

UNIVERSITY

Parents take on volunteer role at Amazon Child Care Center



Children at the Amazon Child Care Center enjoy a free ride courtesy of a volunteer.

Photo by Andre Ranieri

By Colleen Pohlig
Emerald Reporter

This is no ordinary child care center. In fact, the only ordinary thing about the Amazon Child Care Center is that the sound of excited, laughing little kids can be heard from way down the street.

The second you step into the building, you realize that kids live here. This is not the everyday center where parents drop off a crying 2-year-old for someone to take care of for most of the day.

The non-profit center, started in 1978, is a full-time parent cooperative geared toward parent-involved child care. Parents are involved in every aspect of the Center from doing the dishes to teaching kindergarten — and everything in between.

"The parents really feel as though they own the program and so they don't feel like intruders," Center Director Susie Blanchard said. "They are here all the time — they're here cooking, they're here cleaning or they're here in the classroom."

"They get to know the kids and so I don't think the kids' needs go unmet," Blanchard said.

By volunteering their time at the Center, the parents are able to reduce their monthly child care bill. The reductions are based on how many hours a week they are willing to work.

The Center is open to children of University students, with Amazon residents having first priority. Currently enrolled are 46 children, 36 of whom are in the preschool/kindergarten program. Of the 36, 26 parents are presently "co-opping" which makes for an outstanding ratio of parents to children.

The remaining 10 children are in a new program started this fall called Latch-Key. The program, initiated at the request of student parents, gives seven to 10-year-olds the opportunity to be involved in extra curricular activities after school rather than going home to an empty house.

The Center rents out the Amazon Community Room in the afternoons and the kids play soccer, learn art, play the piano, or just plain have fun in the same parent-involved child care atmosphere as the Center.

"Some of them (Latch-Key participants) are previous day-care kids so the parents have a great deal of affection for the co-op," Blanchard said. "Most of them are aged 7 to 10 and they have nowhere to be and they basically ended up hanging out here (Amazon Center), so the parents called me and said 'let's put something together'."

Blanchard, director since 1982, brought her philosophy on how kids should grow up at the center. Kids should be in an environment where each child can experience and develop cooperative autonomy without inhibiting his or her free-

doms to do both good and bad, Blanchard said.

One way of dealing with the kids' so-called "bad" behavior is transforming it from a situation of punishment to a situation of validating each child's feelings. By doing this, the Center has changed what was once the "time-out" corner to the "feeling corner" where a huge stuffed rocking chair covered with blankets serves as the place to go to problem solve with a parent or teacher. The child is encouraged to figure out why he or she is having these feelings.

"It is validating your feelings instead of saying 'you need to sit there and think about this,'" Blanchard said. "It's saying to the kid 'it's OK that you're angry — here's a pillow.'"

Sometimes you will hear a 3-year-old saying "why don't we go to the feeling corner?" Blanchard said. "Part of it is we, as facilitators, need to stand back and let the children solve all their problems themselves — they do a really good job of it," Blanchard said.

Don Stull, who "co-ops" and has a six-year-old daughter, Shanna, in the Latch-Key program, could not have made it without the Center, he said.

"I could not have gotten through the University, my wife Lisa couldn't have gotten through school and Shanna couldn't have gotten better care if it had not been for the program," Stull said. "It would have been impossible financially and without the support groups (at the Center) to get through."

Stull said he thinks of the Center as a resource, rather than just a child care facility, for three reasons. The first is that the parents who co-op are able to network with other parents to solve problems and share their experiences with parents who may be going through the same things.

The second reason Stull considers it a resource center is that "Susie is there," he said. She is able to bring programs and support group information to the co-op for student parents.

Finally, the Center acts as a resource in that "there are lots of other student parents who bring a lot of information about what they are studying in school to the co-op," Stull said.

Stull's daughter has benefited in numerous ways from the program, he said.

"In the goals that parents want for their children — they want them to be liked, respected, charismatic and independent — this is exactly what Shanna has received from the program," Stull said. "She has social responsibility, respects other people, cultures and people's choices for living their lives instead of criticizing them."

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THE FAR SIDE

By GARY LARSON

At the monthly meeting of Squidheads Anonymous

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