

leelanau children's center

Leeland, MI

Overview

Leelanau Children's Center, in rural Michigan, provides childcare and preschool to a mixed-income population. The center was founded in 1978 as a play group at the local library, which later moved to a church. Now, thanks to donations from the community, the center has its own building, on grounds donated by the church.

Leelanau Children's Center is a hub for families in the community. It provides a comfortable place for parents to spend time, organizes community events, and is one of the lead agencies in a county-wide collaboration. Staff and volunteers extend the center's reach by participating in the Family Coordinating Council, which coordinates human service delivery across the county.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Leelanau 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

- ChildCare Co-op
- Observation Area
- Parent Advisory Committee
- School-based Services

Profile

Staffing

- Teachers: 6
- Home visitors: 2
- On-call substitute teacher: 1
- Support staff: 2
- Cook
- Director
- Business manager

Total: 14

Children & Families Served

- Licensed childcare program*: 58
- Preschool*: 44
- Program for 5-year-olds*: 14
- Play groups & home visiting: 37
- Summer program for kindergarteners through third-graders: 40

*Most of these families receive home visits as well; they are not included in the number below.

Budget

\$300,000

Social Connections

- Childcare Co-op
- Cooperation and Conflict Resolution
- Forums on Violence
- Parents' Advisory Committee
- Parents Together
- Play Groups
- Social Events

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Home Visits
- Lending Library
- Newsletters
- Observation Rooms
- Parent Orientation
- Parents Together
- Play Therapy
- Walk and Talk

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- All Support Action Plan
- Family Coordinating Council
- Home Visits
- Individualized Family Support Plan
- Resource Referrals

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Cooperation and Conflict Resolution
- Play Groups
- Play Therapy
- Responsibility
- Staggered School Entry

Key Program Features

Center Environment

Each classroom at Leelanau Children's Center has only three walls and is open to the rest of the center. The openness provides a sense of teacher accountability

Sources

- Childcare subsidies
- Endowments
- Local fundraising
- Fees for services
- State preschool funding

Services Provided On-Site

Family support planning

- Home visiting
- Parent education
- Play therapy
- Resource and referral

Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Observing child behavior
- Observing parents during pick-up and drop-off
- Requests from parents for help
- Referrals from area agencies

Response Protocol

If a staff member suspects child abuse or neglect, he or she:

- Raises concerns with the director or, if input from other staff is desired, at a weekly staff meeting
- Begins documenting his or her concerns
- Sets up a conference with the parents; this is attended by the staff member and/or director

The director:

- Refers the family to the home visiting program
- Connects the family to the wrap-around team

but also gives staff the security of being able to easily call on their colleagues for help. Each classroom also includes an observation area—a room behind a glass wall from which parents can observe their children without interrupting classroom activities. These observation areas enable parents to observe their children’s behavior in the classroom; they use what they see to help their children develop at home. The observation areas also enable staff to point out to parents what their children do well—one of the most important roles for staff.

Based on the model of schools created in Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy, the center’s kitchen takes up one-fifth of the programming space and is visible from the preschool classroom. The importance of the kitchen springs from the understanding that:

- It is important for children to get a hot, healthy meal every day
- It is important for children to be surrounded by sights, smells, and sounds that evoke home and comfort
- Cooking is a learning and community-building activity

Children call the chef “Bill the Cooker Man.” He is also an adjunct teacher and informal counselor at the center. Parents often drop in to talk with him and have a cup of coffee, and each day, he works directly with three children who have been assigned to help him make lunch.

ChildCare Co-op

One evening per month, parents use the center space to provide childcare for each other so that parents can have a night out. Two sets of parents volunteer to look after the children so that the other parents can go out, run errands, or just spend some time by themselves. Called Parents’ Nite Out, the childcare co-op was developed by the Parent Advisory Committee and is organized and run entirely by parents.

- Files a report with the state’s child protective services department

Key Elements

- Emergent learning curriculum approach
- Focus on reciprocity and responsibility for children and parents
- Conflict resolution
- Kitchen
- Consistency across teaching staff
- Communication
- Strong participation in local service coordination collaborative
- Multi-age classroom

What People Say

“I didn’t realize how hard being a mom was. Pat [the home visitor] was like a breath of fresh air—she gave me ideas for crafts and things that I could do with my baby. When I talk to moms in other counties who don’t have this support, I realize how lucky we are.”
—Parent

“What the kids get is a sense of themselves as strong.”
—Parent

“Half the children in our incoming class each year come from the Leelanau Children’s Center. Our teachers can tell who they are because they’re independent learners and they love learning—and we can tell who the parents are because they’re more involved in their kids’ education.”
—Superintendent of schools

Having a night out on their own is very important to parents. Likewise, parents providing childcare benefit from the experience; they get a taste of what it is like for center staff to care for a number of children at once at the center, and they learn about their own children's behavior by seeing it in the context of others'.

Cooperation and Conflict Resolution

In all activities, the center focuses on cooperation and conflict resolution, and these emphases impact the entire community. The values and skills that children learn at the center are brought home with them, improving the way they and their families handle conflict in the home. Similarly, the center's collaborative partners find that the center promotes cooperation and conflict resolution among community organizations and leaders.

With regard to violence, the center's approach focuses less on aggressors than on victims. The center helps victims strengthen their voice and learn to articulate what they want. One part of the center's programs in this area is a series of regular forums on violence held by parents.

Emergent Learning Curriculum

One of the hallmarks of the center's approach is the use of an emergent learning curriculum. Classes don't use set lesson plans; instead, the curriculum for each class evolves out of the children's interests and what is happening in the world around them. For instance, in one class, children's interest in the kitchen and cooking led to an opportunity for them to learn about the body and how it processes food. Local health care providers were brought in to help the children learn about food, growth, and energy.

The use of emergent learning helps connect the center—and participating children and families—to the community. Community members are tapped as a resource to help children learn at the center, and children are taken out on field trips and other activities

"I would never have had a night out in two years if it hadn't been for [the childcare co-op]."

—Parent

"It's our job to create a safe environment—no fences, no bells. Abuse is an adult problem."

—Maggie Sprattmoran, executive director

"We use the center as our community center. It extends my sense of what the community is."

—Parent

"I find strength [in] the unconditional support and non-threatening environment here."

—Parent

"The family doesn't feel where the money comes from. They just get the support they need."

—Family Coordinating Council member

"I feel that my children are well cared for and given a full introduction into what it means to live in a community of people."

—Parent

"This has become the standard for what childcare should be in our community. We'd like to build a childcare system where what is offered at the Leelanau Children's Center is available throughout the community."

—County early childhood coordinator

to learn in the community. The emergent learning curriculum creates an ethos in which the entire community is responsible for the well-being and healthy development of children. It also encourages teachers to be attuned to children's individual interests and capacities and how they engage with others and the world. Being attuned in this way also helps staff identify when a child is troubled.

Family Coordinating Council

In Michigan, local Family Coordinating Councils coordinate services for children and families in their communities. Leelanau County has one of the most active and successful councils. Its goal is to not only integrate services, but to create a caring community for children. Hundreds of providers and citizens planned and designed a system of community-wide collaboration in 1993, and as of 2003, nearly 300 individuals and agencies were involved. Unlike in other counties, where social service providers working with high-need families lead the councils' efforts, a key partner in Leelanau County's efforts is Leelanau Children's Center, providing childcare for families of all kinds.

All members of the council, from the school superintendent to the local prosecuting attorney, readily attest to the center's important role, not just at the front end—reaching families before they are in crisis—but in supporting high-risk and in-crisis families. Center staff play an active role in the county's "wrap-around teams," coordinating and planning services to meet multiple needs in one family. The center imbues the council's work with its philosophy of collaboration, cooperation, consensus, and conflict resolution.

Participating in the Family Coordinating Council builds relationships among staff of different agencies. These relationships give center staff confidence in the organizations to which they refer families.

Home Visits

At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of each year, teachers visit the families of all children in their classrooms, using the Parents As Teachers home visiting curriculum. These visits allow the teacher to start to build a relationship with the parent and child before the year starts, reducing their anxiety about entering a new environment. By allowing the teacher to observe the child at home, they also deepen his or her understanding of how to work with the child and parent. Finally, they allow parents and teachers to work together to develop a plan for the child's learning, so that parents can identify their values and choose parenting strategies that match.

Occasionally, parents who have never had home visits worry that they will be intrusive. But after trying them, parents invariably come to view home visits as a support rather than an intrusion, and some even request additional visits as often as once a week.

Home visitors receive referrals from classroom teachers who have identified families who seem to have needs for additional support. The home visitor then goes and assesses the family's situation and, if appropriate, conducts follow-up visits to strengthen parents' awareness of child development. These may take place as often as weekly, depending on the family's needs and desires.

If the family needs and is interested in intensive, on-going support, the home visitor will use the Individualized Family Support Plan or All Support Action Plan. These are strengths-based, survey-like forms that help families list and prioritize their strengths, concerns, and hopes.

A family with multiple risk factors or intense needs is referred to either a wrap-around team or a high-risk home visitor. These referrals are made only with the family's knowledge and consent. Staff from the Leelanau Children's Center work closely with the high-risk home visitor and case manager.

Lending Library

The center lends families children's books; books, videotapes, and other materials on parenting; toys; and activities for parents and children to engage in together at home. These resources help parents work through specific parenting issues at home, facilitate parent-child interactions that promote learning, and give families access to resources they may not be able to afford. Video- and audiotapes and other materials provide important information to parents with limited literacy, and materials are provided in the primary languages that parents in the program speak.

Male Involvement

There are three men on the staff of 14: the cook, a teacher who also leads the daily music hour, and a movement-artist-in-residence. Their presence is very noticeable in the program, as is the presence of program participants who are fathers. The center's director feels that having men play nurturing roles in children's lives is important.

Newsletters

The center produces two parent newsletters. The first, which is monthly, is aimed at the center community—staff and parents—and contains information on child development topics, the theory behind the center's practice, and details about upcoming events and activities. Parents look forward to receiving this newsletter and use it as a resource. The second newsletter is mailed to every individual in the county twice each year to raise awareness of the importance of child development not only in the lives of families but in creating a strong community.

Parent Advisory Committee

The Parent Advisory Committee designs, develops, and implements programming and activities for parents (including social events) that will help the center meet its goal to strengthen families. While center staff provide some support for the committee,

parents are in the leadership role. Meetings are for parents only, and any parent with a child at the center is welcome to attend. The Parent Advisory Committee provides an opportunity for parents to build relationships with each other, see the value of their contributions to the center and other parents, and get to know the community.

Play Groups

The center emphasizes the use of play as a learning tool for children. Weekly play groups (one for each of four age-groups) are provided for all parents and children in the community. These provide an opportunity for parents to spend time with their children, learn new child development skills, and build connections with other parents. They also provide an easy transition for children who will enter the program; the youngest age-group included in the play groups is infants. Up to 30 parents take part in the groups each week.

Play Therapy

Play therapy is also available to provide support for children who face extraordinary circumstances and to teach these children coping skills. Teachers may refer families to the play therapy program based on observing the child and / or talking with the parent, or based on a parent's request for help. In addition to working with children, the therapist meets weekly with these children's parents to help them learn parenting strategies that meet their children's needs and promote their development.

Responsibility

The center creates an environment in which child, parent, and staff responsibility is emphasized. Each child has responsibility for some task each day—whether it is feeding the rabbit or helping the cook serve lunch. The presumption is that children are capable and want to help. Often, staff expectations of children help parents realize what their children are capable of.

Parents also share in the work of the center. At enrollment, each parent is interviewed and signs a contract specifying how he or she will contribute to the work of the center. Parents serve on committees, help organize events, participating in fundraising drives, and more.

School-based Services

Leelanau Children's Center staff provide family support services in a classroom at a local public school, for families of children attending the school.

Social Events

The Parent Advisory Committee chooses and plans social and educational activities for the center and the community. Past events have included: a fall bonfire, annual carnival, silent auction fundraiser, field trips to local attractions, ice cream social, and the ChildCare Co-op. By planning these events, parents' build their sense of ownership of the center and their connection to the community, since many events are planned with or supported by community partners. These events attract not only parents of the children participating in the center, but past participants, their parents, and others.

Each preschool and kindergarten classroom offers several classroom events each year at which parents talk about the journey the class is making. The center also organizes two series of events at which parents interact without their children and help each other answer child development questions:

- **Parents Together**

Each of these monthly dinners is organized around a different child development topic.

- **Walk and Talk**

Each week, during this 30-minute walk, parents of children attending the center or the local elementary school talk about a different child

development issue, based on the *What Young Children Need To Succeed* curriculum. The walks are led by the mother of a child participating in the center.

Staff Support

Each classroom is staffed by a teaching team; one member is a credentialed teacher. Because the program is small, the director is often in the classrooms and has daily interaction with parents. Once each week, substitute teachers watch over the children during nap time while center staff meet to address logistics and planning as well as get input and support to address difficulties.