

**THE HEART OF  
SMART LOVE**



**SMART LOVE**  
**FAMILY SERVICES**

**FALL 2025  
NEWSLETTER**

**STAY UP-TO-DATE WITH  
ALL THINGS SMART LOVE!**

## MEET OUR NEW LEADERSHIP TEAM

### President



Dr. Beatrici is a Clinical Psychologist and an Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor at Loyola University Medical Center with over 30 years of clinical experience. She received her Psy.D. at the Illinois School of Professional Psychology and is a member of the Illinois Psychological Association and Board member of the Intrapsychic Humanism Society. Dr. Beatrici has been at SLFS since 2007 when she helped develop and launch the clinic as the Clinical Director. She will continue to maintain that position along with her President role. Dr. Beatrici has a passion for training and inspiring clinicians to be the very best they can be for their clients and to enjoy the true privilege of being a therapist.

*"I can't imagine spending my professional life and working hours anywhere else. Smart Love is a remarkable place and I have seen with my own eyes how the care we provide truly has the power to transform lives. Our Smart Love community is made up of dedicated therapists who take their work seriously, which is the only way it should be when helping our clients with the serious matter of improving their emotional well-being and mental health. When people ask whether I live to work or work to live, I happily answer that I do both at Smart Love!"* — **Dr. Carla Beatrici, President & Clinical Director**

### Vice President



Kelly Perez holds a B.A. in Applied Behavioral Science from National Louis University and two American Montessori Society teaching credentials. In 2017, she was honored as a nominee for the Golden Apple Stanley C. Golder Leadership Award. In 2024, Kelly co-authored *The Happiest Preschool: A Manual for Teachers* with Dr. Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D. Kelly is a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Illinois Association for Infant Mental Health. Since 1987, Kelly has dedicated her career to developing and leading high-quality early childhood programs. She has been part of Smart Love since 2010, bringing her expertise and passion for nurturing young learners and supporting their families.

*"I've found the Smart Love approach to be the most meaningful and effective way to foster what matters most—a world filled with compassionate, fulfilled individuals, both big and small. What an honor it is and I feel such gratitude to work alongside others who share this vision, it's truly the best. Here, modeling the qualities we wish to nurture in others creates true authenticity and happiness, where work makes 'Smart Love' visible."* — **Kelly Perez, Vice President & Preschool Director**

### Director of Operations



Dr. Beatrici and Kelly Perez would like to acknowledge the role that our new Director of Operations, Laura Bentley, LCPC, is playing in helping us achieve great success. Laura has been with Smart Love for almost 10 years as a Clinical Therapist and Clinical Coordinator, but her talents also extend beyond the therapy office. Laura has been instrumental in helping us improve and streamline our operations. She is always thinking about how to enhance the Smart Love experience for our staff and all those we serve.

## COMMUNITY PARENT PROGRAMS

At Smart Love, we believe parents deserve as much support as the children they care for. That's why we created our Community Parent Programs, including It Takes a Village, a partnership with Hephzibah Children's Association that offers parenting classes and youth support groups, and Smart From the Start, which provides guidance for expectant and new parents. These programs bring Smart Love's positive, developmentally informed approach to families throughout the community. In this interview conducted by Sydney Mesker, LPC, Dr. Ciccarone, Community Based Parent Support Program Coordinator, shares what makes these groups unique, how they've already made a difference for families, and why this work is so vital for our community.

**SM: We're excited to share more about our community parent programs. Dr. Ciccarone, can you tell us what makes these groups unique?**

Dr. C: We sure are excited about our new community parent support programs! Through our programs we can bring Smart Love's positive, optimistic understanding of child development and the critical role of parents to the community at large. We are unique in our focus, understanding that all parents love their children and want them to grow up to be happy successful adults, but that they can get confused by conflicting parenting advice. We help parents see that their positive, loving relationship with their children is the key to their children's inner happiness and success. They matter!

**SM: How do these parent groups help parents?**

Dr. C: The groups give parents space where they can get the most up-to-date information and research on child development to parent successfully; the support needed to follow their natural instincts to lovingly respond to their child's developmental needs; and a community of other parents to build connections to know they are not alone in their parenting struggles.

**SM: What are some of the Smart Love tips you teach parents?**

Dr. C: We like to call them Smart Love "nuggets," which we embed throughout the groups. One includes how it is important to "Welcome all Feelings." Too often children

are punished for being unhappy mad, or upset. But feelings are not actions. Feelings are feelings, they don't hurt anything. Behaviors are actions that can hurt, but feelings do not. Children who feel heard and understood are actually less likely to act out. We also help parents see that how they treat their children is how their child learns to treat themselves and others. When children are treated with kindness and compassion, especially when they're struggling, they learn to be positive and gentle with both themselves and others in times of trouble.



**SM: How does donor support make this work possible?**

Dr. C: We began our parent program entirely through donor support! Donor support allows for our counselors to lead the groups, for project development time, and for flexibility with community collaboration. For instance, with Hephzibah, donations helped offset the cost of having Smart Love therapists and students simultaneously lead a parent group and a childcare group, creating a more engaged, enjoyable experience for the entire family. This has definitely contributed to the success of the program! As of now, our groups are possible only because of a grant from the Community Mental Health Board of Oak Park and donor support. Community work requires community engagement, and we appreciate the support of our donors that allows us to offer free or low-cost services that are readily available to all within the community.

## TODDLER EXPLORATIONS

We're excited to bring back Toddler Explorations, our beloved returning caregiver and child program! After pausing for a time due to the popularity of our Playschool program, we're thrilled to once again welcome families back for these special Saturday morning classes, created especially for our youngest learners and their caregivers.

Toddler Explorations is a joyful and developmentally enriching experience for toddlers ages 12–30 months, offering a chance to freely discover, explore, and play alongside their caregivers in the company of our warm and nurturing Smart Love teachers. These mornings provide a gentle introduction to the pleasures of “school,” helping little ones build confidence and curiosity while feeling secure and supported by their caregiver’s presence.



Each 75-minute class, held from 8:30–9:45 a.m. at the school, blends outdoor and indoor play designed to foster happiness and discovery. Outdoor time on our large playground invites children to explore with sand, water, bubbles, and movement, while indoor activities offer opportunities for art, dramatic play, exploration in the water and sand table, and imaginative discovery. Every part of the morning is guided by Smart Love’s relationship-based approach, ensuring that children can learn and grow through joyful, self-directed play.



The program also gives caregivers a chance to connect with their child, with other families, and with our teachers who are always available to share insights about child development and early learning. Whether this is your family’s first time joining us or you’re returning for another session, each class offers a wonderful opportunity to slow down, play, and enjoy this special stage of life together.



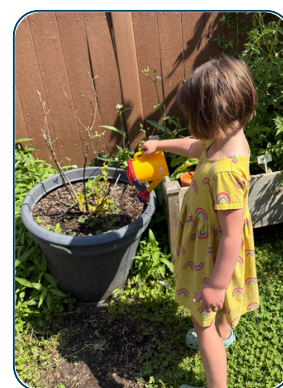
We’ve truly missed offering Toddler Explorations, and we couldn’t be more delighted to bring it back. We look forward to welcoming new families to share in the wonder of joyful learning, discovery, and connection!

## PRESCHOOL GARDEN PROGRAM

From tiny seeds in the spring to a flourishing fall harvest, our garden has been full of growth, discovery, and delight! Over the past few months, the children at Smart Love Preschool have been actively involved in planting, tending, and watching their garden grow. It's been amazing to see their hard work and care create beautiful and thriving plants!

This season, our gardeners have been able to learn about numerous crops including cantaloupe, zucchini, tomatoes, eggplant, sweet peppers, strawberries, blueberries, corn, and leafy greens such as kale, leaf lettuce, and butter lettuce. Our greenhouse has also allowed us to extend the growing season and keep our garden thriving even longer. Inside the greenhouse, the children enjoyed tending to herbs like oregano, basil, rosemary, and even mint, which they were delighted to discover tasted just like toothpaste!

Through watering, weeding, harvesting, and observing life all around them, the children have been able to experience the connections between care, science, and growth. As the season progresses, we look forward to even more opportunities to explore, taste, and celebrate our Smart Love garden while watching both the garden and our gardeners flourish side by side!



## PLAY THERAPY AT SMART LOVE



Our child therapists are trained to understand children's play and its metaphoric meaning to help resolve internal barriers to achieving genuine happiness and self-worth. They enjoy working with children and respond therapeutically no matter how sessions unfold, remaining positive and supportive to foster trust and openness. When children's readiness to share is respected, they gradually internalize this care and learn to be supportive toward themselves, especially in difficult times. Resilience is built through this partnership and relationship with the therapist.

Because Smart Love therapy works on a deep level, a child's ability to talk about their problems isn't a measure of success. Therapy is effective even when children don't directly discuss their feelings. Some share through words, others through metaphoric play. No matter what, the time spent is always therapeutic, fostering a child's experience of feeling understood.

We build on children's deepest desire—to feel loved, lovable, and successful in their daily lives. All parents want that for their children, and despite any challenges, children want that for themselves too. Our approach to child therapy begins from that premise. Our goal is to strengthen children's motivation for help and build on their desire for genuine happiness. This nurtures their sense of agency and ownership in therapy, helping them feel better and take better care of themselves.

## THE HAPPIEST PRESCHOOL: AN ONLINE COURSE

We're thrilled to share that Smart Love has officially launched *The Happiest Preschool: An Online Course*, a project developed from the book *The Happiest Preschool: A Manual for Teachers* by Dr. Martha Heineman Pieper and our Vice President & Preschool Director, Kelly Perez.

This 11-step, self-paced program (which offers 8 CEUs) was designed to share Smart Love's developmentally informed approach to teaching with educators everywhere. The course outlines practical ways to create classrooms that nurture emotional well-being, encourage cooperation, and bring more joy to learning.

While created with preschool and kindergarten teachers in mind, the course also offers valuable insights for parents who want to better understand and support their children's social and emotional growth. We're so proud to see this important work come to life and to continue expanding Smart Love's reach in helping both teachers and families create happier learning experiences.

Our teachers recently completed the course, and we asked them how it connects to the work they do in their classrooms each day. Here's what some of them shared:

"One thing that I really like is that it outlines very specific scenarios that are similar to what we see in the classroom. I think that it does a great job at giving examples of what specific language would be best to use in certain scenarios. The examples are reflective of our classroom training."

— Ella Mattingly, Smart Love Teacher



"It really conceptualizes what we do here at Smart Love, supporting and encouraging children while at school. We're so glad this course is now available for the public because we feel like this information is extremely valuable and beneficial to all teachers and children."

— Maddy Perez, Smart Love Teacher



"The Happiest Preschool: An Online Course was very accurate to what we do and experience in the classroom everyday. It was also very straight forward and applicable to many different kinds of situations."

— Karen Hermach, Smart Love Teacher



"I have seen incredible responsiveness from our students when using S.M.A.R.T. practices in the classroom. The course does a wonderful job highlighting exactly how teachers and caregivers can best support children in times that call for regulation."

— Kaylee Belletynee, Smart Love Teacher



## CLINICAL TRAINING PROGRAM

For more than a decade, Smart Love Family Services has offered a high-quality year-long clinical training program to masters and doctoral level students in psychology and social work, led by Drs. Sharkey and Terrill, from a range of Chicago area schools. Our program provides in-depth training in the Intrapsychic Humanism psychotherapy approach used at Smart Love and we are committed to providing our trainees with intensive, high quality training and support.

This year, we're thrilled to welcome five new trainees to our program, and are so proud of their ideals and commitment to providing their clients with the best possible care. We recently asked all of our interns the following question: "What is something that you have enjoyed about being [with Smart Love] so far?" Their answers are below!

"I was eager to pursue an internship that would both refine my clinical acumen and allow me to serve a diverse population. My experience at Smart Love has fulfilled both of these goals whilst providing an incredibly supportive environment. I am grateful to continue my internship at an agency that fosters my learning and growth, and I look forward to continuing to serve my wonderful clients.

— **Sahana Viswanathan**



"It is a really great community. Everybody is kind and welcoming, the training team does a great way of teaching us a lot but also easing us into it in a way where we don't feel overwhelmed. I feel very supported by everybody here. My supervisor goes very above and beyond to support me. I also have loved getting to work with kids again."

— **Joey Romansky, MA**



"The community, everybody is so open and interested in getting to know each other. I have enjoyed learning about the intervention. I feel like it has a very holistic approach that is not pathologizing."

— **Christina Carper**



"I feel so well supported especially since I am doing a mid career change. I knew that I would enjoy it. The leadership team has been showing up and available in ways that I have not always found are always available."

— **Steven Binns, MSW**



"Everybody is so friendly, it's not just talking about [Intrapsychic Humanism], you also walk the practice. It's a very warm and trusting environment. The value system is really there."

— **Racheal McTague, MA**





## NEW BOARD MEMBERS

It is with great pleasure that we introduce you to our two new Board members. Mr. Thom Kuhn and Ms. Margo Murvay, LCSW.

Thom Kuhn brings a wealth of business experience as a former CEO of Millstone Weber, LLC, a large construction company in St. Louis, Missouri, and being on the Board of Directors for other not for profit organizations, including PHL, Inc, an organization he helped start that improves and builds athletic facilities for underfunded inner city schools. Even though a short time on our Board, Thom has already made invaluable contributions including providing his management expertise and also supporting our fundraising efforts at our annual Gala.



Margo Murvay, LCSW brings an important and relevant perspective as a social worker and mental health professional herself. Her professional background includes being a psychotherapist at Smart Love Family Services for many years. She is able to use that experience and knowledge to help us improve our processes for staff and clients alike. Margo also supports our fundraising efforts at our annual gala and is helping us in the development of an Associate Board, an important next step in expanding our support network and reach.

We are so grateful for their generosity! We also want to acknowledge our other important contributing Board Officers including Chair Katherine Knight, Ph.D., Treasurer David Friedman, Secretary Rich Sanders, and Board members Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., Cecelia Pikul, and Robert Stone. We could not do it without the dedication of these individuals!



## Smart Love Programs

### Counseling Services

- Therapy for Children, Adolescents, and Adults
- Play Therapy for Young Children
- Neuro-Psychological and Psychological Testing
- Couples and Family Counseling

### Early Childhood Education

*The Natalie G. Heineman*

*Smart Love Preschool*

- Preschool and Kindergarten for Children 3-6 years
- Playschool for Children 2-3 years
- Toddler Explorations, Parent & Caregiver Program
- Summer Camp

### Learning Services

- Therapeutic Tutoring
- Smart Love Futures Postsecondary Counseling
- Psycho-Educational and Learning Assessments
- Customized Parent Consultation

### Parenting & Community

- Parent Coaching and Counseling
- Webinars
- Publications and Resources
- Parent and Youth Groups

## To Learn More, Visit:

[www.smartlovefamily.org](http://www.smartlovefamily.org)  
[www.smartlovepreschool.org](http://www.smartlovepreschool.org)  
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