

sheltering arms child development and family support center

Chamblee, GA

Overview

In 1888, a group of Atlanta women formed a sewing circle at the First United Methodist Church's John Barclay Mission to mend the clothing of street children. While delivering clothes one day, the women discovered a child tied to a bedpost as a safety measure while the mother worked long hours in the cotton mills. Determined to help these children, the women began to care for them at the mission. An old railroad boxcar served as the first Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center. From the beginning, the program valued interacting with and supporting the mothers of the children. Each week, staff held mothers' meetings, which allowed mothers to share experiences and learn from each other.

This dedication to supporting both children and their families is the cornerstone of the program's tradition and current philosophy. At each of its 18 sites in and around Atlanta, the Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center empowers families and strengthens communities by providing high-quality, affordable early care and education, comprehensive support services for families, professional development, and community outreach.

The site described below is located in the International Village Center in Chamblee, which was established in 1999 by a community-led project serving a diverse population. Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center was invited to develop and

Profile

Staffing

- Classroom: 23
- Family support: 2
- Non-childcare direct services: 2
- Administrative: 3
- Total: 30

Children & Families Served

Annually:

- Childcare: 52
- Early Head Start: 24
- Preschool: 60
- Total: 136

Budget

\$1,074,435 million

Key Funding Sources

- Childcare subsidies
- Early Head Start
- State preschool funding
- Parent fees
- United Way
- Georgia Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Foundation, corporate, and community donors

operate the childcare center on-site because of its history of high-quality care and expertise in developing centers and raising funds. This site serves children ages 6 weeks to 5 years old—including children with special needs—and their families. Chamblee is an international community. Of families served by the program: 43% are African American, 43% are Hispanic, 7% are Asian, 4% are white, and 3% are biracial.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support 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

- Enrollment / Empowerment Plan
- Open-Door Policy
- Parent Involvement

Social Connections

- Building Design
- Parent Leadership Meetings
- Social Activities
- Violence Prevention

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Enrollment
- Parent Education
- Parent Information & Education
- Parent Involvement

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Early Intervention
- Family Support Coordinators
- Parent to Parent

Hours

6:30 am- 6:30 pm

Services Provided On-Site

- Preschool
- Childcare
- Applications for state childcare subsidies
- Career counseling
- Certificates for clothing, diapers, care packages available through St. Vincent de Paul Society
- Child developmental therapy (& continuation with therapist after child leaves program)
- Enrollment in health and dental insurance
- Flexible emergency funds
- Life skills workshops
- Parent education
- Resource and referral
- Toy lending library for home childcare providers

Partners

- Babies Can't Wait
- Children First
- Food banks
- Georgia Department of Child and Family Services
- Public schools
- Quality Care for Children
- Right Side Up
- St. Vincent de Paul Society

Ways of Identifying When Families Are at Risk

- Strong relationships with families so they feel comfortable expressing needs for support
- Checking in with parents during drop-off and pick-up
- Daily health check with each child

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Developmental Screening
- Early Childhood Curricula
- Language Groups

Key Program Features

Building Design

The Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center at the International Village Center is a colorful building constructed of glass and steel. Its location is convenient for the diverse population it serves, and it is designed specifically to house a high-quality childcare center.

The center is welcoming to parents and children alike. The area near the front desk includes sofas and chairs, a large parent and community room, storage areas for car seats and strollers, and a large video monitor that enables parents to see their children in the classrooms. Often, snacks and drinks are available for parents when they arrive to pick up their children.

Each classroom features large windows that look onto the hallway and doors with glass panels that allow very small children to see into the main hall. All classrooms open onto a large outdoor play area. The facility also includes comfortable staff offices, a parent library, a staff room, and a lending library for home childcare providers.

Developmental Screening

Together, the family support coordinator, teacher, and parents conduct an initial screening upon enrollment to assess the child's developmental level and potential special needs. Teachers also conduct ongoing assessments of each child. Assessments are conducted using the Temperament and Atypical Behavior Scale Screener and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. The simple Ages and Stages

Response Protocol

If a staff member is concerned about a family:

- Minor, non-recurrent problems are resolved on the spot (e.g., bathing a child who is not clean)
- Concerns are reported to family support coordinators or other staff
- Family support coordinators (or other staff, if they work more with family) discuss with parents and refer to needed services or plan further on-site observation of child
- Family support coordinators follow up with parents (e.g., home visits, accompanying parents to school or service providers)

What People Say

"Sheltering Arms is a place where you can find respectful diversity. It is a place where everyone feels comfortable."

—Parent

"Sheltering Arms offers a nurturing and learning environment with a loving, caring, and sincere staff who really embrace your children."

—Parent

"[Children] like it here—it feels like home."

—Teacher

"There's a certain spirit at Sheltering Arms. I always leave feeling like I don't do enough for the community."

—Parent

Questionnaire helps analyze a child's abilities by prompting parents to indicate which tasks the child can complete.

These assessments help:

- Staff and parents identify whether services may be required immediately to meet the child's social or emotional needs
- Teachers create lesson plans to promote all children's social and emotional competence
- Parents develop expectations that match their children's developmental stages

Early Childhood Curricula

The curricula used in childcare and preschool classrooms promote children's social and emotional well-being. Three curricula or models are used: language groups, I Can Problem Solve, and Second Step.

Daily language groups offer the opportunity for children and teachers to talk in groups that are smaller than the class. In these groups, they talk about how the children feel that day and discuss any issues that may arise. The groups offer teachers the opportunity to demonstrate and practice positive social interactions with the children.

Teachers use the I Can Problem Solve curriculum with 3-year-olds and the Second Step curriculum with 4-year-olds to promote social and emotional development. These curricula teach children how to use their words to express what they feel. They help children distinguish appropriate from inappropriate play and resolve conflicts by describing pictures and situations. The curricula are based on Piagetian learning principles and Erikson's stages of emotional growth.

Early Intervention

Staff are trained and encouraged to practice crisis prevention through early intervention—recognizing a potential problem and intervening before it comes a

"I have a child who often has trouble. The staff have really helped me let him be more individual, more independent. They helped me to let go a little bit."

—Parent

"I volunteer here on Mondays with Miss Mary in the kitchen. We talk about spiritual things. There's something about this place, a spirit in all of them that is loving and sincere. I feel very safe about leaving my child here."

—Parent

"I was so worried when I first left my daughter here. I came and had lunch every day the first week. But nobody made me feel bad about that. I got to know the staff and the other parents that way. Now I'm really happy about being here."

—Parent

"We refer people to people, not to services."

—Family support coordinator

"We have the ability to see parents every day. That is a valuable opportunity."

—Director, International Village Center

crisis. Through day-to-day contact, staff members bond with families; for example, the receptionist makes a point of greeting every child by name every time she sees him or her. Staff thus become sensitive to changes in individual and family norms and can often predict and prevent potential difficulties. Staff respond immediately to withdrawn, overactive, or unusual behavior in children. When families need additional support, staff locate local resources by calling the United Way's 211 First Call for Help system, and they help parents access the system as well.

During 2001, the 18 Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center sites served more than 3,000 families and made fewer than 25 reports of child abuse or neglect. The International Village Center site made none.

Enrollment / Empowerment Plan

Upon a child's enrollment in preschool or childcare, a family support coordinator conducts an in-depth interview with the child's family to get a clear idea of the family's situation, needs, and goals and to fully orient the family regarding available services and support. This process lasts at least two hours and allows family support coordinators to get to know families. During the enrollment interview, the family completes a family interest survey and a family empowerment plan, which covers:

- Involvement
- Information
- Inspiration
- Community linkages

The family works with the family support coordinator to formulate and pursue obtainable goals. Extended family members are included, and personal goals are also identified.

Family Support Coordinators

The center employs two full-time coordinators to provide family support services, refer families to community resources, and guide families in using

these resources. Family support coordinators carry out the enrollment process, which includes assessing the family's strengths and needs. Following the enrollment process, the coordinator continues to build a strong foundation for the family on a day-to-day basis and through home visits, parent-teacher conferences, informal contact, and multiple opportunities for parent involvement. Family support coordinators are also available for one-on-one counseling and provide referrals to social services in the community. Personal relationships with providers of community resources allow staff to connect people with people, rather than just making referrals to agencies. Teachers and family support coordinators work closely with families and make home visits together at least twice each year.

Open-Door Policy

Parents are welcome to visit the center at any time during its hours of operation, to observe their children or talk with staff. Cameras in all classrooms enable parents to watch their children interact with others from a monitor in the parent area near the front desk. From all classrooms, large windows look out onto the main hallway. The open-door policy is comforting to families; they know that they can always observe their children or speak to anyone in the center about their questions and concerns.

Parent Information & Education

Parent education takes place at all times, not just in classes. That said, parent education classes are offered by family support coordinators in two series per year, each lasting 10 hours. The classes use the Parent 1234 curriculum, which addresses the ages and stages of child development; they offer parents guidance in dealing with children's behavioral stages and teach fundamental attitudes and skills necessary for parenting young children. Classes and printed information are available in English and Spanish. A translator for those who speak Vietnamese is provided as needed.

Topical workshops occur in response to parents' needs, which they articulate during monthly parent meetings. Providers of services are invited to speak, as are participating parents. For example, one parent conducted a workshop on home ownership; as a result, another parent applied for mortgage pre-approval.

Printed materials on parenting and child development are posted on bulletin boards outside of children's classrooms and distributed to families. An extensive parent handbook is provided to parents upon enrollment of their children in preschool or childcare.

Families are fully informed about the center's policy on child abuse and neglect, including the center's legal responsibility. Pamphlets and information sheets on these subjects are available for parents to take home.

Parent Inspiration

Staff are always available to discuss parenting issues. In addition, they are careful to model parenting techniques when parents may be having difficulties or questions about their children's behavior. Staff training and supervision helps teachers take on this role of teacher and coach for parents as well as children.

Parents are inspired to achieve goals for themselves as well as for their families and children. Staff encourage parents to dream, help them set goals, and provide daily encouragement.

Parent Involvement

Parents have a range of ways to be involved in the center. In addition to participating in programs, they take part in social activities and, at the encouragement of teachers, get involved in their children's classrooms. Teachers provide volunteer opportunities, an open-door policy, opportunities to discuss children's daily activity during drop-off and pick-up, and individual parent-teacher conferences three times per year.

Parents who want to take an active role in decision making can take part in monthly parent leadership

meetings and / or the center's advisory committee. At parent leadership meetings, conducted by family support coordinators, parents make connections, tap into resources for support, and find ways to become involved in the center's activities. The center's advisory committee is comprised of 50% parents and 50% community volunteers and has input into the center's policies and programs. Translators attend all meetings as needed, and materials are offered in Spanish and Vietnamese as well as English.

Parents often work with each other and staff to solve community and family problems. For example, when one family's house was destroyed by a fire, other parents provided a great deal of relief and supplies.

Parent to Parent

Families of children with special needs are linked to Parent to Parent of Georgia, which provides them with specialized support and information.

Right Side Up Drug Treatment Program

The center reserves two spots in its childcare program for children of mothers in drug treatment. A social worker from the treatment program works with childcare staff to coordinate support for the family and keep the child in consistent childcare. Childcare staff work with parents in treatment on communication skills and other parenting issues. The arrangement is made possible through a partnership with the county department of child and family services.

Social Activities

The center values both formal and informal opportunities for parents to make social connections. These opportunities range from talking over refreshments during drop-off and pick-up to taking part in monthly parent meetings.

Social activities such as the fall festival, fashion shows, and ice cream parties bring children and families together at the center throughout the year. Events are not connected to religious holidays, to honor the

diversity of religions represented, but many events take place near holiday times. Each classroom hosts its own events for parents throughout the year.

The center has paid special attention to engaging fathers through dads' breakfasts, sporting event outings, and sports teams. Center sites have their own basketball teams, which play against each other.

Staff Training and Support

Each staff member completes a 20-hour training course (double the hours required by the state), offered by Sheltering Arms Child Development and Family Support Center. This training includes basic child development principles and emphasizes positive guidance, self-esteem, and temperament. In addition, all staff are trained in recognizing child abuse and neglect during the first year of employment. The training is offered twice each year. The center follows up with ongoing training and reviews during monthly staff meetings. Training toward obtaining a Child Development Associate degree is also offered to all staff.

For support and resources, staff often turn to each other. The presence of a break room and scheduled break times facilitate daily interaction, while monthly staff meetings allow for more formal interaction. Teachers also access a teacher resource room to develop their curricula.

The center takes a team approach to issues; no staff member ever feels he or she has to make a decision individually.

Violence Prevention

The center strengthens the community and families' social connections by taking part in violence prevention efforts. Through long-term partnerships with agencies that speak out on violence and social issues, staff have opportunities to be involved in community forums, task forces, and committees that address these issues.

The center recognizes and publicizes domestic violence awareness month and connects family members with International Women’s House Shelter, which serves immigrant and refugee women and their children.

The center uses the Act Against Violence training programs in classrooms and workshops to promote healthy anger management and conflict resolution. Children are encouraged to demonstrate appropriate conflict resolution strategies.

Challenges

- While family members and teachers appreciate the diversity of participants, cultural differences sometimes create barriers. For example, children are not always accustomed to the friendly greetings they receive when arriving at the center, nor to sharing meals family-style, which is the custom at the center. While children in the United States often are expected to learn assertively, the cultures of many recent immigrants do not value independent decision-making in children. Families and staff have to spend time to understand these differences and how they affect a diverse community’s common expectations about children.
- Once the center stopped receiving federal funding through Title XX, the number of families involved in child protective services who were referred to the center decreased. The center would like the state department of child protective services to see that it helps prevent child abuse and neglect by getting children out of unsafe or undesirable situations.
- The manner in which the state department of child protective services handles reimbursement of childcare fees for foster children makes it difficult for foster parents to make ends meet. Foster parents must pay fees up-front and then wait for reimbursement.
- The center would like to establish more formal referral agreements.

- Subsidized full-day care is not available for parents who are working full-time. The center would like to be able to provide more scholarships for these families.
- Staff training is needed on community violence, substance abuse, and special needs.
- The center needs to be able to hire substitute teachers while primary teachers are in training.

