



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

EARLY LEARNING CENTER
FOR RESEARCH & PRACTICE

Early Learning Center History

The Early Learning Center first opened in 1927 as a nursery school program started in the Jessie B. Harris Home Economics Building. In the early 1930s, a nursery school building at 1206 White Avenue was constructed. It was one of the first structures in the country designed and built specifically for the use of preschool children. Eventually the program was named the University of Tennessee Child Development Laboratory. The day care program for preschoolers began at the Golf Range facility at 3700 Sutherland Avenue in 1966. The infant day care program opened in 1968 and the toddler day care program in 1981 at the Nursery School Building.

In the fall of 1982 the half day nursery school program was discontinued and all programs were converted to full-day childcare. After extensive renovations to the kitchen and food service areas, the infant and preschool programs moved to 1206 White Avenue. The facility on Sutherland Avenue was also renovated so that it could adequately house the toddler program.

In 1983 the special education component was added to the preschool program. The inclusion of children with special rights became a welcomed mission and goal of the program. The program converted to a full-time 12-month schedule as an additional step to meet the needs of working parents in the fall of 1986. Also in 1986, the foster grandparent program, placing grandparents in the laboratory programs to work with children with special rights, was initiated. The special education component was expanded to include the infant and toddler programs in 1987.

In 1987 the program became the first child care program in Knoxville to receive accreditation from the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, a division of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Also in 1987, the Cumberland Child Care Center was established as the first employer-sponsored early education center at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Cumberland Child Care Center began operations under the UTK Personnel Office. In 1989 the administration of the center was transferred to the Department of Child and Family Studies as a first step in the expansion of university childcare programs.

In 1991 the Cumberland Child Care Center was restructured as one of the Child Development Laboratories' programs. This became the CDL's third site (White Avenue, Cumberland, and Golf Range), and a total of ninety-nine children ranging in age from six weeks to five years were served.

In 2000, the Cumberland facility was closed and newly renovated space in the Laurel Avenue Student Apartments became the third Child Development Laboratories' site. An eighth classroom was opened to expand the number of children served to a total of 111. The programs were simultaneously restructured to create the infant and toddler programs at Golf Range and Laurel Avenue, and the preschool program at White Avenue.

In July 2005, the Child Development Laboratories became the University of Tennessee Early Learning Center for Research and Practice. This change came from a desire to better reflect the diverse mission and goals of the program and the Department of Child and Family Studies. In August 2006, the Early Learning Center for Research and Practice initiated a new kindergarten program at the White Avenue location.

In August 2007, the Laurel Avenue facility closed for extensive remodeling, and a newly constructed building at 2010 Lake Avenue became the site for the infant-toddler classrooms at the Early Learning Center for Research and Practice.

In July 2011 the Early Learning Center for Research and Practice closed the Golf Range facility and opened a new facility: Lake Avenue at 21st Street. This facility serves two toddler classrooms and one preschool classroom.

Early Learning Center Philosophy

Since the mission of the UT Early Learning Center is a multi-faceted one - university students, young children, and the community - our philosophy must be equally encompassing. Therefore, we consider the following statements as the guide and focus of our experiences with all children and adults.

We believe that children and adults are:

- Capable, competent, rich and powerful in ideas and abilities
- Both uniquely individual and yet similar to others, in thinking and development
- Active organizers of experience and thoughts
- Interested in learning primarily through meaningful human relationships
- Constantly constructing and re-constructing their own theories and understandings of how the world works

Our overall goals focus our efforts on providing learning opportunities that can enable the individual to work towards developing the competencies needed to function successfully and meaningfully in a changing world.

We aim to help children and adults:

- Trust, respect and invest emotionally in meaningful personal relationships
- Acquire and use effective and satisfying problem-finding and problem-solving skills and strategies
- Be curious about the natural and social world and derive skill and pleasure from learning, exploring and developing ideas, theories and competencies
- Understand and organize information about their physical, social and intellectual environment
- Develop abilities and interests in representing their ideas in many varied and complex ways, through the use of many media (languages)
- Develop the ability to act and think independently with assurance and confidence in their ideas, convictions, abilities and strengths
- Develop effective means of self-regulation and control, which will enable them to learn, think and act with feelings of self-worth and self-confidence within a complex social and intellectual world
- Skillfully communicate ideas and feelings

We hope to achieve these goals by:

- Providing children and adults with open-ended, process-oriented activities and investigations that acknowledge and value play as the preferred medium of learning for young children and beneficial to adults
- Providing adequate amounts of time for exploration, skill building, and thinking
- Having an intellectually complex and rigorous curriculum filled with possibilities
- Using a variety of quality materials designed to promote active exploration and challenges
- Expecting learners to direct and construct their own learning with the assistance of perceptive, reassuring, and responsive teachers
- Offering a variety of solitary, small, and large group settings within carefully prepared indoor/outdoor environments that enables children and adults to learn from each other
- Providing many opportunities to explore and develop competence in the use of representational media (art, construction, music, movement, literacy, play)
- Providing a developmentally appropriate foundation in the content areas of math, literacy, science, and social studies

In order to successfully accomplish this mission, we expect to create a social and physical environment, in which teachers can:

- Develop strong, collaborative and empowering relationships with each other, children, and their families based upon mutual respect
- Observe children's behavior to determine interests and emerging understandings as the basis of curriculum planning
- Act as a facilitator for learning by observing, questioning, modeling for, provoking and reinforcing children's efforts, interests and ideas
- Encourage children to use each other as facilitators of learning and a source of important social relationships
- Structure aesthetically pleasing and intellectually rich environments that meet children's needs, capitalize on their interests, and guide their behavior
- Provide curriculum possibilities that utilize creative and enticing materials and concepts for children to explore and become skilled at using
- Document the actions, thoughts, theories, and strategies used by both children and adults as they attempt to make sense of their environments and ideas
- Use documentation and reflection as collaborative tools for curriculum development
- Encourage the use of problem solving skills in all situations including social conflict and relationship building
- Enjoy and have passion for their valued work with children, families and each other

Early Learning Center Mission Statement

The mission of the Early Learning Center for Research and Practice (ELC) is to foster scientific understanding of young children's development. Prominent features of the ELC mission are the investigation of **development in context**, the study **children of and families at risk**, and the generation and utilization of **informed practices**. The ELC accomplishes this mission through (a) interdisciplinary research, (b) academic programs for undergraduate and graduate students, (c) early education programs for young children, and (d) outreach, advocacy, and public policy.

Interdisciplinary Research: The ELC leads and supports interdisciplinary research initiatives that share the common purpose of making qualitative differences in the lives of children and families. To this end, projects are typically conducted in natural settings, which better ensures the findings are socially significant and readily applied by parents and professionals. Research is supported by university, state, federal, and private agencies and addresses a wide range of current and emerging issues relevant to contemporary society. Current research includes: teacher inquiry, documentation of teaching and learning, school readiness, the effect of quality care on children's development, family-centered practices, and linking authentic assessment to child outcomes.

University Academic Programs: Theoretical principles and empirical findings guide the selection and implementation of informed practices that are showcased in ELC classrooms. Undergraduate and graduate students discover how theory and practice combine to contribute to a deeper and more useful understanding of development in context. Through a diversity of ELC experiences, students learn to value and engage in processes of critical inquiry and systematic research that challenge popular solutions to complex problems related to the welfare of children and families.

Early Education Programs: The ELC provides an exemplary, inclusive early care and education program for infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families. Children and families represent a wide diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. The program design assures a well-balanced curriculum that promotes the physical, emotional, social, creative, and cognitive development of young children. The curriculum is guided by a theoretical orientation, which posits that all children, regardless of their developmental dispositions, are active learners who construct increasingly more complex representations of the world, primarily through the processes of play.

Outreach, Advocacy, and Public Policy: The ELC serves as a bridge between the university and the broader community through its involvement in outreach, advocacy, and public policy. As new knowledge is generated about young children and families, it is shared with local, national and international constituencies of parents and professionals. The ELC also promotes university-community partnerships that facilitate the dissemination and utilization of resources in response to the needs of families and children, particularly those at risk. Because the ELC faculty, staff, and students generate and have access to science-based knowledge, they are in a unique position to advocate for children and families and influence public policy.

In all these respects, the ELC strives to achieve not only its own mission, but also the missions espoused by the Department of Child and Family Studies and the University of Tennessee.