

Two child and family centres merge to carry on long legacy

90 years later, support still there

Mother tells how counselling helped

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STAFF REPORTER

In the early 1900s, two pioneering Toronto agencies were formed: one to address the growing need for care of young children in working families, the other to serve as a haven for older children unable to remain at home due to dire family situations.

They were established in an era when day-care centres were unheard of, and child welfare and early child development were just becoming concerns worthy of greater attention.

This past week, more than 90 years later, the Crèche Child and Family Centre and the Earls-court Family and Child Centre announced they have merged, building on each other's history and experience. The new organization, called the Child Development Institute, will carry on the combined legacy of early intervention, education and research, said executive director Tony Diniz.

Close to 5,000 children, from infant to age 12, and their families participate each year in programs that include early learning centres across Toronto, parenting sessions, early assessment, mental health services for children with behavioural or emotional issues, and help for troubled girls and boys. There are also counselling and referral services for parents and children up to age 16 involving sexual abuse and domestic violence.

"We're new, but we've been here a very long time and the path is well-plowed," Diniz said.

For parents like Susan, a recovered drug addict and mother of three small children, the most encouraging aspect of the merger is that all programs currently offered will remain untouched.

Speaking to a crowd gathered for this week's announcement in the original Crèche building on Euclid Ave., she described her own gut-wrenching experience more than five years ago when a child-welfare worker and police officer rapped on her door one Thanksgiving and, without warning, whisked away her 2½-year-old son, Joseph.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

Susan, accompanied by her 15-month-old daughter Katherine, spoke during ceremonies to announce the merger of two child and family centres. The new organization is called the Child Development Institute and will carry on the combined legacy of early intervention, education and research.

"I got to wave goodbye," she recalled.

At that moment her life took a dramatic and unexpected turn.

"I was full of denial, anger, guilt and, finally, sadness."

Addicted to alcohol, painkillers and crack cocaine, she said, there were days when "my son would be calling, 'Mommy, mommy,' but I couldn't see him."

She got into counselling. Later she got involved in Earls-court's family reconnection program, designed to help mothers suffering substance abuse reconnect with their children.

This week's announcement was applauded by such child-advocate heavyweights as Toronto councillor and federal candidate Olivia Chow, United Way president Frances Lankin

and Margaret McCain, Early Years Study co-author and former New Brunswick lieutenant-governor.

McCain, whose 1999 report with Fraser Mustard to the Ontario government concluded that the first six years of life set the foundation for lifelong learning, praised the agencies for merging, not out of necessity, but to provide better service.