

So You Think You Want to Be an Infant-Toddler Teacher?

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Diana Finnie and some of the children under her care.

Diana Finnie's passion for caretaking has evolved into a rewarding career as an Infant/Toddler Teacher at the Jefferson City Daycare Center, JCDCC. She discovered this calling while working with young children as a Sunday school teacher in her hometown of Russellville. For Diana, education has always been a top priority, a way to further herself within her field. She studied child development along with dietetics and nutrition at Lincoln University and now regularly attends conferences and workshops. After being employed at Hermann's Department store for five years until its closing in 1990, she made the decision to move into childcare. She has been working at JCDCC for more than 15 years and remains committed to the center and the community it serves.

What does it take to work with children?

Diana Finnie: To work with children takes patience, kindness and unconditional caring. You must put the needs of each child first. You should have the ability to love any child and to recognize that the love of family is the glue that keeps it all together.

Why did you choose to work at JCDCC as opposed to a different center?

DF: My heart belongs to JCDCC. I personally know the Executive Director, Donna Scheidt, through Russellville United Methodist Church and after meeting her I began working here. Children are my passion; working at JCDCC fills my need to care for children and their families. I have a Foster Grandma volunteer, Dorothy Ponder, who has been with me for 11 years. I am truly blessed to have her daily. I also knew I would be able to continue with my education here. I finished my preschool and infant/toddler Child Development Associate, CDA, certificates and received my associate's degree in early childhood education through a TEACH grant. I go to conferences and workshops every year that fill me in on the latest research and inspire me so that I come back motivated and wealthy with information.

Most daycare centers do not have teachers that have degrees or are CDA certified. At JCDCC, our highly trained teachers know how to teach very young children. I feel that what I do every day is important. We believe that all children deserve quality care. JCDCC is a United Way agency and has a sliding scale fee that applies to the needs of our families. We provide an accredited early childhood

education program, a clean environment, two meals and a snack, as well as fenced in playgrounds in a safe environment.



Diana Finnie enjoys reading to children.

Describe some of your responsibilities.

DF: I'm not a desk person. I believe you're more alert when you're moving. They say you should exercise thirty minutes a day and I'm exercising eight hours a day! My responsibilities begin early in the morning on Monday. I assist another teacher with the arrival of the children. We help the children separate from the parents by reading books and interacting with songs to offer a calm and comforting environment. I spend a lot of time on personal care. I wash the children's hands before and after each meal, after diapering and after playing with messy things like paint, leaves or sand. I wash my own hands at least twenty times a day.

We eat together at the table three times a day, talking about the food we're eating and what we're doing in order to increase their vocabulary and make meals pleasant. At our center, babies must be held when they are drinking a bottle, which creates an opportunity to smile and talk and bond with the baby. Weather permitting, we go out to our playground where we assist the children learning to go up the climber and down the slide, sing songs, play follow-the-leader games, push wheel toys and swing in the tire swings. The infants get one-on-one interaction as we assist them while learning to walk, crawl, swing or carry on a conversation that is appropriate to their age.

Every day we learn about colors, shapes, animals and their sounds, our bodies and how they move and many other things. We learn songs and read lots of books. During nap time I fill out daily charts and observation notebooks for each child in my care. I meet and greet the parents in the morning and the evening and talk about their child's day. I listen for any news or concerns of the parents and note such concerns in their folders. I post on the bulletin board any needs for each child or upcoming events for the children or parents, and prepare my room for the next day and take our laundry to the laundry room. It's the foundation of life that fascinates me and keeps me working in early childhood. I get to know these kids so well and it's just heartbreaking when they move on.

What are some common misconceptions about your work?

DF: People think that daycare centers are babysitting houses. Come spend an hour here. You will quickly see that this is not a babysitting house! The staff here are trained to provide quality care and stimulate the brain so the children can work on verbal, physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills. One level prepares each child for the next level. I am not a babysitter, but a teacher who knows what is developmentally appropriate and what is not.

What is JCDCC's role within the community?

DF: As a United Way agency our primary focus is to provide quality affordable care for low income working families. However, we take all children whose parents are working or in school, which offers a great mix of children from all economic levels and gives us great diversity. We have parent meetings once a month sponsored by the Children's Trust fund. We offer a full evening meal, free childcare and have a guest speaker that talks about a parenting issue. Our volunteers rock babies or interact with an individual child or group of children. Our volunteer Board of Directors is a blessing in helping our center be the best it can be.

We also search for grants and work with church and civic groups to improve our center. The community helps us in so many ways. Some organizations may offer hats and mittens or food for our children. Sometimes we receive donations from people after their yard sale. Our need families receive help with toys for their children at Christmas time. Scholastic provides us with boxes of books a couple of times throughout the year. I served as a Parent Educator in a pilot program with the Parents As Teachers program for 11 years. We served ten families each month. Come, meet us, and see the love we give to families.

What advice would you give to women who want to work in your field?

DF: Find a center and observe or volunteer. Spend some time there and then come back on another day at a different time. You must love children and be physically fit – you bend, lift, crawl and move constantly. Be willing to continue your education. Apply for your CDA, which requires 120 clock hours of training in our field. I also love Lincoln University, which has an excellent education program. Once you get into the childcare system, networking becomes very important. At one conference I found a T-shirt that said, "children are my business" which is now my motto! This job is physically and mentally demanding, but the reward is worth it. What you give to families will come back to you many times. ■

Photos by Julie Smith