

New preschool named in memory of social worker

Teachers at North Side facility will discipline with kindness

Michelle D. Anderson, Special to the Tribune
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In a mansion on the city's North Side, educators are working to maintain the legacy of one of Chicago's most celebrated child welfare activists.

A preschool opening inside the building next month recently was named in memory of Natalie G. Heineman, known for her social work in improving children's lives throughout the city. School leaders say it's different from other preschools because it will use a play-based curriculum and the Smart Love method, a progressive approach to child development inspired by Heineman's beliefs about children's well-being.

"My mother adored children," said Martha Heineman Pieper, Heineman's daughter and one of the school's founders. "When they were happy, she was happy. When they were sad, she wanted to help them. She would love the new school."

Heineman died of natural causes in February at age 96.

The Smart Love philosophy focuses on what behavior is appropriate at each age. It is based on the belief that children imitate how parents treat them, and that if parents treat children with compassion and understanding, kids will treat others the same way, said Carolyn Stolper Friedman, founder and executive director of Smart Love Family Services.

The new school is an expansion of the 9-year-old non-profit that provides counseling, coaching and education services to families.

Friedman said the Smart Love approach offers a positive foundation for academic success. Smart Love does not shame, threaten or harshly punish children for their behavior, said Friedman. It encourages an alternative philosophy called "loving regulation" to manage children's immature behavior, she said.

The school's certified teachers will use enjoyable activities to teach children language and early math skills and to hone students' social-emotional health, intellect and creativity, Friedman said.

Pieper and her husband, Dr. William J. Pieper, developed the Smart Love approach in the 1970s. The couple have written several publications about child development, parenting and social-emotional health.

Pieper said she is concerned about the direction of preschool education. Children as young as 3 are often made to sit at desks or in a circle and are punished when they don't want to cooperate. That approach makes children feel like failures if they don't do what is expected, she said.

Many schools also teach language and mathematical skills before the pupils are ready, say Pieper and Friedman. That often causes children to develop a negative mindset about school during their formative years, they say.

Arthur J. Reynolds, a professor at the Institute of Child Development at the University of Minnesota, said that while it is important to incorporate play-based learning, "you still have to have an academic side."

"It can't be a play-based free-for-all," Reynolds said. "Kids want knowledge, they want structure."



Preschool director Melissa Boshans plays with Elan Kaeding Valentine at Smart Love preschool. (Shauna Bittle, Photo for the Chicago Tribune / October 20, 2010)

Smart Love Preschool will operate half-days Mondays through Fridays, beginning Nov. 8. It will accept children midyear, as soon as they turn 3, Friedman said. The preschool will occupy about 5,000 square feet of the 11,000-square-foot mansion, at 800 W. Buena Ave. and owned by the Menomonee Club.

The preschool is funded largely by Natalie Heineman's longtime friends, Josef Blass, and his wife, Dr. Ewa Schaff-Blass, who met the social worker in the 1980s. The couple have committed to an annual contribution of \$25,000 in honor of Heineman, who was the first female president of the Chicago Child Care Society.

"Natalie would be thoroughly pleased. The school would be very dear to her heart," Blass said. "I know how she was committed to social causes, especially to children."

Heineman served many organizations, including the Child Welfare League of America, and worked in many of the city's low-income neighborhoods.

The Menomonee Club received the mansion as a donation. The club began collaborating with Smart Love Family Services five years ago and suggested Smart Love use the building for its preschool, Friedman said.

Nancy Johnstone, executive director of the Chicago Child Care Society, said schools should acknowledge the connection between social development, child welfare and academic performance.

"It's very appropriate that a school that's doing that is named after Heineman," Johnstone said. "She, out of all people I've known, deserves that honor. Linking her interest in education and the field of social work is where she was at."