
- Military Deployment & Relocation Readiness
- Resource Referral
- Respite Childcare
- School Transition Services
- Special Needs Services
- Support Groups

### Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Childcare and Development Programs
- Developmental Plans
- Early Childhood Trainers

- Parents are referred to assistance through Child Find, Fairfax County Office for Children, or a developmental pediatrician

Signs of abuse and neglect indicate families in need of support. Staff receive annual training on swift, appropriate reporting of concerns.

**If staff suspect child abuse or neglect:**

- Care provider reports to Army Social Work Services and to supervisor
- Army Social Work Services contacts county child protective services within 24 hours
- County conducts assessment including home visit and draws conclusions
- Army Social Work Services Case Review Committee draws conclusions from above plus research conducted with county
- Army regional or multidisciplinary Dept. of Defense Family Advocacy Command Assistance Team responds

### Key Elements

- Community crisis management team
- Developmental Program Plan
- Individual Development Plan
- Newcomer orientation
- Parent orientation
- Social activities
- Standardized staff training
- Training linked to compensation

## Key Program Features

### Childcare and Development Programs

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs meet the needs of families connected to the military through:

- Two Child Development Centers providing care to 492 children ages 6 weeks through Kindergarten. These centers are certified by the U. S. Dept. of Defense, which is equivalent to being licensed by a state agency. They are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). There is a waiting list for enrollment.
- School Age Services serving 280 children in first through fifth grade. These are accredited by the National School-Age Care Alliance and include after-school and weekend programs, school liaison services, services for families providing home schooling, 4-H, and Boys and Girls Clubs of America.
- Family Childcare for 240 children from 4 weeks old through fifth grade in 35 certified homes. Home childcare providers are offered the same training as center-based staff, with the same benefits and supervision. There is a waiting list for participation.

In addition, weekly play mornings are provided, enabling all families as well as children in family childcare to play together.

National accreditation of these programs is required by the Military Childcare Act. The programs provide full-day, part-day, and hourly care as well as options for children with special needs, mildly ill children, respite care, and after-hours and weekend care. Programs accommodate families during shift work or extended duty and provide military contingency-related care.

### Communication with Families

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs have an extensive web site that outlines all of the programs and describes their philosophies and policies. It also includes web pages created by teens and links to school-age youth programs at Fort Belvoir. The Child

## What People Say

"I like that they respond to the special needs of the military family; they really take that into account."  
—Parent

"Pre-K 3 is great. The kids are doing a lot of activities, including a packet of crafts to do at home with direction from the parents."  
—Parent

"I have a very good relationship with the teacher of my daughter. She is so nice. She even gave my daughter a feeling of being special on her birthday."  
—Parent

"I like that they call me when my child falls or something happens, even if he is okay, so I know in advance that something happened."  
—Parent

"Because my child is an infant, we get daily written reports, including first words and even a photo album."  
—Parent

"I like the Army day care system; I especially like the security they offer."  
—Parent

Development Center teachers also provide newsletters to parents via paper and e-mail, which provide parents with general information about their classrooms, the program, current affairs, and information on child development and parenting issues.

### **Community Crisis Management Team**

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs are members of the community crisis management team that convenes when there is a crisis on the installation. This multidisciplinary team is comprised of chaplains, family advocacy staff, Army Community Service staff, military police, and other community members who may need to assist or be aware of the crisis. This team effort is effective in ensuring that all areas are covered and that all people needing assistance and services receive them.

### **Development Plans**

Two types of development plans are created and revised by Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs annually:

- An Individual Development Plan for each child is developed by staff and the family, who work together to set goals and objectives that promote the child's social and emotional development. Information is gathered through observation and communication with the child and family. The plan is responsive to the needs and culture of the child and family.
- A Developmental Program Plan for each group or classroom of children assists staff in meeting the goals and objectives outlined by NAEYC and the U. S. Dept. of Defense Child Development Program.

These plans are created using resources such as *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth*

*through Age 8* (NAYEC, 1987), *The Creative Curriculum* series (Teaching Strategies), and the *Active Learning* series (Dale Seymour Publications).

### **Parent Advisory Council**

Each site has a Parent Advisory Council that is required to meet quarterly; most opt to meet monthly. Regular participants get discounts on childcare fees. All parents with children participating in Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs are eligible to attend meetings of the council, where they discuss objectives and plans for program improvement. These meetings also provide an opportunity for them to voice their concerns as parents to the leaders of the military installation.

### **Parent Orientation**

Parents who are new to the installation or who have children entering childcare attend parent orientation, which is held weekly. During orientation, parents and children visit classrooms, learn about the programs and services available, and can register. Parents also have a chance to meet, bond, and make connections in the community. In addition, families who are new to Fort Belvoir attend a special orientation at which they are presented with information on all services and programs available to them both on and away from the installation.

### **Parent-Teacher Conferences**

Parents are encouraged to attend parent-teacher conferences two times each year to discuss their children's progress, goals, and objectives in the context of their Individual Developmental Plans. This provides parents a chance to receive feedback, develop partnerships with staff, and be more involved in their children's development. Parents may attend during their duty hours.

Parents with children in center-based care receive daily written "sunshine reports" about their children's

activities and are encouraged to visit the center at any time and to have lunch with their children. The receptionist often develops relationships with families.

At one center, the receptionist (or “clerk”) plays a trivia / general knowledge game called Challenge the Clerk with parents every Friday and provides prizes.

### **Parenting and Relationship Classes**

Parents attend free classes on parenting and child development. Discounts on fees for concurrent childcare are an added incentive for participation. In addition, all training sessions for staff are announced publicly, and parents are invited.

The community offers a variety of parenting classes as well, on topics such as parenting for ages 0-6, the middle years and teens, parenting for step-families, divorce recovery, single parenting, using discipline to teach children, couples relationships, and managing the aggressive adolescent and teen. Support groups are offered for single parents and others.

Teachers offer advice to families about child development issues that arise. The I’m Glad You Asked program encourages parents to turn to teachers for help. A substitute teacher is available to cover classes so that teachers can talk with parents when they need assistance on child growth and development, guidance techniques, child abuse and neglect reporting, and other issues.

### **Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect**

All U.S. Dept. of Defense childcare programs have explicit policies and practices designed to prevent child abuse and neglect within the program. These include:

- Video cameras that monitor and record all classroom activity
- Vision panels in doorways and hallways to allow easy supervision of classrooms

- Monitored and limited entrances
- Alarms on exits that lead to unfenced areas
- Bathrooms that are within the classroom areas and easily monitored
- Hourly monitoring of adult-to-child ratios to ensure adequate supervision
- Extensive background checks for all employees
- Annual staff training on recognizing, reporting, and preventing child abuse and neglect, including a clear explanation of opportunities for guidance and of the consequences if abuse or neglect occurs

### **Resource Library**

Child Development Centers, School-Age Services sites, and Family Childcare homes have lending libraries where parents can check out books, videos, and magazines on parenting and child development. Parents are provided comfortable, home-like places to read and relax with their children.

### **Resource Referral**

Staff refer families with needs that cannot be met by Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs to community resources such as Fort Belvoir Social Work Services, the Family Advocacy Program, Army Community Service programs, Child Find, the Fairfax County Office for Children, and the Military Exceptional Family Member Program, for family members with special needs. Staff also maintain a file of web sites that both describe and serve as useful resources.

### **Social Activities**

Several social activities are offered for families throughout the year to promote parent awareness of and involvement in the programs. These include luncheons that bring parents and staff together and community celebrations such the America's Kids Run, National Kids Day, Lights on After School, the Fourth of July, an annual tree lighting, and the Month of the

Military Child. Other activities include parents' night out and kids' night out, both of which occur monthly.

## Staff Training

Fort Belvoir Child Development Programs provide extensive training and development for employees. These are tied to performance, retention, and promotion. Each employee has an individualized plan, but for all staff, the first phase lasts 18 months and consists of 320 hours of training; staff demonstrating the required capacities after training are promoted and monetarily compensated for their advancement.

Thereafter, staff participate in ongoing annual training. Topics include CPR, first aid, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales, preventing child abuse and neglect, identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect, the Child Abuse Risk Management Assessment Tool for center-based care, child and youth growth and development, guidance and discipline techniques, health, sanitation, safety, special needs, parent relations, and 13 self-paced training modules that culminate in the Child Development Associate credential. Employees also can pursue appropriate college-level courses, many of which are funded by the Army.

## Challenges

Families who are connected to the military face a number of unique challenges, which in turn challenge the programs' ability to provide services and support:

- Separation from extended families decreases the amount of support available to parents and increases the demand for programs.
- Frequent moves challenge families' ability to maintain social networks. Program workers themselves move frequently, posing challenges to training.
- Programs must be crafted to strengthen parent-child bonds and provide care during long periods of parental absence.
- The diversity of work schedules and frequency of

relocation necessitates a variety of care options: short- and long-term, 10-12 hours a day, early morning, weekends, and evenings.

- Deployment in dangerous areas challenges families and program workers

The programs also meet with challenges with regard to maintaining accessible, affordable, and quality care for military-connected families, including:

- Recruiting and retaining qualified staff
- Serving a community with a large population of infants and toddlers

