

New Palmer Childcare Center Modeled on Chiropractic Principles

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As every working parent knows, it's impossible to concentrate on your job when you are concerned about the health and happiness of your child. The enriching environments we strive to create at home are rarely matched by the available day-care options. Uninspired programming, poor nutritional offerings and outdated facilities are all-too-common. In addition, even well-educated, well-meaning caregivers often possess mechanistic viewpoints of health that become manifest in a center's unaccommodating policies regarding vaccination; required antibiotic use for children returning after an illness; and a lack of appreciation for the impact each unique window of development has on the unfolding perfection of a child.

The Palmer community has considered developing a child-care center for years to serve our students, faculty and staff with a facility that truly reflects our understanding of human health and performance. That vision recently became reality on our Davenport, Iowa campus with the opening of the joint Palmer/YMCA Childcare Center.

We worked with experts in child development from the YMCA and brought in top chiropractors that specialize in the care of children to design an ideal chiropractic day-care center. We are pleased that the center is a high-quality facility for the children of Palmer students, faculty and staff, and a unique learning resource for chiropractic students. Even more importantly, we are proud that it is the first center of its kind, and one that can serve as a living model of how chiropractic philosophies of health and human potential can be incorporated into our most important community resources.

A Chiropractic Model

Contemporary research is beginning to confirm what educational theorists and child development experts have hypothesized for years: Normal childhood development often occurs in specific and somewhat confined stages. In milestone moments, the body chemistry changes and a baby begins to coo, a toddler learns to jump or a four-year-old develops a sense of empathy and a drive to care for another. From the moment of conception through to maturity, the body is presented with certain windows of opportunity for physical, mental and emotional development and skill acquisition that, once closed, will never again be as vividly encountered.

In his groundbreaking book *Magical Child*, Joseph Chilton Pearce described the crucial stages of a child's early years of development. If key opportunities for growth and maturation go unrealized during these stages, he argued, they are never fully recovered, and a child's potential is lessened to some degree by what is not accomplished or completed at a previous stage. Renowned medical doctor and educator Maria Montessori observed a similar phenomenon in her extensive work with children in orphanages in the early 1900s. She noted that children pass through certain "sensitive periods," during which their physiology makes them most open to (and capable of) mastering certain tasks. At particular points in their development, she noted that children are intensely interested in words and language and can learn to read easily. At other times they become

extremely capable of grasping mathematical concepts and are eager to do so. Pearce and Montessori made similar points - every moment in a child's life presents unique opportunities for healthy physical, intellectual and emotional development.

Inspired by these and other innovators in child development, Palmer set out to create a high-quality child-care center infused with chiropractic's commitment to helping people express more of their inborn potential. The center focuses not simply on meeting daily needs, but on fostering the emotional, physical, intellectual and social well-being of the child. We are striving for no less than to create an environment that will facilitate optimal child development.

On-Site Chiropractic Care

Even in the earliest planning stages, we knew on-site chiropractic care was a must for the center. Anyone who has served in chiropractic practice for a few years (or even just a few months) knows that children under regular care experience better health and overall performance. They often suffer fewer illnesses; show greater coordination; exhibit more even moods; eat and sleep better; and can concentrate more easily. Most importantly, children who are free from nerve interference caused by vertebral subluxations are better equipped to realize the developmental potential of each stage of their growth.

Young bodies change rapidly and constantly as the brain and nervous system mature and orchestrate the complex chemical reactions that dictate healthy development. We don't know precisely when the brain will send a message across the nervous system for the body to release a particular chemical in a prescribed amount that will enable a baby to sleep through the night, utter his or her first word, or grow a half-inch between evening and morning. Such chemical and biological reactions and interactions continue nonstop. Yet the body must be ever ready to make use of these key opportunities if normal development is to continue. We all perform better and enjoy greater health when our nervous system is not impeded by spinal misalignments. But for developing infants and children, whose bodies are stretching toward crucial new developmental milestones every day, it's critical that the right information flows from the brain across the spinal cord and its many nerves to every cell of the body in exactly the right amount at exactly the right time.

Toward that end, a child-oriented adjusting suite was designed to accommodate the children in comfortable surroundings for their regular chiropractic visits. Pediatric residents on staff in the Palmer Clinic will visit the center several times a week to check and adjust the children while their parents are present. It is particularly rewarding to know that these children are experiencing the unique benefits of chiropractic from the very beginning of life - true wellness/development care (as described on the Palmer Triangle of Care) that will help them express greater levels of health and function throughout their lives.

Emphasis on Full Range of Development

The Palmer/YMCA Childcare Center curriculum revolves around programming geared to helping children reach the developmental milestones appropriate to their age. Staff members evaluate each child four times per year to see how he or she is progressing in meeting those milestones, and to tweak learning plans as needed.

"Because our lesson and development plans are age-specific, our goals vary significantly from child to child and class to class," explains Courtney Pickens Schultze, director of the center. "For example, twice each day infants enjoy a personal massage that is geared to helping them develop a sense of trust and connection with their caregivers and that helps prime their muscles for the

development needed for sitting, standing and crawling.

"With toddlers, we focus more on gross and fine motor development and beginning language skills. Our 2-year-olds are learning to use their bodies to run, throw and kick, practicing their fine motor skills through pouring liquids, building towers and practicing the use of scissors. Our preschool children, ages 3 to 5, are really getting primed for kindergarten. We work on ABCs, number skills, matching skills and pre-reading skills. Music, dancing and building social skills are ongoing activities with every age group."

There is a distinct Montessori influence in the curriculum, as evidenced by some of the learning materials used and the creation of learning center areas, where children can move freely from one center to another, selecting activities that interest and stimulate them. Montessori pioneered the concept of how the structure and organization of the learning environment itself contributes to the development of the child.

"The learning centers allow children to grow through the natural activities of play and 'hands-on' experiences based on their own timetables of developmental progress," adds Ms. Schultze.

Making Nutrition a Priority

Unfortunately, many day-care centers receive inexpensive and often low-quality food through national grant programs. The resulting diet for the children tends to revolve around large quantities of simple carbohydrates and dairy foods.

At the Palmer/YMCA Center, care is being taken to ensure fresh fruits and vegetables form a core part of the diet. Sixth-trimester student Vanessa Helfrich appreciates the differences she noticed in the snacks provided at the center, compared to the day-care facility where her 4-year-old son was previously enrolled. "Tyler used to receive powdered juices and chocolate-covered cookies during snack time at his other day care. For parents who strive to provide good diets at home, it's upsetting to see those foods introduced so early. There is a lot more care given to nutrition at the Palmer/YMCA center." Helfrich is working to improve nutrition at the center even more as the student representative on a joint YMCA-Palmer Program Advisory Committee.

A breastfeeding room also offers mothers a convenient and comfortable way to meet the nutritional needs of the youngest members of the center. Mothers can drop in the center any time of day to sit quietly in a rocker and nurse their infants in a private, tranquil setting. What better way to support nursing mothers and ensure the best possible nutrition for a growing infant?

Helfrich considers it a great benefit to have the day-care center so close to campus when her youngest, Caelen, came to the center at the age of one year. "It is a huge plus for student moms with newborns to be able to stop in and connect with and nurse their children."

Although care in the center costs a little more than some of the in-home day-care and passive babysitting options available to students, Helfrich and her husband, also a sixth-trimester student, feel it's a worthy investment: "We are able to use student loans to help pay for the care, and we feel it's worth it to have our children in a facility where they are not only receiving outstanding care and education, but are also surrounded by people who understand and share our philosophies of health."

Learning Resource for Chiropractic Students

Having a college-sponsored day-care facility right down the street from the campus will not only help student parents with a practical concern; it also will create new learning opportunities for all

Palmer students.

"Many students have not had a lot of personal contact with infants or young children up until now," comments Janet Cuhel, DC, a 1993 Palmer alumna who holds the chiropractic diplomate in pediatrics and serves on the YMCA-Palmer Advisory Board. "It is very helpful for them to observe the developmental activities they are learning about in the classroom in real life. It's very different to read about the neurological and physical steps involved in an infant learning to sit up than it is to observe an infant over several weeks and watch as he gains the strength and coordination to accomplish the task on his own."

In addition, students who have more contact with infants and young children during their chiropractic education will develop greater skill and confidence in working with this segment of the population in practice - a key goal of every practitioner who understands the importance of lifetime chiropractic care. One-way viewing windows are built into each room so students (and parents) can observe the children in a natural setting. Students in the obstetrics and pediatrics course will complete rotations through the observation areas so they can see firsthand what they are learning in class, and discuss their observations with their professors.

In addition to serving as a learning resource for students, the center has the potential to provide data to chiropractic researchers. The Palmer/YMCA Childcare Center could provide one of the largest populations of infants and children in one setting who are experiencing regular chiropractic care from a very early age. Data on their growth, development, incidence of illness and other measures could be collected for research purposes and comparison with children who are not receiving regular chiropractic care. Potential research projects will be explored in the future when the center is at full capacity and, of course, only with parental consent.

We also hope that the child-care center will evolve into an information center for families. We want to see the center set a standard for parent education, perhaps by providing classes on a broad range of parenting topics. In addition to providing valuable information to parents, such classes would also give Palmer students additional opportunities to interact with parents and build speaking and interactive skills to take into practice.

Far-Reaching Impact

Although the new Palmer/YMCA Childcare Center simply provides quality care for a small group, it is our profession's first attempt at institutionalizing core chiropractic principles in a quality health and education experience for children. As Dr. Cuhel observes, "Imagine how we could improve the health of so many children by structuring the chiropractic lifestyle right into their daycare."

The center does provide an outstanding curriculum and enviable environment, and it will significantly enhance the pediatric education of Palmer students. But, most importantly, it will nurture the unfolding perfection of our children. To those who embrace our vitalistic philosophies, no higher goal exists.

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