

Friends & Neighbors

The Neighborhood House Newsletter

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Skills for School - Looking Towards a Brighter Future

There's no doubt that Neighborhood House's *Skills for School* program helps its young participants prepare for kindergarten. But while it may be easy to see the proficiencies the children develop with such skills as numbers, letters and colors, the journey they take to get there sometimes goes unnoticed.

It starts the moment these 3- to 5-year-olds walk in the door for the first time.

"For many of our children, this is their first time being away from their family, from the adults in their life," says Kara Schommer, Neighborhood House's director of programs. "We often see the uncertainty. They're thinking, 'Are my parents coming back? Why am I being left with people I don't know?'"

"So our first task is helping them understand that they are in a safe place," Schommer explains. A key, she says, is that every adult in the classroom is committed to connecting with the children in the best way for

each one of them – given their broad range of backgrounds, a one-size-fits-all approach would not work.

"We allow them to have their own experiences as they learn to trust a new environment," Schommer said. "We want them to see adults who are consistently demonstrating that they can be trusted and are caring."

Danielle DeRose, the program's child development specialist, recalls an experience with a preschooler named Hannah. "There were some tears during drop-off for the first week or two," DeRose says. "But little by little she developed relationships with the teachers, and that is what made her feel at ease at school."

"I've learned that the most important thing that teachers can do at the beginning of a school year," DeRose says, "is to invest time and energy building rapport with the children."



Neighborhood House™

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Building a shared community, one that values every individual and family, begins with creating opportunities for all children. The first years of a child's life are critical to their growth, and the early support they receive from parents and educators has huge implications for future emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Throughout St. Paul's East Side, West Side, and Highland Park neighborhoods we are leading efforts to make quality educational opportunities available to immigrant, refugee, and low-income families. Our two multicultural preschool classrooms prepare children for kindergarten success. Home visits by child development specialists help parents become involved in their child's learning while respecting the cultural traditions of the household. Recently, Neighborhood House added an experienced Karen parent educator to meet the needs of new and expecting parents from one of Minnesota's fastest-growing refugee populations.

In this issue of Friends & Neighbors you're going to hear stories from the frontlines of early childhood education. Learn how dinosaurs are preparing our children for success in math and science, join our gifted educators as they work with parents to ignite a passion for learning, and meet Claudia, an ELL student making a difference in our preschool classrooms.

Raising our children to achieve their fullest potential takes a village, and there are many ways you can make a difference. Become a sustaining donor! Volunteer in our preschool classrooms! Lead a school supply drive! Your support provides children and their families with the resources to learn, grow, and do well together.

Nancy @ Brady



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While different children progress at different rates, in most cases by the end of the program's first week "the kids are bouncing outside the classroom door anxious to start the day," she says.

Another critical component is that in a classroom full of diversity, including children who speak a number of different languages, it's what the children have in common that brings them together, sparks friendships, and creates an environment conducive to learning.

"The commonalities that bond the children always makes me laugh," says Valerie Dorschner, the program's early childhood teacher. "For example, two of our students have grown really close over the year, and the thing that they first bonded over was 'My Little Pony.' Other kids will bond over the fact that they are both 4-years-old or that they both have a mother."

"During the first few weeks of class, the interactions between the kids also involves a lot of jokes and making each other laugh," Dorschner adds. "The preschoolers have already discovered the art of using humor to break the ice."

Consistent routines in the classroom are also important to putting the kids at ease.

"Once the child is able to anticipate what's next, it brings them comfort to know they can understand and then master the schedule," Schommer says."

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One boy, when he began class, would not sit with the other children during circle time, Dorschner remembers, and instead he would lie under a table a few feet away from his classmates. But as he began observing class activities and listening to stories from his spot under the table, each day he moved closer and closer to the class, until he was sitting on the rug with the other children and participating.

"That sets the stage for a successful transition to kindergarten," Dorschner says. "Once a child has become comfortable being in school, that child is ready to learn."

Finally, despite not being in the classroom, parents have an important role to play in their child's development, according to Schommer.

"Many of these families come from countries where teachers are revered and beloved, and they would never think of infringing on the teacher's job," she says. "But we help them understand that in the U.S., parents also play a role in teaching their children."

Whether it's telling stories, counting, or looking at books, there's a lot parents can do at home to help support their child, according to Schommer. "Whether the learning takes place in the classroom or in the home," she says, "we are all in this together, with the same goals — getting these children ready for kindergarten."



Goals & Objectives of our Parent & Early Childhood Program

1. Families will demonstrate positive, responsive parenting techniques that support children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development, promote children's language development, and access community services as needed.
2. Children will be age appropriate in their social, emotional, cognitive, language and physical development and will receive early interventions when appropriate.
3. Children will be up-to-date with immunizations and complete an annual well-child check-up.

The First Teacher

When asked about the most influential teacher in your life, who would you choose? Many of us have clear memories of that person. At Neighborhood House, we see parents as that most important teacher.

At home, parents set a baseline for education. They have an opportunity to instill a curiosity and love of learning that will stay with their children for the rest of their lives. To support parents in the very central role they play in their children's education, we partner with the entire family to help children learn essential classroom and social skills like recognizing their ABCs, sharing, making friends, and holding a pencil with a three-point grip.

Some of this is done in our preschool classrooms, but other skills are more readily developed when reinforced at home. An education veteran, and program manager for Parent & Early Childhood Education at Neighborhood House, Amanda Williams has seen how crucial parents are to their children's development: "The things parents can teach their children at home are not only influential, they're life-changing. When parents take an active role in their child's education they encourage them to be more interested in learning



and are connecting with their child in a more intentional way. When you sit down with your child and work on an ABC puzzle, that's a very different interaction than when you're trying to get them to clean up their toys or go to bed."



Home visits are tailored to meet the needs of each individual student and their families, in the classroom and beyond. With many parents in the process of learning English themselves, learning exercises are offered that give parents and their children an

opportunity to practice developing skills in the comfort of home. When possible, these activities are offered in English and the primary language of the household. "One of the ways that children become kindergarten ready is by learning English, but we also want parents to know that we value their children learning their family's native language – we want them to know that we support them passing on their language, heritage and culture" says Williams.

To some, parenting is "the toughest job you'll ever love." Kids are messy, confusing, and most of the time — delightful. Regardless of where they come from, whether it's Laos, Mexico, Ethiopia, Russia, Somalia, Myanmar, or Peru — all parents want the very best for their children. At Neighborhood House, our Parent Education program helps empower parents to provide educational support for their children at all stages of early development.

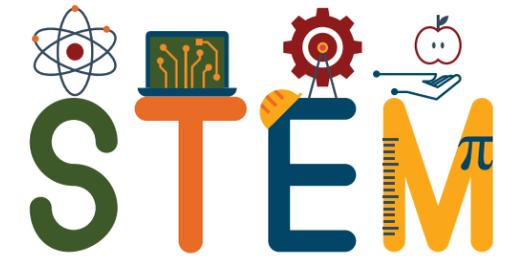


Rocket Science



By Valerie Dorschner

Are dinosaurs real, or make-believe? If we place a marble in a glass of water will it sink or float? How do planes fly? If you and your friends laid down head to toe, how many of you would it take to reach the length of a Stegosaurus? Curiosity about our natural world is fundamental to a love of science, and in our *Skills for School* classrooms, we're working to prepare our students for elementary school and beyond by igniting their passion for experimentation and discovery.



It seems that nearly every day we hear about the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics education in our children's classrooms. Collectively known as STEM, these disciplines are considered essential to the vitality of the American workforce, and, over the past decade, educational institutions throughout the U.S. have invested heavily in preparing students to thrive in an economy that is increasingly driven by the tech sector.

To help our children build foundations for school success in these areas, we create lessons centered on parts of the natural world that they gravitate towards. Children are interested in learning about the world around them, so we use topics like dinosaurs, machinery, and weather to guide that excitement into learning opportunities around measurement and the scientific method — the fundamentals of physical science.

During one popular unit on transportation, the students were curious about why boats float when so many objects sink. Together the class identified items that they'd like to test, then made a chart listing each item along with their predications on what would sink or float. Simple activities like these introduce children to the basic methodologies of science and are easily replicated at home so children and their parents can share a learning experience together.

Children are born little scientists, and are constantly manipulating their environment to see what happens. It may seem like a stretch to say that an 8 month old is learning physics, but they are. When babies sit in their highchairs and drop a toy off the edge to see how it lands, they're exploring their world — they're learning about gravity and natural forces. We focus on developing a foundation for the science and math skills they'll need and use throughout their lives, starting with elementary school.

Valerie Dorschner is a licensed Early Childhood Education Teacher with over 20 years of experience. She leads Neighborhood House's Skills for School preschool program, serving 40 children every week at locations in Highland Park and on St. Paul's West Side.

The Teacher Makes Housecalls

Within seconds of Abeba welcoming Danielle into the apartment, Melat, her 2-year-old daughter is eagerly showing off her new toys. She races up and down the narrow hallway between her bedroom and the living room bringing books, plastic cars, and favorite pieces of clothing with her. Melat's older brother, 4-year-old Biniyam, is fast asleep on the nearby sofa — napping after a busy day in preschool. His mother scoops him up and kisses him on both cheeks "it's time to get up, teacher Danielle is here with more games."

Designed to provide families with educational support and help prepare their children for kindergarten, Neighborhood House's home visiting program connects parents and their young children with free, in-home support to help them achieve their educational goals.



30
HOME
VISITS
per month

As a child development specialist with Neighborhood House, Danielle DeRose teaches daily preschool classes and visits 30 homes each month. During a typical visit she leads a variety of activities to help children develop the math and early literacy skills so essential to school success. Because every child and family is different, activities are specially tailored for each visit. Danielle will often create easy-to-replicate games or lessons

using inexpensive materials so that parents can make these exercises a part of their daily routine in the weeks between visits. When Danielle visits Abeba and her children they all sit on the floor and participate in activities together: "It means a lot to help my children learn," Abeba says. "Danielle brings games, toys, we read books and tell stories — I'm thankful for her. We always sit in a circle as a group, a family. Like a little school right in my home."

Danielle looks forward to every home visit because she has an opportunity to form a bond with students and their families that extends far beyond their work in the preschool classroom. "Home visits break down barriers between parents and educators. Families get to know the teachers more intimately, and teachers get to experience their students on their home turf — where they are most comfortable and confident. It puts us on the same team, and creates a space for parents to be actively involved in their children's education."

For parents looking to become more involved in their children's educational success, the benefits are immediate and long reaching. "My dream is for my children to have a good education." Abeba says. "I don't want them to work like I do

right now for \$8 per hour, I want them to be in a good place. I want them to live a good life, with a good education, and to be good people."



Abeba first learned about the home visit program when her son began attending Neighborhood House's preschool in Highland Park. She was amazed to learn that a teacher would be willing to visit her house and spend one-on-one time with her children. "I never knew teachers came to houses. When I learned about the program I thought 'That's kind of nice, we don't pay a penny and she comes to our house. That's a big deal!'"

"I don't want them to work like I do right now for \$8 per hour, I want them to be in a good place. I want them to live a good life, with a good education, and to be good people."



Eat the Octopus

Trust is a tricky thing. It can take weeks, months, even years to develop — only to evaporate over a single misunderstanding or careless word. When they begin working with Neighborhood House, many families may understand that education is extremely important to life in the U.S., but become nervous when faced with the layers of bureaucracy that complicate our educational system.

Several months ago, Amanda Williams, program manager for Parent & Early Childhood Education, worked with a family of recent immigrants who relied heavily on friends and neighbors for information about the educational system in the United States. Shortly after their child began attending our preschool program, Amanda offered a home visit to the child's mother, who hesitantly agreed. "After a few successful home visits with the family, the child's mother shared that at first she was nervous to have me in their home because she had been told by friends and neighbors that teachers only want to visit students homes to see if they are clean and would take the family's children away if anything is out of place."

Developing rapport with the families we serve is a tremendous obstacle, but also an opportunity. Relationships are everything in our work and the chance to overcome barriers has powerful implications for the future of our shared community. Once parents open their doors to our teachers, they end up looking forward to and loving these home visits. Parents seeking advice from a knowledgeable source are relieved when they are finally able to open up to someone they trust who knows their children well.

To effectively partner with parents and provide the best opportunities for their children, our teachers carefully navigate a diverse range of cultural perspectives and practices around parenting. We recruit staff who represent the communities we serve and can help bridge the language and cultural divide, but we also seek out flexible, culturally adaptive teachers who are passionate about building strong, meaningful relationships with all people.



Many Neighborhood House teachers experience the rich cultures of our participant community in surprising ways. Oftentimes, many of these encounters involve unfamiliar foods. During one visit, Amanda was given a large plate of Somali pasta and salad and told that the home visit wouldn't begin until she had finished. Another time she confronted her strong dislike of seafood when offered fresh octopus. The student's mother shared that while growing up in China, eating octopus was reserved for special family occasions and that offering it was her way of demonstrating gratitude. "When you have a genuine love of other people and cultures and are willing to take the time to get to know the families you're working with, they are naturally more comfortable sharing their lives with you." Amanda says. "I was so happy to know that she appreciated the work I was doing with her family, and I would eat all the octopus in the world for that."

Claudia's Story



One day, while out for a walk with her children, Claudia stumbled across the Wellstone Center. Excited to learn that Neighborhood House offered free English classes, she quickly enrolled and began attending daily classes. For several weeks Claudia attended classes, but didn't say much. She knew some English, but didn't speak because she was nervous. Gradually, supportive teachers recognized her English skills and helped her develop the confidence to take exams and advance to more challenging levels.

Claudia's mornings were filled with classes, but she didn't have much to do during the afternoon hours. A former physical education teacher from the Mexican state of Zacatecas, Claudia doesn't enjoy sitting around. "I like to help people," she says. "I like to work." One of her English teachers at Neighborhood House recommended that she look for volunteer opportunities that would allow her to use her skills and practice her emerging English. Claudia jumped at the opportunity to volunteer with children in Neighborhood House's Skills for School preschool classroom.

From the moment she began volunteering, it was clear that Claudia had a gift for working with children. On her first day, she sought out Hannah – a shy little girl who hadn't yet spoken in class – and the two became fast friends. With Claudia's

help Hannah began to learn the language of the classroom and became a star student. Danielle DeRose, a child development specialist, has worked alongside Claudia since 2014 and is amazed by her dedication to the students. "It only takes a few minutes of watching Claudia in the classroom to notice her genuine passion for teaching. She puts all of her heart into building relationships with the children, and they absolutely adore her. We are so fortunate to have Claudia's wisdom and positive energy in our classroom."



In English classes and while volunteering, Claudia feels safe and confident. As her English has improved, she has begun to branch out and find ways to become involved in the community outside of Neighborhood House by coaching two different soccer teams.

When asked what dreams she has for children in the classroom, Claudia reflects on her own experiences with prejudice. Even at a young age she sees children naturally separating into groups by language and skin color, but she's hopeful that experiencing diversity at a young age will promote a more tolerant future. "The kids are really smart, and I hope being in the classroom together will help them to grow up appreciating diversity. I hope they become friends, because a love for all cultures is important."

Investing with the Heart

By Pastor Bradley Schmeling



When I came to Gloria Dei four years ago, the church was moving outward into our community. There was a desire to become more connected, not just to our Highland Park neighborhood on the hill, but also with the Highland Park neighborhood that runs along West 7th.

I first learned of Neighborhood House through their work with the Francis Basket Food Market. It became a wonderful way for us to connect more deeply to our neighborhood, particularly in a part of our community that is often overlooked. Members of the church can always relate to the needs of hungry people, so we started collecting food, which led to collecting money. We've all learned more about Neighborhood House along the way.

When Gloria Dei first volunteered at one of Neighborhood House's produce distributions, it allowed us to have direct interaction with the people who came for food. As they were waiting for food we had an opportunity to talk with them, to learn about their world, their lives, and their challenges. These opportunities have been great, not only for me, but for people at Gloria Dei to have the kind of personal interaction that makes a difference. It's one thing to collect money or to send food to support programming, but to have an experience of the people who live in our neighborhood reminds us that we're really neighbors.

I love the concept of accompaniment that shapes how the staff of Neighborhood House interact with our neighbors. They take the time to listen and to walk alongside people. Together they build a program and a plan. I like that model of being alongside. For me, that's a theological value. God walks with us and so therefore we walk with one another. Implied in this approach is equity and mutuality. I want to think that it's not just us serving people with needs, but we grow and change ourselves through what they bring. Really, it's in the meeting where both are able to become fully human. It cements that we really need each other. Neighborhood House understands and approaches each of their services this way.

Jesus says "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I'm not a person of great wealth, but I support the work of Neighborhood House, and want to put my money to carry my heart to what is most important. As a sustainer, giving every month means that by the end of the year I've given more than I could by simply writing one check. But even more importantly, this ongoing gift is a monthly reminder of the investment that I'm making, not just financially, but with my heart as well.

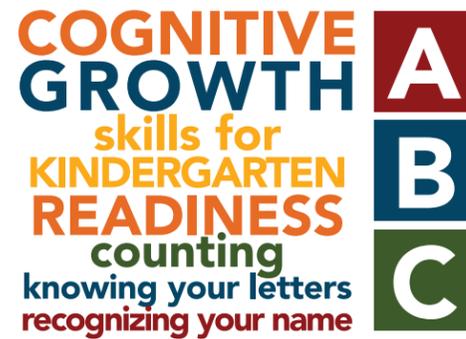
Pastor Bradley Schmeling is the Senior Pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, and has served as a member of Neighborhood House's Board of Directors since 2014.

Become a Sustaining Donor!

Sustaining Donors make a monthly gift to Neighborhood House, providing an ongoing base of support to meet the specific needs of children, youth and adults.

Your contribution is deducted automatically from the account or credit card of your choice. There's no need for reminders, and you'll feel good knowing your support is making a difference each and every month!

Becoming a Sustaining Donor is quick and convenient! Visit www.neighb.org and click "Donate Now" to fill out our online form (remember to check the "Make this a Monthly Gift" box). Or contact Karla Healey at khealey@neighb.org.



Teacher Valerie's Favorite Science Books for Kids

How Does a Dinosaur Say Goodnight

by Jane Yolen
"Contains great pictures that include the names of many different types of dinosaurs."

Planting a Rainbow

by Lois Ehlert
"I love the descriptive pictures. They really help teach how seeds and bulbs grow into plants and flowers."

The Very Hungry Caterpillar and The Grouchy Ladybug

by Eric Carle
"A classic, but still one of the best for teaching young children about insects and the life stages of a butterfly."

The Snowy Day

by Ezra Jack Keats
"I use this, along with real snow in the classroom, to teach about snow and the concept of melting."

"Scholastic Books offers book orders at many schools, and also have a series on topics like weather, seasons, animals, and health that I enjoy as well."



- We recently held our annual **Youth Awards**, celebrating the accomplishments and contributions of youth throughout our programs. Several youth took the stage for speeches and spoken word performances in front of friends and family.
- At a reception in early May we awarded \$16,000 in scholarships to 16 students, helping them pursue their college dreams through our **Constance Currie Scholarship program**.



- Beginning in June, we will be providing fresh fruits and vegetables to our community at **free produce events** within four unique St. Paul neighborhoods. Visit our website to learn more about how you can volunteer!
- **March Food Drive** efforts raised an astonishing **172,000 dollars and pounds** of food to support the work of our two Food Markets. Thanks to all who contributed!

Upcoming Events





Neighborhood House™

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A Blast from the Past - 1962



Walking out from the old Neighborhood House this week were Little Rebecca Diaz and Cassandra Phillips with their nursery school teacher Sharon Nolan. As they crossed the street under the watchful eyes of a Neighborhood teacher.