



It's the Little Things That Count

Ann Gadzikowski

How We Welcome Families to Our Full-Day Preschool Program



The smell of muffins baking, a soft couch with overstuffed pillows, and family pictures displayed with care—the elements that help us feel comfortable in our own homes are the same things that help families feel welcome in our early childhood programs. At least that's our experience at Evanston Day Nursery (EDN), a full-day preschool that has been serving an economically diverse population of families for almost 100 years.

Our NAEYC-accredited program, which includes three classrooms and more than 50 children, offers the professionalism of a well-run school in a cozy, homelike setting. EDN's facility is a two-story house with a big backyard playground. Before the children learn the name of our school, they often recognize us as "the school with the red door" because the entrance is a brightly painted door at the end of a front walk decorated with a tile mosaic. We have a large "waving window" near the entrance, a children's gardening area on the side of the house, and, nestled in the center of

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Photos by Allison Jones.

the building, a residential-style kitchen where we brew coffee for parents and bake the children's morning snacks.

In addition to our unique facility, EDN offers an unusual option to families—an open invitation for parents to call their children directly on the classroom phones throughout the day. For many children, a quick phone call from Mom or Dad is an

important part of the daily routine. Years ago, when we had simple rotary-dial phones, we taught the five-year-old children to answer the phones independently; but with the demands of new multiline phone technology, the teachers now screen the calls. The advantage of our fancy phone system is that the children feel very excited when they hear an announcement on the intercom: "Call for Tyler on line 2!"

The calls are usually short and sometimes a teacher steps in to help the child say good-bye. The teachers are especially attentive to the phone calls to new and very young children who may miss their families or feel overwhelmed by their new surroundings. On these rare occasions, a phone call may bring on tears and cries of "Mommy, I want to go home!" Although it takes commitment and training to respond to the children's emotions in an authentic way, the teachers welcome the phone calls as an opportunity for children to express what they are feeling. It is also an opportunity to reassure the children (and the families) that the teachers will keep the children safe and well while their parents are working. For the most part, though, the children take the calls in stride and their moods visibly improve each time they get a call.

TIES



photos and the encouragement to bring—and to hug, hold, and squeeze—an item of comfort from home. The children at EDN are attached to a wide variety of “lovies,” including a small blanket, a baby doll, a stuffed jaguar, a small family photo album, a mother’s scarf, an old transit pass, and shreds of a father’s old T-shirt. Keeping track of these items from home can be challenging for teachers, but our staff have a shared understanding of the importance of these links between home and school.

Although these are examples of small things, they all add up to a broad and holistic approach to working with families that is both respectful and collaborative.

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One of our families has a unique way of making the most of daily phone calls. When Dad drops off his son at school each morning, he says to his child, “When Mommy calls, please tell her that I love her.” Later, when the child takes the call from his mom, he enthusiastically discharges his important job. “Daddy loves you!” he announces with joy. “And I do too,” he adds.

The other small things that mean a lot to children and families are displays of family

