



# Teaching Tree

Early Childhood Learning Center

*Growing to meet big childcare needs*

by rhea maze

**C**assondra Baker felt uneasy about taking her fourth child to a childcare center. “I didn’t have a great experience taking my older children to daycare centers,” Baker says. But after a referral from the Larimer County Department of Human Services and a recommendation from a friend, she decided to get on the waiting list at Teaching Tree Early Childhood Learning Center. “Walking into Teaching Tree, I immediately noticed its comfortable, clean atmosphere. It just felt different.” Baker’s daughter began attending Teaching Tree at 5 months old and is now 2-and-a-half and thriving. “I’ve been so happy with the loving, attentive care she has received.”

Teaching Tree Early Childhood Learning Center is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1970 with the goal of providing Larimer County with affordable, high-quality childcare. It now operates two centers, one in Fort Collins and one in Loveland, that care for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. Teaching Tree’s unique model allows them to offer a sliding fee based on income to those who qualify. Families enrolled at Teaching Tree include full-paying clients and children of parents who are involved with human services or participating in employment and training programs.

“What makes us really unique is the diversity we serve,” says Anne Lance, Teaching Tree’s executive director. “Our students represent a mix of economic statuses and cultural backgrounds and that experience is great for kids because it reflects the real world.”

Maintaining general affordability while supporting families with limited incomes and providing enough for scholarships and teacher salaries is an ongoing challenge for the organization. “Teaching Tree has done a really great job of building a sustainable model,”



Sariyah has enjoyed the Center’s activities and learning environment since she was an infant.

*Photos courtesy of Teaching Tree Early Childhood Center*

says Jodie Riesenberger, Teaching Tree’s board president.

The need for quality, affordable childcare is at an all-time high, with over 6,000 children on waitlists for childcare in Larimer County. Teaching Tree is experiencing the longest waitlists they’ve seen in nearly 50 years of operation, with over 300 families waiting to get into the Fort Collins facility alone.

“Lack of childcare is not just a Larimer County issue, it’s a nationwide

issue,” says Lisa Sadar, quality resources manager for the Early Childhood Council of Larimer County, an agency that regularly observes and evaluates Teaching Tree’s programming. “And part of it is that as a society we aren’t fully realizing how important it is to invest in young children. So until we can shift that view, we will be short on childcare.” To help address the need, Teaching Tree’s Fort Collins location will expand in 2019 into its neighboring building, which currently houses United Way of Larimer County, through a 20-year lease with the City of Fort Collins. The expansion will create six new classrooms and two new naturalized playgrounds, allowing the enrollment capacity to increase from 101 students to 215 students.

“I’m thrilled about the opportunity Teaching Tree now has to expand and serve more children,” Riesenberger says. “And while the local need is far greater than the additional 114 kids we’re going to be able to serve, every spot that opens up helps to address the communitywide problem.”

In addition to access and affordability, Teaching Tree stands out for its unique programming and dedication to forging community partnerships that enrich the experience for families as well as staff. These include collaborations with the Children’s Speech and Reading Center, which provides speech and reading assessments, screenings, referrals, Phonics activities, and additional services for students; the Fort Collins Lions Club, which provides vision screenings for students; Salud Family Health Centers, which provides dental screenings for students; and SummitStone Health Partners, which provide various mental health resources and support for students and their families, as well as for center staff.



Sariyah

Teaching Tree also has free yoga for students every Friday. Extracurricular activities such as soccer, karate, and ballet are offered in-house to enrolled students for additional fees, or on a scholarship basis, so that parents don’t have to find time to fit activities in after school.

To get children kindergarten-ready, Teaching Tree follows the Pyramid Model for promoting social-emotional competence in children, and Creative Curriculum programming that focuses on project-based investigations that foster social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development in all of their classrooms, including the infant room.

“Through the Pyramid Model, we teach children how to empathize with others, be a good friend, problem solve, and validate and recognize emotions,” says Fort Collins center director Jennifer Van Cleave. “Those social-emotional skills provide the basis for learning.”

“What has always stood out to me is how Teaching Tree steps up to ensure that they are providing high quality, nurturing, and responsive care to young children and how they consistently make it part of their culture to address children’s social and emotional wellbeing,” says Sadar. “Regardless of how chaotic a child’s life might be outside of the program, at Teaching Tree they can trust that things will be consistent from day-to-day, while also being engaging and enriching. We need more childcare options like this that provide consistency and high-quality experiences for our community’s most valuable assets, our youngest children, because it matters.”