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SustainableLife, The Portland Area's Guide to Green Living

Fostering eco-healthy day care

Oregon Environmental Council uses checklist to assess centers

By Julia Silverman

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JAIME VALDEZ / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP

Preschoolers at ChildRoots, a green day care center in Southeast Portland that uses standards developed by Oregon Environmental Council, listen during storytime.

Weekdays around 5 p.m., parents descend on ChildRoots day-care center in Southeast Portland to pick up their children. Christina Unga heads into the street, on a mission to make sure no cars are idling while children are dawdling.

Reducing exhaust from running engines is No. 4 on a checklist for the Oregon Environmental Council's Eco-Healthy Child Care program. It's one of 30 provisions that Unga, like 131 other Portland day-care providers, has agreed to abide by to get certified.

Oregon Environmental Council launched the program five years ago, while searching to raise the profile of children's environmental health issues. Council staff decided they could reach a large number of children cost-effectively through day-care centers, says program coordinator Hester Paul.

Parent Suzanne Hallerman says her two youngsters at ChildRoots are learning to make environmentally responsible choices, like not being wasteful.

The ever-evolving checklist includes basics like a comprehensive recycling program for paper, cardboard, glass, aluminum and plastic bottles, and using only nontoxic art materials. There's also more specialized items, like minimal use of chlorine bleach, no mercury thermometers or particle board furniture.

Three items on the list are absolute requirements for certification: a ban on employee smoking during operating hours; the use of cold water for drinking, cooking and baby formula to prevent lead exposure; and the use of nontoxic controls on insects and weeds.

Organics not required

The checklist has been carefully winnowed for maximum impact and accessibility, Paul says, while recognizing that money is often tight, particularly at small, home-based centers.

That's why the checklist makes no mention of organic food and snacks, though Paul calls that "a great goal."

Overall, centers aiming for certification need to be able to answer "yes" to 24 of the 30 items on the list. For Unga, the checklist is so ingrained that she can quote it almost verbatim — no treated playground equipment; no toys that might contain lead; no Bisphenol A, or BPA, in eating or drinking utensils; and only nontoxic cleaning products.

She can wax poetic about scavenging at the ReBuilding Center for sinks and cabinets before the September 2007 opening of her center on Southeast 17th and Burnside, and about quizzing contractors on what sort of silicone caulk they were using.

Her playground lacks the familiar plastic play structures seen all over town. Instead, there's a grassy mound dotted with foraged tree stumps for children to scramble up and perch atop, and a concrete cave structure, perfect for hiding inside.

Parents may send children to school in disposable diapers, but during the day they'll be changed into the school's own stash of organic cloth diapers, laundered on site by an energy-efficient washing machine. No disposable wipes are allowed. Every Child- Roots classroom contains a small basket full of old scraps to wipe bottoms, faces and hands.

All books are checked out from the library. Toys are often as basic as a bin full of pine cones.

Compliance voluntary

Unga would like to see the program be more rigorous, with more items required.

“There’s a lot of wiggle room there,” she says.

Some day-care centers may assume they’re in compliance but overlook some targets. They got rid of rubber duckies and beach balls to comply with the guideline against toys with polyvinyl chloride (PVC), but still allow vinyl bibs.

Right now, since compliance is voluntary, the centers that have been stampeding to participate are more likely to have an environmental bent. Accordingly, the OEC made a point of reaching out to corporate centers, like Portland-based Children’s Creative Learning Center, which runs 108 day-care centers in 37 states, and to the 110 centers located in federal office buildings around the country.

Fran Durekas, founder and chief development officer at Children’s Creative Learning Center, says participation in the program has been a selling point for her centers, particularly in environmentally conscious places like parts of Colorado or the San Francisco Bay area.

Jude Foster, head of Harmony Montessori School in outer southeast Portland, says going eco-healthy has been money and time well-spent.

“When you’re first getting on board, there are expenses, like you take the extra leap of getting new playground equipment,” Foster says. “But it’s not a high expense once you’re rolling with it. It’s part of what we do, and we don’t even question it anymore.”

PROGRAM SEEKS NATIONAL CLOUT

The Eco-Healthy Childcare Program hatched five years ago in Portland has snowballed into a nationwide movement

The Oregon Environmental Council has certified more than 1,400 eco-healthy day-care providers in 47 states, plus Australia and Canada. And founders are readying a merger in October with Washington, D.C.-based Children’s Environmental Health Network, with an eye on influencing national policy.

Oregon Environmental Council experimented first in Oregon, then put out feelers to seven other states, says program coordinator Hester Paul. All seven – Washington, California, Colorado,

Maine, Massachusetts, Florida and New York – eagerly accepted. OEC staff flew in to give guidance and run training sessions, and things took off from there.

The upcoming merger could add more teeth to the guidelines for eco-healthy day-care programs, says Nsedu Witherspoon, executive director of the Children’s Environmental Health Network.

One major goal, she says, is to use the two agencies’ combined firepower to persuade a few “early adopter” states such as Oregon to include some of the checklist items in state licensing standards. That means that all child-care centers in those states would have to comply or risk losing their licenses.

That would help eliminate the “preaching to the choir” problem, Paul and Witherspoon say.

The new entity would provide states with the scientific basis for making the guidelines mandatory, using findings of the federal Centers for Disease Control and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Making such change is never easy in a field like child care, says Kitty Lake, acting administrator for the child-care division of the Oregon Employment Department, which sets state licensing standards.

“The more expensive ones, it is hard to mandate them, because providers may not be able to attain that,” she says. “Health and safety comes first for the kids, but we have to balance regulation against supply.”

Paul acknowledges some centers may be certified without fulfilling all the checklist items, or become less than vigilant once they’re approved. Right now, just two signatures are needed for proof that the facility has complied with the requisite number of items on the checklist. One of the signers must be the center’s owner or director; the other must be a parent or non-employee.

After the merger, Witherspoon says the groups hope to do seven to 10 random assessments a year of certified centers. Centers would be given two days’ notice.

“If providers understand that there is a small chance that they may be chosen for a random assessment, they will be even more careful to continually comply with the checklist,” Paul says.

– *Julia Silverman*

FIND OUT MORE

•To find an eco-healthy daycare program certified by Oregon Environmental Council:

<http://oeconline.org/our-work/kidshealth/ehcc/find-an-eco-healthy-child-care>

•The Eco-Healthy Child Care checklist:

<http://oeconline.org/resources/publications/kitsandtipsarchive/2007EHCCChecklist>

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