

# haitian center early care and education program

Dorchester, MA

## Overview

Since 1985, the Haitian Center Early Care and Education program has been providing full-day preschool for children ages 3 to 5 in the community of Dorchester, Massachusetts. Of participating families, 90% are Haitian, 7% are Black, and 3% are Hispanic. The center strives to provide comprehensive services that address the range of children’s physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development needs and to partner with families to ensure the well-being of their children.

The center operates according to the principle that unlocking children’s potential depends on being sensitive and responsive to the needs of local families, many of whom struggle with isolation and other challenges and need a variety of support services. Its position statement declares, “Our aim is to always strive to be a place where families find vital, culturally appropriate services that support and link them with the larger community.”

The center director’s philosophy, which permeates the program, is that early childhood education plants the seeds for a strong democracy, society, and economy. She instills this belief in the teachers, staff, and participating families, so that all are collectively and purposefully engaged in the center’s work. A twin programmatic commitment is to provide emotional security for children, teachers, and families—when their emotional needs are met, children learn more

## Profile

### Staffing

- Total: 12 (9 full-time teachers, director, assistant, and family advocate)

### Children & Families

#### Served

- 54 children

#### Budget

- Total: \$450,000
- Per child: \$8,000

#### Services Provided On-Site

- Early childhood education
- Family advocacy
- Family support
- Father involvement
- Home visits
- Information and referrals
- Literacy services
- Medical services for children
- Mental health services
- Parent council
- Parent education
- Parenting and child development information
- Vision and dental screening and referrals

easily, staff offer higher-quality instruction, and parents provide a safer, more secure and comfortable home environment for their children.

The Haitian Center Early Care and Education program is co-located with and part of the Haitian Multi-Service Center, founded in 1978. Haitian Multi-Service Center's services include: emergency services, counseling, prenatal care, HIV prevention, immigration and citizenship counseling, adult education (including ESL and GED courses), elderly services, computer instruction, and job training.

### How the Program Builds Protective Factors

The Haitian Center Early Care and Education program 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

- Advocacy Opportunities
- Mental Health Consultation
- Parent Governance
- Social Events
- Strong Parent–Staff Relationships

#### Social Connections

- Advocacy Opportunities
- Monthly Parent Coffees
- Parent Council Meetings and Work Groups
- Parent-to-Parent Network
- Social Events
- Volunteer Opportunities

#### Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Family Advocate / Family Support Services
- Home Visits
- Informal and Formal Observation and Consultation
- Mental Health Consultation
- Parenting Education Workshops
- Take-Home Materials for Parents

#### Partners

- Action for Boston Community Development
- Catholic Charities
- Community Partnership Program
- Haitian Multi-Service Center
- Home for Little Wanderers
- ReadBoston

#### Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Staff are trained to recognize indicators and warning signs
- A mental health consultant and family advocate observe and consult with teachers, children, and families

#### Response Protocol

- Staff inform the director when they suspect neglect or abuse; administrators and staff discuss concerns with parents before making a formal report
- Close parent–staff relationships enable staff to offer parents suggestions

#### Staff Resources

Staff receive the following supports to help them prevent, identify, and respond to child abuse and neglect:

- Regular support and education
- Training in recognizing early warning signs of child abuse and neglect
- Institutionalized ways of building relationships with families
- Annual retreat to develop personal and professional goals
- Quarterly meetings between the director and each staff member to review progress toward goals

## Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Daily Check-ins
- Family Advocate / Family Support Services
- Referrals
- Strong Parent–Staff Relationships

## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Emotion-based Classroom Model
- Mental Health Observation
- Social/Emotional Development Curriculum
- Strong Parent–Staff Relationships

## Key Program Features

### Advocacy

Parents and staff advocate together on behalf of children, both at the community and state levels. They participate in community forums, speaking on behalf of the program and on community issues affecting children. The program also brings parents and staff to the state capitol to attend legislative breakfasts, testify at hearings, and take part in budget discussions around funding for children’s issues.

### Case Management for Children with Special Needs

Staff at the center develop case management plans for children with behavioral, social, emotional, or other special needs. Teachers and the mental health consultant observe each special-needs child, review his or her strengths and weaknesses, and develop an individualized plan to help the child progress. Parents and teachers meet together to discuss how to meet the child’s needs, and families are referred to specialized resources when the program cannot offer what the child needs.

### Center Environment

The school is located in two mobile units in the parking lot adjacent to the Haitian Multi-Service Center. Staff make an effort to welcome parents to the program from the minute they walk in the door—

- Daily lunchtime teacher meetings
- On-site trainings
- Weekly staff meeting

### Staffing Policies that Promote Staff and Child Well-being

- Staff orientation that includes training to help prevent child abuse and neglect and gradual assumption of responsibilities
- Emotion-based classrooms with teacher journals to record what works
- Formal and informal staff meetings and team problem solving
- Encouragement of staff breaks and honest communication about stress levels and feelings toward children
- Constant vigilance by all staff members
- Attention to and support of staff members’ personal and professional goals

### Licensing & Accreditation

- Licensed by the Massachusetts Office of Child Care Services
- Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children

### What People Say

“I hope my home is like the classroom. We all want our homes to be an extension of this school.”  
—Parent

“Our children are our teachers at home. They’re learning, and they give back what they learn.”  
—Parent

posting parenting tips on the door and lining the hallways with bulletin boards. The center aims to send the message to parents that this is a place where they are welcome anytime and where their children will be safe and secure. Classroom doors have windows, which give children a sense of security and comfort (rather than a feeling of being trapped) and facilitate observation and supervision.

### **Culturally Appropriate Environment and Curriculum**

Haitian culture is central to the Haitian Center Early Care and Education program. Teachers and staff members are either from Haiti originally or are extremely familiar with Haitian values and cultural norms. Many are multilingual in English, French, and Creole. Haitian holidays are celebrated, and parents are invited to share their culture with the children through poems, stories, and cooking. The program has also developed its own curriculum, called Creole Tet Ansnm (“connections”)—a multilingual, multicultural, community-based childcare curriculum with an emphasis on the Haitian American experience.

### **Domestic Violence Awareness and Training**

As part of the center’s parent education curriculum, parents receive training on the effects of domestic violence on children’s growth and healthy development. Through individual counseling, family education, and support groups, staff teach parents to take the necessary steps to prevent violence at home.

### **Emotionally Responsive Classroom Model**

Realizing that emotional health is the foundation for cognitive learning, the Haitian Center Early Care and Education program operates according to an emotion-based classroom model. Children learn how to deal with their feelings and how to express and control their emotions. Teachers create outlets for children’s emotional expression, which the center views as an important part of their development. Arts, dramatic play, and other opportunities for emotional expression are all integrated into the classroom

“I trust everyone here. Whenever I need help, I call them.”  
—Parent

“Everything is here. They take care of everything—brain, body, spiritual being, health, vision screening, dental exams. And the Haitian spirit is here, too. I feel comfortable.”  
—Parent

“Even when my daughter is no longer here, I will be volunteering. I love it here. ... The whole future of our nation depends on early childhood education. What children are learning right now, they will give back not only to their family but also to the country. We are investing in these children, not only with money but with time and with love.”  
—Parent

“This school makes us proud to be parents.”  
—Parent

“I really enjoy working with the parents. It brings joy to me. They have so many issues, problems, and challenges. Families overcome so much!”  
—Staff member

“I enjoy being there to listen to the parents, not to be judgmental, not to dictate to them, [but] to hear them out. Listening to them helps a lot.”  
—Staff member

“We’re very supportive of each other. If as a community we didn’t develop team spirit, it would be too much on our shoulders, but together we can handle it.”  
—Teacher

experience. Special attention is placed on emotional transitions, such as entering a new class or leaving an old one, and children are given structured opportunities to express their emotions during these transitions. The same attention is given to emotional transitions in children's home lives.

Teachers establish appropriate levels of emotional availability to students and develop the ability to send clear emotional messages. They work both individually and collectively to teach each lesson from an emotional base, constructing lesson plans that include group activities in which children learn to work together and to resolve problems in a positive way. The center employs an evaluation tool that measures the classrooms' social and emotional competence and is currently developing a social/emotional development curriculum.

### **Family Support Services**

The center employs a family advocate who serves as a link between children's homes and the school. The family advocate visits each family at their home at least twice a year, and more often if necessary to help resolve problems or give support. She works with parents at the beginning of the school year to identify such needs as job training, housing, and health services, and to develop an individualized service plan to help them meet their identified needs. Throughout the year, the family advocate works with parents, both formally and informally, to help them progress toward their goals.

Program staff also work as a team to address emergent family issues or crises, ensuring that families have access to the services they need. They employ a holistic approach to:

- Immediately assess the situation (family advocate and/or mental health consultant)
- Meet with the family to develop a service plan (program director, mental health consultant, family advocate, and teachers)

"We have very low staff turnover. I believe this is because our teachers know they are valued, that their role is unique, and that what they do has a lot of impact on the way society functions. They are planting the seeds for democracy, accountability, responsible citizens, and economic outcomes. They're not just providing care for children. They have a sense of mission."  
—Nicole St. Victor, Director

- Gather resources within and outside the program and makes connections, not simply referrals, for the family (family advocate)
- Follow up, evaluate the situation, and revise the plan based on progress made toward resolving the situation (family advocate)

### **Father's Pride Project**

The Father's Pride Project was created to help fathers develop an awareness of their unique role in their children's lives and become more involved in their children's education. Through the project, a nurturing fathers workshop is held annually and a bulletin board is featured at the center.

### **Home Visits**

Home visits are routinely provided at the beginning and end of the school year for every student enrolled in the program—and throughout the year as needed at the request of either parents or staff. At the beginning of the year, the family advocate and teachers visit each child's home to introduce themselves to the family, discuss expectations, introduce parents to the center's culture and norms, and identify specific needs. This visit forms the basis of the individualized service plan, if one is desired. (See "Family Support Services," above.)

The home visits convey positive messages to all parents about their children, involve parents in assessing and supporting their children's development, and promote positive behavior management. They also give parents an opportunity to provide feedback and voice any concerns about the program.

### **Literacy Services**

The center emphasizes reading both in school and at home, encouraging parents to borrow books and to read to their children. At the annual pajama night, children come dressed in pajamas, parents come ready to read to their children, and literacy instructors

are there to help. The center sends books home to parents to read to their children as well as materials specifying what types of reading activities to do and questions to ask.

### **Mental Health Consultation**

A mental health consultant visits the program regularly to talk with parents and staff about child development issues and individual concerns. The consultant conducts observations of children in the classrooms. When teachers notice behavioral or speech and language issues, the mental health consultant conducts a focused observation and develops a service plan for the child in consultation with the child's parents. She works individually with children who have problems through therapeutic play and other methodologies. The mental health consultant also oversees the emotional component of the preschool curriculum and provides staff training on emotional development topics, including how to set up a feelings-based classroom and how to create an atmosphere where children feel emotionally safe. She participates in a monthly team meeting involving the family advocate, health manager, and teachers in which all children are discussed, classroom issues are identified, and plans are made to resolve problems. The mental health consultant also works with parents—both at the center and at their home—to address issues with their child and is always part of the team that intervenes to help families in times of need. Finally, she is a resource for teachers, helping them maintain their emotional well-being in times of stress—whether it's caused by professional or personal circumstances.

### **Parenting Education**

Parenting education occurs both informally and formally at the center. A popular formal parenting workshop is organized monthly by parents and staff around parent needs—more than a third of the center's families regularly participate. Through instruction, group activities, and discussions, the workshops provide information about children's

growth and development, age-appropriate behavior, basic parenting techniques, abuse and neglect, anger management, positive discipline, coping with stress, and talking with children about a range of issues, including strangers, sexual abuse, violence, illness, death, and human sexuality. A mandatory annual workshop on child abuse and neglect raises parents' awareness regarding legal parenting responsibilities.

Center staff send home parenting tips and parenting education pamphlets, and the family advocate conducts home visits to help parents implement what they learn in workshops. Teachers informally provide parenting education through daily communication with parents about what's happening with their child. Every Friday, teachers send home a notebook with a written report of the child's week and encourage parents to write back. Parents and teachers often experience the same issues with a child and join forces to resolve problems or deal with challenging behavior consistently. Non-violent disciplinary techniques are a major topic for parenting education, since the center's social and emotional development curriculum emphasizes peaceful problem solving and conflict resolution. Community parenting norms generally include corporal punishment, yet many parents have learned from their children "to use their words, not their hands" when they are angry.

### **Parent Policy Council**

The parent policy council is active in all program activities. It plans family activities and social events, monthly parenting workshops (based on a survey of parent needs conducted by the family advocate), and fundraising projects. It provides input into the program's curriculum development and cultural competence, oversees the budget, is involved in hiring staff, and mobilizes parents for advocacy events.

The center strives to create a climate of involvement in which parents participate in decisions affecting their children. The council has established a parent-to-parent network through which parents meet on a regular basis to discuss issues of common concern and

share experiences and has created a family phone tree to facilitate ongoing communication and nurture relationships among parents.

### **Referrals**

Comprehensive social services are available through a network of referrals. These services include one-on-one 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, health services, and developmental screenings.

### **Social Events**

The parent policy council organizes social events for parents and families, including parent coffees, family nights, a Haitian celebration, holiday parties, a parent celebration, and field trips.

### **Staff Capacities and Retention**

The center maintains a stable workforce and has limited staff turnover. All teachers have been at the center for more than seven years, which the director attributes to an atmosphere that encourages personal and professional growth and allows staff to feel valued, cared for, and supported. The center utilizes theories of human development to help staff members explore themselves, realize their potential, and meet their personal needs.

### **Volunteer and Leadership Opportunities**

Parents volunteer at the center often—reading aloud to children, chaperoning children on trips, cleaning classrooms, and helping with art projects. They also sit on numerous committees and sub-committees that make decisions about the center.