

Putting Children First



Children First is a small nonprofit early education program in Durham, North Carolina. Founded in 1990 by a group of teachers and parents, the program is governed by a board of directors comprised of parents, teachers, and community members. It is staffed by two teachers who share administrative and curricular duties. Like a family child care program, Children First is housed in a residence. It serves 12 children in one mixed-age group. Coteachers Donna and Sarah offer children challenges that they can reach—with a stretch. This helps children believe in their genuine ability to strive and achieve. The environment is open, available, and appealing to encourage children to pursue their own ideas as much as possible.

DONNA KING, MA, worked with a group of teachers and parents to found Children First. She has been teaching, directing, and—most of all—learning there for more than 24 years. Her three children, Cara, Anna Grace, and Josh, are all Children First graduates.

We interview individual children as part of the parent-teacher conference process. We use the same set of questions for every interview, so over time we see changes in the child's communication skills and perspectives on learning, friends, curriculum, and the school community.

A rich, readable, and accessible environment lets children make choices. They can select materials, decide where to play, and take care of their basic needs.

Anything children can do inside, they can do outside—only louder, bigger, and with more freedom. In addition, many developmentally important activities can happen only outdoors. Large group pretending games that involve noise, running, and story lines that move from place to place are typical at Children First.



We teach with cameras, recorders, and notebooks in hand. Documenting the story of each child's development is integral to our teaching practice. At the end of the day we download the photographs and audio and decide which stories to write up for the children's portfolios. The portfolios tell children, *You are the hero in your own life story, and your life story is a story worth telling.*



Other parts of the outdoor environment include a water deck for sensory play; the sand river for engineering and pretending; a mud kitchen; lots of big blocks for building pretend play settings and obstacle courses; easels; unit blocks; and the alone space, with a cloth hammock where children can take a break from the action.

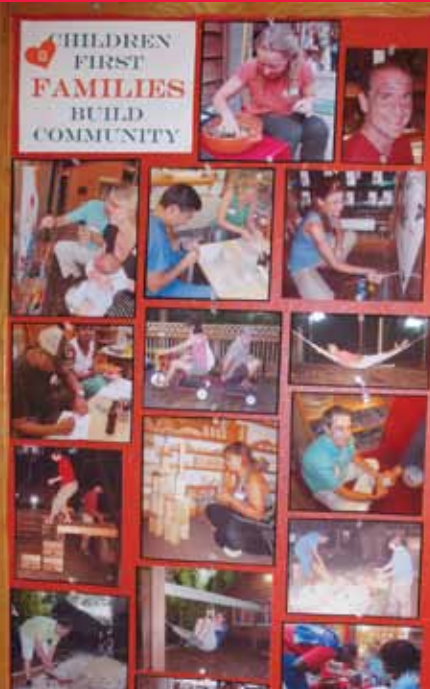


When the learning environment satisfies the senses, children are better able to relax and focus. When the environment is organized, children can make sense of what's available and experiment in positive and intentional ways.



We divide the group for lunchtime so children can have genuine conversations with each other and with a teacher. The older children give a daily pretending report that keeps the teachers in touch with their ongoing play. The children share one good thing from the morning, a practice in cultivating gratitude and optimism. They discuss their ideas and opinions on a variety of topics, including the books read together at the table.





Once you've been a Children Firster, you're part of the community for life. The teachers and children call graduates on their birthdays each year to sing "Happy Birthday." In the bathroom hang photographs of all the children who have been part of Children First. Graduating children paint a tile before they leave. Those tiles hang in a long colorful line above the classroom windows.

We believe that

- Children are real people—just very young ones—who merit the same respect and consideration we give adults.
- In a mixed-age group, older children are teachers and leaders. With them, younger children learn to navigate and benefit from the environment more quickly and with less instruction from teachers.
- Every inch of the environment can contribute to children's well-being; children and teachers thrive in an environment that awakens and pleases their senses.
- Young children develop best when their days include long, uninterrupted blocks of time for cooperative pretend play and when there are a wide variety of open-ended materials available for that play.
- The outdoors is children's natural habitat and they should be able to access the outdoors as often and as freely as possible.
- Children learn best in a "caring conspiracy" of adults, where the families and teachers have a shared interest in and sense of responsibility for all the children.
- Every child and family should feel accepted and experience a deep sense of belonging: *I am an important part of this place and I will always be known and welcome in this place.*



The structures in the loft room help children build gross motor skills and are great settings for pretend play. The room is a little dark, and the children control the light fixtures and a projector to match the level of light to their pretending ideas. We add the monkey bars in January. By then the children are ready for the extra physical challenge and are able to communicate with each other to safely manage their play. **TYC**