



PHOTOS BY LINDA THOMAS

Changing the World, One Child at a Time

A day in the life of St. Mike's Tikes

Parents, many with coffee cups in hand, arrive at St. Mike's Tikes in Olympia as early as 7 a.m. to drop their children off for child care. A few hugs and kisses later, they leave to begin the workday with their minds already racing to accomplish tasks on their "to do" lists.

Meanwhile, the happy chatter of children stacking blocks, working on puzzles and even practicing a musical instrument fills the building.

That's how a typical day begins in a Catholic Community Services child care and early learning center. CCS serves about 250 children through four facilities.

For parents, child care isn't a convenience; it's a necessity so they can work. And for children, the center isn't just a place to hang out; it's an environment where they learn and make friends.

"Child care is near and dear to the CCS mission," said Dawn Larsen, director of CCS child care and early learning programs. "All children deserve a loving, nurturing environment, and we're here to help them grow into responsible, caring adults."

Brain development research has led to one of the biggest changes for child care in the seven years that Larsen has been with CCS.

A newborn's brain is only about one-quarter the size of an adult brain. It grows to about 80 percent of adult size by 3 years of age and 90 percent by age 5.

"Children are born learning," Larsen explained. "Even a few years ago we used to send kids to preschool so they would be ready to learn when they went to school. The emphasis today is on making sure children are fully prepared, successful learners before they get to kindergarten."

The National Institute for Early Education found that children who know more words when they enter school do better than their peers.

Larsen, a licensed mental health therapist, said children who have had little contact with adults and limited opportunities for learning enter school "light years" behind the others.

"One of our top priorities is to make sure our kids, who are often from low-income families, enter school on a level playing field," she said. "That's why the curriculum and teachers are so important at CCS centers."



'Happy children who are eager to learn become adults who make a difference in the world.'

-Deb Harris, CCS



Washington Governor Christine Gregoire agrees with the need to provide better learning opportunities for children from birth to 5 years old.

In April, Governor Gregoire signed a bill into law that creates a new state agency: the Department of Early Learning. Among other things, the agency will come up with standards for child care programs and recommendations for attracting and retaining preschool teachers.

“**Y**te gustarán, tal vez,” Mary Lou Jones said as she read a Spanish version of the Dr. Seuss book, *Green Eggs and Ham*, to her preschool class.

When she was hired at St. Mike's Tikes she was surprised to learn she'd receive benefits. She earns vacation time, along with the medical, dental and vision package that all CCS employees receive.

“That is rare in child care,” she said. “This is a great place to work and it's a consistent program for the children because the staff is taken care of.”

Low wages and staff turnover are two concerns for most child care centers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately one third of child care staff leave the field each year because of low wages.

“It's a blessing that our staff has a lot of education and experience,” said Deb Harris, director of St. Mike's Tikes. “Nobody was deciding whether they should flip burgers or work in child care. They came here because it's what they choose to do.”

A low staff turnover rate was one factor that helped St. Mike's Tikes

win accreditation a few years ago from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Harris said even though St. Mike's Tikes faces the same challenges as other programs – funding is always a concern and their facility is aging – it is changing the world, one child at a time.

“It's not our mission to serve the greatest number of children. Our goal is to serve children in a great way,” Harris said. “Happy children who are eager to learn become adults who make a difference in the world.”

- Linda Thomas

CCS CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING CENTERS

Bremerton

Caring Place Child Care and Early Learning Center
Ages 4 weeks – 12 years
360-479-9229

Olympia

St. Mike's Tikes
Ages 18 months – 12 years
360-586-2960

Poulsbo

St. Olaf Child Care and Early Learning Center
Ages 18 months – 6 years
360-779-5791

Seattle

Martin Luther King Jr. Day Home Center
Ages 4 weeks – 6 years
206-328-5670