



Daycare's secret to success: 'We always want to do better'

BY VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 7, 2011

Every six months, all staff members at the Open Door daycare in Abbotsford have to go through a thorough evaluation.

Each employee has to fill out their own five-page self evaluation and then sit down with the daycare's director, Jennifer St. Jean, to go over their strengths and weaknesses.

"Just so they know how they're doing ... what they are doing right and maybe something they can improve on," said St. Jean. "Because we always want to be, like any workplace, a better place to be."

Twice-yearly staff evaluations are just one practice that sets Open Door apart from a lot of the other daycares in the region.

Open Door, which has been operating since the 1980s, has a volunteer who comes in once a week to clean the toys. And it uses a monthly checklist to ensure every toy and piece of playground equipment is in working order and safe.

Provincial child care regulations contain strict staff-to-child ratios for all daycare facilities: eight-to-one for toddler care, 10-to-one for preschool.

Open Door's policy is to exceed those ratios by an extra staff member in each program, something St. Jean says means there are always lots of extra eyes on the playground and extra hands to help out.

"Our child-staff ratio is so great that we're always constantly watching and scanning the children, so fewer accidents happen," she said. "We're on top of everything."

The daycare's efforts seem to be paying off.

Of the nearly 3,000 licensed daycares in Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, Open Door is one of only nine to receive a "perfect" rating from health authority inspectors.

In order to determine how often a daycare needs to be inspected, health authority inspectors grade each facility on six separate factors -deciding, in each category, which of five statements best reflects the facility being assessed.

The result is a score out of 65. The higher the score, the more problems the facility has and the more visits inspectors will make.

A facility with a score of 29 or lower is usually rated "low," meaning it receives just one inspection a year. Those with a score between 30 and 39 are rated "moderate," meaning two inspections. And facilities with a score of 40 or more are rated "high," meaning three or more inspections.

Through the Freedom of Information Act, The Vancouver Sun obtained the inspection priority scores for all 3,000 licensed daycares as of fall 2010.

The lowest possible score a facility can receive on the assessment is 13 -which is what Open Door received. In an e-mail explaining Open Door's low score, Fraser Health pointed to its regular staff evaluations, high staff-to-child ratio and systems for promoting quality care that are a "best practice model" that other daycares should follow.

Open Door operates four separate programs -a toddler daycare, preschool, kindergarten-age care and an after school program for those up to age 12.

"We have just under 100 children come through our doors every day," said St. Jean. "It's fun. Never a dull moment."

Open Door is attached to the Church of the Nazarene but has a lot more space than a typical church-basement daycare, said St. Jean.

"From the road it looks small, but once you come in you can't believe how big it is," she said.

Each program has its own large room, said St. Jean, and the children have access to a big outdoor playground with sandboxes and monkey bars.

The daycare also has a large gymnasium inside with a playhouse, slide and loads of toys.

As a church daycare, said St. Jean, Open Door makes religion an integral part of its daily routine and expects its staff to be Christians.

"We have Christian-based circle time," she said. "We do things like, 'Jesus loves me' and we talk about stories from the Bible."

Asked to describe Open Door's philosophy, St. Jean said staff are constantly trying to improve the program.

"We always want to do better."

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