

Universal Appeal

Free centers aim to help raise happy, healthy kids

By Amos Maki

Paige Marcantel, a licensed clinical social worker, served as a grief counselor for Baptist Memorial Hospital for several years before becoming a stay-at-home mom two years ago.

But when the opportunity to help local families dealing with child rearing issues and trauma arose – everything from disrespectful behavior to more serious issues like divorce, addiction and domestic violence – Marcantel couldn't turn it down.

She is now the site director and family consultant at the Universal Parenting Place at Baptist Memorial Hospital for Women in East Memphis.

“For the long-term, we would love for the center to be able to help the community have more well-adjusted children and more well-adjusted families and for families to have what they need to be successful,” she said.

Universal Parenting Places are a new, free resource for Shelby County families. They are located at Baptist Women's and at Knowledge Quest in South Memphis. The centers focus on the parents, empowering them to stop negative behaviors in children before they turn into serious problems, such as violence, addiction, obesity and depression.

“I think for the short term I'd like to help parents better understand the early childhood experience, how a child's brain develops, and how things that occur early in their childhood make an impact on their thinking and processing,” Marcantel said.

The Universal Parenting Places, the first of their kind in the country, opened to the public last month. The centers are judgment-free zones funded by private donations and operated by a partnership including Baptist, Knowledge Quest and Porter-Leath.

In many cities and counties across the country, parenting help is focused solely on high-risk, low-income minority families and often comes only after problems have developed. But the Universal Parenting Places are open to all families: Extensive research shows the effects of trauma cross all socioeconomic, racial and ethnic barriers.



Adam Nelson, left, coordinates Universal Parenting Place's Music for Aardvarks, a program for kids 5

“Having challenges parenting goes with the territory,” said [Barbara Holden Nixon](#), founding chair of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Task Force of Shelby County.

“It’s okay and normally you’ll be challenged at all stages and at all ages but I believe if we make it okay to say people need help parenting, we’ll all be better off,” Holden Nixon said. “It’s very, very difficult and something you’re never really prepared for.”

Created in 2014, the 40-member task force launched a survey of 1,500 Shelby County adults that pointed to the need for the new centers.

The survey indicated that 52 percent of Shelby County adults had at least one adverse childhood experience, such as child abuse, bullying, domestic violence or neglect.

“Families have issues and it’s so common and for us to ignore that, like everything is ‘Ozzie and Harriet,’ that doesn’t make sense in today’s world,” she said. “It didn’t make sense at that time, either.”

Architecturally, the centers are designed to create a warm, welcoming environment through the use of vibrant colors and defined areas for parents and children.

“This is a unique type of space, something very different than a lot of locations where families receive services, where it is more of a sterile environment,” said [Jimmie Tucker](#), principal with Memphis-based Self-Tucker Architects. “We really wanted to make it welcoming and vibrant and let people know this is a special place they are coming to.”

And the centers aren’t entirely focused on intense, traumatic issues. They’re also places for parents to share normal, everyday child raising experiences.

“A lot of times parents think they have to be perfect but the challenges they’re dealing with are just a part of parenting and at times they just need additional tools or emotional support or advice on how to deal with those situations,” said [Veronica Brooks](#), director of the Universal Parenting Place at Knowledge Quest, located at [990 College Park Drive](#). “We want to let parents know parenting is difficult and it’s not abnormal for them to deal with challenges – or feel frustrated or feel like they want to pull their hair out – and we’re here in the community for them in a non-judgmental environment.”

Marcantel said the centers revolve around loving, caring parents who want the best for their children.

“We work with the strengths parents bring to us,” she said. “I think if parents are coming here they’re already a great parent because they’re coming through the door, they’re already caring and interested in their child’s development.”

and younger and their parents. (Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell tours the new Universal Parenting Place facility with Paige Marcantel, site director and family consultant for the center at Baptist Memorial Hospital for Women. (Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)