

Child Care Resource Center Holds Second Annual Caring for Babies Forum

By Caryl Lattof

"I had begun to think that children were master manipulators, but I learned today that children are just responding to a learned experience," concluded Judy Farr, a Cambridge-based family child care provider. As part of the Child Care Resource Center's (CCRC) 2nd Annual Caring for Babies Forum, Farr had just attended a topical workshop on developmentally appropriate growth and behavior, and how normal development assumes many forms during these stages.

Farr, with more than 70 parents and child care providers, participated in the Forum on Saturday, March 22 at the M.E. Fitzgerald Middle School in North Cambridge. Focused on the care and development of infants and toddlers, the Caring for Babies Forum offered free workshops and information sessions as part of CCRC's Zero-to-Three Initiative in Cambridge.

It kicked off with a welcome from Mayor Michael Sullivan, who stressed the importance of early learning to prepare children for kindergarten. "We are committed to school-readiness," he said.

Following the mayor, keynote speaker Peggie O'Hare, Inclusion Consultant, encouraged infant and toddler activities that stimulate the senses and foster the spirit of play. "Play is really the way that children learn," she said.

O'Hare emphasized the critical parallel between learning and gross motor development: "Children who have difficulty integrating vestibular [sense of balance] and proprioceptive [sense of body position in relation to itself] information are at risk for developing learning disabilities at an older age." Early warning signs for developmental issues include clumsiness, fearfulness, and a slowness to reach motor milestones. But O'Hare advised against rushing a toddler into walking. Crawling is a very important stage, she noted, "because it provides smooth vestibular movement" that impacts the development of fine motor skills at later developmental stages. Poor handwriting, for example, can be a result of a too-short crawling stage.

Following the Keynote address – which was interpreted for Spanish-speaking attendees – parents and providers participated in their choice of two 90-minute topic-focused workshops, including *Literacy Development*, *Baby Signing*, *Playing with Infants & Toddlers*, and *Love & Limits: An Introduction to positive Approaches to Discipline*, among the twelve offerings. Two workshops were led in Spanish.

Elaine Severino is an experienced family child care provider who attended the Love & Limits workshop. "I care for a 3-year-old who lets out blood-curdling screams on a regular basis. Today I learned what to do to help her express herself in another way," she said.

Danielle W. is a mother of a 6-year-old son who has no interest in books or in learning the alphabet. She attended the Literacy Development workshop, where she learned that books are best viewed as tools with which one can have wonderful conversations. "I've tried everything," she said, "Today I got the chance to share my worries with other parents and teachers, who told me what worked for them. I was also very relieved when the presenter said that most kids catch up at some point. I feel like I have new resources and that I am not alone in this struggle."

Providers and parents like Severino and Danielle W. sat side-by-side in a unique learning environment where they shared about similar experiences with children. They were able to learn about each other's perspectives and see their role in caring for children from the other's point of view. Many participants agreed that the day was invaluable, whether a parent, provider or a parent-to-be. "I learned practical tips on how to deal with some of the issues that seem to come up again and again with the children I look after," said one provider, "Today has been terrific – and such a big help! Really it has."

Along with the free workshops, breakfast, lunch and child care were provided. Eight raffle items were given away just for signing in at the Forum. The prizes included books, museum visitor passes, and gift certificates. "You made it so easy to be here," said one parent participant. "It's a great learning opportunity – for anyone who has kids. Thank you!"

CCRC was able to offer the Caring for Babies Forum at no cost due, in large part, to a long list of generous sponsors and collaborators, who include: CCRC, Acorn Child Care, Agenda for Children, Center for Families of North Cambridge, City of Cambridge Department of Human Services, Cambridge Community Foundation, Cambridge Community Learning Center, Cambridge Community Partnerships for Children, Cambridge Community Television, Cambridge Health Alliance, Cambridge Housing Authority, Cambridge Public Library, Cambridge Public Health Nursing, Cambridge Public Schools, Cambridge School Department Home-Based Program, Cambridge - Somerville Early Intervention, Cambridge & Somerville WIC, Chelsea Human Services Collaborative, Concilio Hispano, Families First, First Steps Day Care, The Guidance Center Infant Toddler Services, Henry Bear's Park, Harvard Children's Institute, MA Department of Education Early Learning Services, Massachusetts Family Literacy Collaborative, Museum of Science, New England Aquarium, Parents Forum, Star Market, Target, and Zoo New England.

The 2nd Annual Caring for Babies Forum was designed to raise community awareness about the critical importance of caring for infants and toddlers and promoting their growth and development in the first years of life. What was present in the closing moments of that day was a parent and caregiving community devoted to providing the very best learning environments for children, to give each child the best possible chance for developing into a happy, productive adult. Their enthusiasm said it all.