

MUCH MORE THAN A DAY CARE



KILEY CRUISE/THE WORLD-HERALD

Aerial Duron and Keyona Slaughter play in the infant room at the city's first Educare, in north Omaha. Educare accepts babies as young as 14 days.

Second Educare center gives more kids a solid foundation



Shane Harrison and Me'Khi Jones enjoy the taste of Educare's toys.

WHAT'S ON A LESSON PLAN FOR AN INFANT?

Children can start at Educare at about 2 weeks old. For children in their first weeks and months of life, teachers lay the foundation for skill development in terms of language, cognition, motor and social-emotional well-being: Does the child track you with her eyes? Does she respond to sounds? Is the child eating and sleeping well? Does the child push up on her tummy? Hold her head up? Does the child choose between two toys presented?

As the child nears his first birthday —
Does the child gesture in relation to wants and needs?
Use word approximation?
Eat with his fingers? Use big crayons?

Toddlers —
Does the child share with other students?
Can the child sort big and little items?
Does the child play with blocks, by himself and with others?

No matter how old your children are, be sure to talk to them. Use everyday things — like a trip to the store or ATM or a bus ride — to tell them what's going on.

Source: Educare of Omaha Director Gladys Haynes

BY MICHAELA SAUNDERS
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Making faces and cooing while holding a baby may seem fun, even a bit silly.

But that simple act isn't silly at all. It helps the baby build a relationship and feel secure, learn the most basic foundation for language and start to interact with the world around him.

It's the sort of thing you see at Omaha's two Educare centers, which provide free care for low-income children while their parents work or attend school.

Everything that happens with the youngest learners is designed to give them strong foundations in language, cognition, social-emotional and motor skills. Walk past the infant room, and you'll likely see a teacher cooing, rocking and talking to a baby.

On Thursday, the second center, at 31st and W Streets, celebrated its grand opening. The other center is at 2123 Paul St. Both are connected to elementary schools in the Omaha school district.

The centers are funded by a mixture of federal funding for Head Start and Early Head Start, private funding from the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, Nebraska's early childhood endowment fund and other grants. There is a waiting list of more than 300 children.

Fifty of the 120 infant slots are reserved for the children of teen moms. The babies can come to the center as young as 14 days old so mom can get back to school. Most Nebraska day care centers won't serve babies younger than 6 weeks old.

Others join at 2, 3 or 4 years old and stay in the year-round, all-day program until it's time for kindergarten.

The infants sleep when they're tired and are fed when they're hungry, allowing them to be on their own schedule, said Omaha's Educare director, Gladys Haynes. That often means more one-on-one time with a teacher when they're awake.

Most of the time, when an infant is awake, one of three teachers for each eight children is making sure the babies are stimulated. The state's minimum infant-to-adult ratio for licensed day cares is 4-to-1.

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Educare: In S. Omaha, more kids get a good start

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Teachers talk, babble and tell stories to build language. They make faces, encouraging the baby to mimic.

A teacher is on the floor with a baby as he plays on his tummy, strengthening his neck and shoulders. That teacher might walk around the room to see if the baby tracks her movements. Or make a noise away from the baby to see if the child responds.

Each child has an individual lesson plan because children develop at different rates, especially when they're that young, Haynes said. Staff don't sweat it if a child is 3 before he is fully

potty-trained or not walking until 16 months.

"No study has linked IQ and potty-training," Haynes said. What's most important early on, she said, is language.

Last year's Educare program evaluation showed that more than 76 percent of children 11 months or younger were on target in terms of language development, based on a measurement called the Early Communication Indicator. That measurement was more than 80 percent for children between 3 and about 4 years old.

And a study completed last spring showed children who learned in the nation's seven Educare centers for three years

or more headed to kindergarten with school readiness scores higher than the national average for all children.

At the end of the Educare school day, staff suggest activities to do at home.

Parents are encouraged, above all, to talk to their babies and toddlers — about what they see at the grocery store or ATM, what's around the house or even what their day was like. That exposes children to language and vocabulary even more than reading books.

The work with parents gives parents hope and changes what they believe is possible for their babies, said program evaluator

Lisa St. Clair, who works for the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

"Parents expect their children to get a master's degree, a doctorate," she said, which is atypical for low-income parents who often don't have high school diplomas.

St. Clair said one of the most important things Educare gives its students is a sense of themselves as learners.

"When they leave here, if they already perceive themselves as smart, they know they're a good learner, that's going to be all the way through."

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