

Smart Love® Newsletter

Teaching and Nurturing Children during the Pandemic



The Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool is one of Smart Love’s core programs, and has been working with the families of young children since 2010. During this span of time, no school year has been as stressful for our preschool community as this one has.

Like all schools for children of any age, the initial impact of the pandemic on the Preschool was immense and disorienting. For families with young children, worries about job stability, finances, and health have been compounded by trying to help children learn and grow in an emotionally and developmentally healthy way during this destabilizing time.

For many of these families, things were further complicated by the fact that schools, daycare centers, and other providers of care and learning were suddenly closing, leaving parents to fend for themselves in caring for and teaching their children. This was all the more challenging for parents who were juggling how to transition their workloads and cope with all the other impacts of the crisis.

At the start of the pandemic our preschool team was able to pivot to virtual classes to provide

families with support, engaging with children and helping sustain their growth and learning. The results were more positive than expected but we knew that resuming in person classes for preschoolers was in everyone’s best interest. So over the summer, Smart Love focused on and invested in what would be required to reopen the Preschool in August while ensuring everyone’s health and safety. It was a herculean effort, but one that has proven well worth it.

As Preschool Director Kelly Perez reports, “When we welcomed our preschoolers with masks and all, their joy was clear as was their parents’ happiness and sense of relief.” As Kelly notes, “One cornerstone of what we do is being real partners to parents.” And like any good partnership, “our transparency and openness make for effective communication and parental confidence.”

All learning comes through what Kelly describes as “the social/emotional portal” and is at the heart of the Smart Love approach. This idea combined with an intellectually engaging curriculum increases children’s confidence, curiosity, and happiness. Kelly describes it as “we give them space to express their feelings

and help them talk about what is going on around those feelings.” At any point in time and especially during the pandemic, the approach ensures children feel valued, heard, and understood.

Nurturing the children’s well-being has taken many forms, but in many ways, other than wearing masks and following the safety protocols, very little has changed in their day-to-day classroom experience. We strive to preserve the joy of learning and healthy development. And, as Kelly explains, this “deeply resonates with parents because they can see the social/emotional link to not only their child’s learning but also to their child’s overall enthusiasm and happiness at school.”

During a year in which so much has been upended in young families’ lives, Smart Love Preschool’s focus on ensuring the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical health of their children while expanding children’s curiosity and learning is proving to be just what parents are seeking. Enrollment in the Preschool has almost tripled since late August and we’re thrilled to spread the love.

PROGRAM UPDATE

Preschool's Nature Garden Wins Award

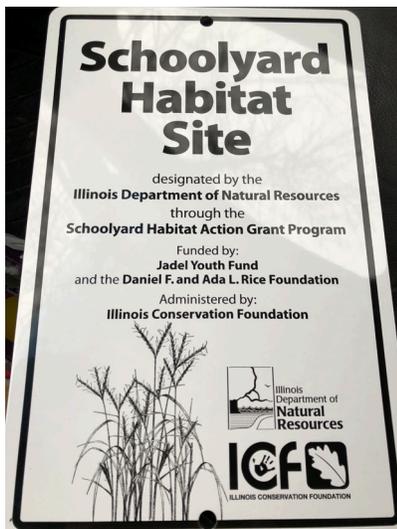


The Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool received an Illinois Schoolyard Habitat Award from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources –the only preschool honored.

The Nature Garden is composed of several plots within Smart Love's Logan Square campus and features 28 species of native Illinois wildflowers, grasses, and other plants. The Garden is cared for by members of the Smart Love staff with the active assistance of the preschoolers.

With its native prairie and pollinator plantings, the Nature Garden is an integral element of the Preschool's garden and nature curriculum, which engages preschoolers in learning about the natural world around them. They come to understand the importance of caring for the environment, and growing and tending their own plantings. The children also raise butterflies from eggs laid on the native plants, and watch and learn about birds and other wildlife that use the garden for food and shelter all year long. The award's accompanying grant will enable us to expand the nature garden with two new beds and to enrich the mix of native plants even further.

The preschoolers also tend an edibles garden on the school property and are involved in every step of the seed-to-table cycle. Produce that they harvest features in their snacks and take-home gifts for their families.



Cooking Up a Success at A Culinary Soirée!

On February 27, 2021, Smart Love paired up with Chicago's famed Boka Restaurant to host a virtual master cooking class, *A Culinary Soirée!* From New York to California, guests joined the event via Zoom as Boka's Executive Chef Lee Wolen demonstrated how to prepare his renowned Parmesan-Crusted Chicken Breast. Chef Wolen has earned several awards and accolades as well as Michelin stars for Boka since his arrival in 2014. Participants enjoyed asking the distinguished chef their culinary questions while he offered tips and tricks inside the kitchen. After the class guests were then able to savor their creations after the class at home with friends and family.

Smart Love is grateful to our supporters for participating, and Boka and Chef Wolen for their generous donation of time and talent to help support Smart Love's work with children and families in the Chicago area.



New Group for Latinx Parents

After months of careful preparation and development, our new group for Latinx families was launched in January.

Titled *Mi Familia* ("My Family"), this further evolution of the Minority Family Program (MFP) will help expand Smart Love's services to the area's Latinx families. In doing so, the program will strengthen our efforts to building greater equity in mental health care on the West Side and in nearby suburban communities.

Our efforts to spread the news about *Mi Familia* coincide with the launching of a new program cycle for the existing parent group, which will center more specifically on African-American families, and the multicultural youth group. The outreach, focused on community organizations and public agencies who can refer families to Smart Love, is already creating new relationships and opening new conversations in the community.

Launching *Mi Familia* required not only translation of the curriculum teaching materials and programs, but also the development of marketing materials and the hiring of another new Spanish-speaking clinician. Silvia Rosman MSW is leading *Mi Familia* and welcoming new parents to the program.



Ordinarily, the MFP groups all meet together in-person for lunch and then break out into their respective sessions. However, since that hasn't been possible during the pandemic, the groups all meet via a private, restricted-access Zoom set-up. *Mi Familia* will continue to take place simultaneously with the existing parent and youth groups, which meet every other Saturday, all year long.

Helping Teens During the Pandemic

COVID-19 has affected us all in countless ways; teens, however, are among the groups struggling significantly from the impacts of the pandemic. Data released by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) late last year shows that adolescent emergency room admissions for mental health concerns like depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts have increased by 31% over the year prior. Carla Beatrice, Psy.D., Director of Clinical Services at Smart Love Family Services confirms “[Smart Love is] getting more referrals of teens and the problems seem to be more significant as time goes on in the pandemic.”

Teens have strong desires to be among their peers—a defining and integral part of their development. As a result, the isolation from their friends due to remote learning, social distancing, and the cancellation of extracurricular activities and social events is likely the greatest contributing factor to the CDC’s statistics. But until it is safe for teens to gather, what can parents do to help their child through these very challenging times?

- **Be Positive:** One of the most important ways parents can be with their teens is to be positive with them. If teens are struggling in any way, parents may be tempted to correct them or tell them what they can do to improve themselves. Yet this often backfires in that it can cause teens to feel criticized and pressured, ultimately increasing feelings of isolation. Parents will have greater success at creating a closer relationship with their teens when they provide positive reflections for the ways the teen is taking care of themselves or doing a good job, even if it may seem small in comparison to their challenges. Negativity is not the way to go.
- **Be available:** No matter the location or time of day, always make yourself available to listen to your teen when they are ready to talk.
- **Offer acceptance and understanding:** Because teens do not have the maturity to express themselves the way adults can, their behavior may seem erratic, they may be overly irritable or moody, easily annoyed or agitated, and more. Know that all of these behaviors are healthy and normal responses to the internal sadness, stress, frustration, and other troubling emotions they are experiencing.



- **Avoid judgment, criticism, and power struggles:** Teens need to feel understood and connected. When parents engage in power struggles or respond with harsh criticism, these kinds of responses only push children away, preventing them from talking about their feelings and leaving teens alone to cope with their troubling emotions.
- **Reflect, check-in, and validate:** By reflecting what your teen is expressing and asking them, in a very caring manner, “What happened?”, parents are helping to alleviate their child from the grasps of the emotions and guide them towards feeling better.

Teens may or may not want to talk in that moment, and this is okay. The important element is showing children that their parents care about them. If teens do open up, validate and sympathize with what they are experiencing. It may sound something like:

 - ‘I’m sorry you can’t get ahold of Matt. It is really hard to be away from friends.’
 - ‘It’s very frustrating when your zoom call gets cut off. Our internet connection can be slow at times’
- **Discuss solutions:** If your teen engages in your conversation, get creative and offer some ideas to help remedy the problem. Even if a solution is nowhere to be found, the most

vital takeaway for your teen is that they feel understood and cared about because you are taking their feelings seriously and trying to help them find solutions to feel better.

- **Offer an activity to do together:** If it’s appropriate and your teen is still engaged, suggest an activity that your teen enjoys, perhaps it’s watching a movie together, baking some cookies, or taking a walk together. In the end, your teen will feel connected and loved—salve for the feelings of isolation.

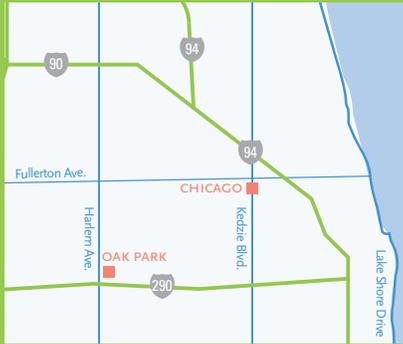
There are some behaviors, however, that may necessitate professional help. For example, if you notice dramatic changes in your child’s sleep, behavior, emotions or if they are engaging in self-harm like cutting, substance abuse, or suicidal ideation, speak to a mental health professional immediately. You can contact Smart Love at 773.665.8052 ext. 4, SAMHSA at 800.622.4357, or NAMI at 800.950.6264.

For more articles on child behavior and development, visit Smart Love’s Blog, *Through Your Child’s Eyes* at www.smartlovefamily.org/blog.



SMART LOVE[®] FAMILY SERVICES

Natalie & Ben Heineman Smart Love Center
2222 N. Kedzie Blvd., Chicago, IL 60647 | 773.665.8052, ext. 130



OUR LOCATIONS

Chicago • Oak Park



TO LEARN MORE VISIT

www.smartlovefamily.org

www.smartlovepreschool.org

Smart Love Programs

COUNSELING SERVICES

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

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The Natalie G. Heineman Smart Love Preschool

- Preschool and Kindergarten for Children 2-6 years
- Parent and Child Toddler Explorations for Children 12-36 months
- Toddler and Parent Play Times
- Summer Camp

LEARNING SERVICES

- Psycho-Educational and Learning Assessments
- Therapeutic Tutoring
- Customized Parent Consultation

PARENTING & COMMUNITY

- Parent Guidance and Counseling
- Webinars
- Publications and Resources

SMART LOVE'S VIRTUAL BENEFIT GALA

JUNE 11, 2021
SAVE THE DATE



The Smart Love approach was developed by Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., and William J. Pieper, M.D., and is described in their book *Smart Love: The Comprehensive Guide to Understanding, Regulating and Enjoying your Child* (2011). Smart Love Family Services is an Illinois-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. ©2021