

**Centre guides children's play for healthy development**\_12 Dec 2007 \_Byline: Ann Harvey - Source: Yorkton This Week

A tour of Accent on Kids is a trip through colour and motion and the voices of children having fun.

These children are learning the things they should be learning for their age and development as they play, says executive director Rhonda Oystriick.

She stops and talks with the children as she provides a tour through the rooms of children at various ages.

Bending down, sitting on the tiny chairs or even sitting on the floor with them, she addresses the children in their space. It's important to be respectful, she said.

Oystriick discusses the centre at 250 Independent Street with enthusiasm that hasn't dimmed through her 18 years of guiding children through their development.

"This centre has existed for more than 30 years, obviously under a couple of different names. I believe at the start they were in a church basement.

"Then we moved to a place on Livingstone where the credit union parking lot is. There was a building there.

"We were housed with S.I.G.N. (the Society for the Involvement of Good Neighbours) at that time."

At that time it was called an early learning and child care centre.

"I take pride in the centre because of how we have changed the program that we offer to our families.

"When I went to school 18 years ago our program was more geared toward the adult or the Early Childhood Education agenda."

But, as more is learned about how children develop, strategies change, she said. It's not just "that bad word babysitting.

"We're not just providing child day care. If we don't continue with following up on research and implementing it into our program than we probably should stay with the word day care."

Oystriick praised her staff for their devotion to always improving. "We're always seeking information from other organizations and professionals."

Now the centre's environment is set up so that age-appropriate things which help them in their development are available in each of the rooms.

It has four rooms - one for infants (six weeks to 17 months), two-year-olds, three-year-

olds and four-year-olds - and is licensed for 66 children. There is some overlap in ages because children are moved from room to room in groups to avoid difficult transitions.

Some come for part of the day or for a full day and the centre has after-school programs - one at Columbia School for its students and one at the centre for St. Mary's School students. "They can stay with us until the children leave Columbia or St. Mary's."

Oystrick said children need to learn certain skills at certain ages. This is achieved through play.

The centre is set up to allow them the correct activity required for their cognitive and physical development. "Our staff are also in that room providing opportunities that also meet their needs and development.

Children are exploring their environment and those opportunities are there for them to practise fine motor skills."

The children are having fun. "They're learning through play.

It's a variety of play they need at this time of their lives, she said. "If we have nothing but Lego in the room for the two-year-olds, we're not meeting their needs.

"They need to be exposed to an environment that may have two to three steps so they can practise walking up stairs. We're always looking for new opportunities and new experiences for them."

The rooms feature many, many things including jars containing coloured objects, allowing the children to learn colours at the appropriate time.

The staff observe the children and encourage them to engage in the activities they need at their developmental stage. They will also identify concerns, such as failure to achieve developmental steps emotionally or physically.

"If we have children who may not be developmentally where they should be, what we do is we work with their families or other professionals meeting and making suggestions for programming requirements.

"We make recommendations or recommendations may come from public health if the family has gone to them.

"No matter who that child is, we need to provide the program that the child would need to be successful."

Parents have various objectives, she said.

"People bring their children to the centre because they need child care and because they want their children to interact with other children that prepares them for kindergarten.

"Children who are in school who haven't been around groups of children before, that's

huge for them." They could have already made that adjustment.

In some cases mothers continue to bring a child although they may be on maternity leave, just so their child can continue with the group.

The centre accepts children with diverse needs, still meeting their needs for development, she said. "We want them to grow, to be as successful as they can be and if we're not providing stimulating environments as well as materials they're not going to reach their potential.

"There's a whole different concern when you talk about diverse needs children. Some children may just need the experiences and involvement with their peers.

"Others may need support staff to be there to guide them through. I would say just assisting them to engage in the environment, to engage in the activities that are going on.

"Fully abled children can do that on their own."

Oystrick said she's proud of the way the centre has constantly improved as more knowledge is available. Her only concern is a funding problem.

"We're non profit. If we didn't have government funding we would have to charge \$1,000 a month per space for a child. Right now a pre-school space is \$400."

That's critical because there aren't enough child care spaces in the city. "The reality is parents are working. Parents have to work and they need to have access to affordable quality day care.

The centre faces a dilemma because of the way government funds it and other centres. "For the last few years they have been increasing funding."

That funding includes a requirement for specific pay for staff. "It's great that they truly want to retain employees but now operations are kind of suffering," she said. "There just isn't money for upkeep of buildings,.

Although new centres are all right in this circumstance the older centres are left with a difficult problem.

"If your operational grants don't increase, what are you going to do but hike child care fees."