

Transcript of Joan Nichol Interview

Interviewer

What is your name and spell it?

Joan Nichol

My name is Joan Nichol. J-O-A-N, N-I-C-H-O-L.
I own Children's Express Learning Academies.

Interviewer

And how many are there?

Joan Nichol

There are two. Here in Taylorsville and in Kearns.

Interviewer

All right, so Jody Gallegos. We may follow her life a little bit. Tell us about her and her children.

Joan Nichol

Jody is an incredible woman. She works full-time, has three children that she is raising by herself. She struggles. She doesn't make a lot of money, but she is one of those women that will make the best out of anything she can. She works every day, takes her children to childcare. They go to school, they stay at childcare depending upon their age. And then they go home and she does, from six o'clock at night until she falls in bed, she does everything that many women do, takes all day to do. She gets their homework done, she gets their dinner, they get their baths and they get in bed. Then she gets to clean the house and do the laundry and maybe have a minute or two just to do something she enjoys. But she makes the best of it and she has the most positive attitude you will ever meet.

Interviewer

So how many working families or let's start with single mothers, have their children in daycare settings or in this setting?

Joan Nichol

In our setting about 60 percent of the children that we serve come from single parent families. And that's mostly single moms but we do have a growing number of single dads raising children.

Interviewer

So do I use the word "daycare," "preschool" or "childcare" when I'm talking about this center and the other?

Joan Nichol

We use the term "early care and education" because we feel that more fully defines what we do. We're called learning academies because we feel like we are more than just childcare and more than daycare. "Daycare's" a very old term, it was the term used 30 years ago when we went into business and now most people call it childcare. I think there's more to it than just caring for the child so hence we have become learning academies.

Interviewer

So what sets you apart, this learning academy, from other childcare/learning academies?

Joan Nichol

I think there are three things that set us apart from other childcare programs. One is the vision that we have that we are here to serve families, we are here to serve families who need to work in order to support themselves and need someplace for their children to be where they can know that the children are loved and are doing positive learning experiences each day. We have that vision in that we feel that children need to be loved, number one. They need to have adults in their life who care about them individually and know them individually. Number two is we feel like the children need to be learning. They're with us more every day than they're with their parents. They're with us 10 and 11 hours a day and we feel a real responsibility of using that time so that the children are learning and becoming good citizens. Even at the age of two you can start to become a good citizen and that's what we ultimately want. We feel that children need to learn not just academically but socially and emotionally they need to be growing. And maybe those are even more important than academics because if emotionally you're all hung up you're not going to learn anything academically. We know that when children are fearful, there is no learning going on. And so they need to feel like they're in a loving and calm atmosphere every day, every minute that they're in their classrooms and with the other children in their class. Their teachers become almost second parents to these children because like I say, they're with them 10 or 12 hours. These teachers -- our teachers -- go through a lot of training not just in how to teach children shapes and colors and alphabet and things like that, but they learn what makes children tick, what makes children fearful, what makes them happy. They learn how their brains are growing and how their limbic system is far developed before they are able to even start any executive processes and how when they get fearful they go right back into their brain stem and nothing is happening other than fight or flight. So how does that work in the classroom? Well, that helps the teachers know that if a teacher is suddenly afraid of something, that the teacher needs to get that child calm and help that child know that they're safe and they're loved, and then they can start working on what's going on in the classroom. But until then, nothing is going to be happening. And you know, it's even good for our teachers to know that as an adult that sometimes we get fearful and talking to me when I'm fearful, when I'm upset isn't going to do a lot of good. I've got to calm down first. And so we use a program called "Be a STAR" that was developed by Dr. Becky Bailey,

in her program called "Conscious Discipline." And that is stop, take a deep breath, and relax. And our teachers are STARS, and we tell them they can't teach the children to be an STAR until they're an STAR. And you'll see teachers get in a situation where you know, things get tense or something happens and you'll see them consciously calm down, stop, take a deep breath, and relax. And then they will start talking to the children. And just that second or two helps us get from our brain stem back into our executive processes so that we can think through and help the children learn and help the children feel safe. There's a lot to it but basically our vision and our passion for what we do are what set us apart. There are many programs that have different visions and programs and it's up to parents to decide what fits into their model of their family. But we feel that children need love and they need learning.

Interviewer

And so let's talk about the Quality Learning Initiative and it's the Granite District model. Talk about that to viewers who don't understand what that is.

Joan Nichol

Okay. The Granite School District Early Learning Initiative has been going on for a number of years. Three years ago they invited us to join with them as a private childcare program to see if their model classroom would work in a full-day childcare setting. And we started -- this coming year will be our third year of having their model of classroom in our classrooms here in our program. I'm thinking. This has been a great, great opportunity for us. This is a program where our staff are trained in a specific way of teaching in a preschool classroom. The program we use is called "We Can" and it's a research-based curriculum developed by a company called Voyager Learning out of Texas. It has what we call a classroom management system and that the way that the classroom works every day -- the basic schedule of the classroom in that the children are running the classroom. By about November our three year olds are in charge of their own classroom and the teacher stands back and does her part, but the three year olds take turns telling each other, "This is where you belong, stand up, please go there now." And they do it. And it is phenomenal to watch. We love it because the children are learning leadership skills at three years old. They're learning to speak in front of a group. They're learning to take direction and give direction. And it is so fun to watch. And it just becomes engrained in them and they know how to do it and they do it. Alongside that they do it with sign language at the same time. So they're speaking and signing this to each other. It's phenomenal to watch. The parts of the classroom, the management program include what we call teacher table and that is small groups of children go to a specific table in the classroom and work with the teacher on a concept that she has decided that they need to work on. It might be something to do with rhyming, it might be something to do with letter strokes or learning to write different letters of the alphabet or numbers. It could be any number of things. It could be something they're working on socially about getting along with one another. It could be a science experiment. But they work with that teacher for 10

to 15 minutes and in just a small group where she can see how they're learning and make sure that they're each getting the concept. And then they go back to a whole group activity where they might sing together, they might do a story together. And then they're off again, their little classmate telling them "your group belongs at work table now." And work table is again, a small group where the children are working on a concept that they've already been introduced to. So they might be doing something with numbers and pairing numbers together or working to put objects in groups or working on specific types of puzzles; just all sorts of things that they work more independently on or as a small group. Then they're back again to a large group activity and they are given time to go to learning centers, what we call learning centers. The teacher will tell them that you may play in the blocks today, or you may play in the dramatic play area which she may have set up as a veterinary center, she may have set it up as an office. She sets it up as something different every week. And the children can choose which center they want to go work in and they're given three or four choices. So they're given opportunities to choose what they want to do, they're given opportunities to learn specific things that they need to know. And it's all done with play. They just think they're going from one play activity to another and yet there is very specific learning going on in every part of the day.

Interviewer

So describe the last three years, the changes you've noticed in children.

Joan Nichol

Specifically with this program, we have seen changes in the children socially, emotionally, and academically. Socially they are much more able to stand up in front of a group and say something meaningful. They are able to assist in directing their group. Just those basic little leadership skills are so much better developed. Emotionally they make choices. They are able to make choices and talk about their choices. And academically we use a couple of different assessment tools to be able to know that the children are learning the skills that they need to have to be ready for success in kindergarten. We use a couple of different play-based tools, that is we don't sit the children down at a table and give them a test. But the teacher observes in their play and in their different activities. For example, at Teacher Table she might observe that Sammy now can tell me the letter B consistently. He can identify that this is the letter B or that snakes starts with "sss" sound. And when he can consistently do that then she can mark it off and say, "Sammy has that skill." So it's not a test like you and I would think of a test. What else?

Interviewer

That's good. Wonderful. What measurements do you use to train your staff and self, kind of self-regulation, because they're going to impart behavior to the children. Do you have training for your staff?

Joan Nichol

We do. We train our staff a lot on helping themselves be socially emotionally fit so that they can help children. If you aren't there yourself, there's no way you can help someone else into that position. So we start with making sure that we, number one, hire staff who we feel, through the interview process, the best we can, we feel that they have a good basis emotionally to be able to work with young children. And it does take a special person. We have parents all the time just saying to us, "I could never do what you do." But we love what we do so that's what makes us different and I could never do some of the things other people do. We use a program, primarily we use Dr. Becky Bailey's Conscious Discipline because we feel like it's a really good fit for what we do. It helps us all see how children learn and it helps us all understand how we can best be a positive impact -- influence on the children. We feel like if teachers understand how children learn and understand how they think, then they can be better prepared and able to help children learn. Our teachers know that children do not have inner speech. So they don't talk in their head like you and I do, they see pictures. And that makes a big difference in how we treat the children and how we react to some of their actions. So we just have a lot of fun learning together.

Interviewer

Let's talk a little bit about the fact that many families need this kind of early care and education for their children just simply so they can work. And we've talked about this before, but the perception out there in the community is that this is a great place to dump your kid while you go work or some place else. That it's babysitting but it's not really quality -- can you talk about that and that attitude?

Joan Nichol

Do you know, I've been in business for 35 years and I've seen big changes in the perception of childcare and I've seen little change in the perception of childcare. Like I said, it used to be called day care, but now we don't call it that so much anymore. We try not to. Why do parents think of it as -- almost with a negative attitude? I think there are a couple of reasons. Number one is when we hear about childcare, if you're not involved in it, if you don't have children in childcare, you hear about it through the news, through the media, or through your neighbors who have had a sad experience. And so people tend to only hear the negative things, the horrible things that happen in some childcare settings. We understand that we are a center-based program and we have a great passion for that. But there are also home-based programs where folks have excellent childcare programs in their home and take small, small groups of children. I applaud them and I think there is a definite need for that. There are also some very poor programs that unfortunately like any industry, the poorer part of the industry tends to set the name for the whole industry. And I'm sad for that and I can't do anything about that. I can just make sure that we're doing a good job. Culturally in Utah I think that there is a mindset that children ought to be at home and mother ought to be their teacher. There are two problems with that, and that is number one, reality kicks in and says Mom can't be home. In over 60 percent of the homes right now, we know that moms are working. And so there needs to

be some place for children to be where they're safe and happy and learning and we feel like that's our job. The other part is that sometimes Mom is not always the best teacher. I know from my own children that there were times when I was too close and probably had too high of goals for my child at that time and somebody else could take them and teach them what I was trying to teach them and do it in a beautiful job and I just wasn't the one to teach them that particular thing. So I think that there's a lot that goes into how people perceive childcare.

Interviewer

Let's talk about really quickly, regulation of childcare or preschool. Can anybody open up a day care? What are the rules of licensing?

Joan Nichol

There's a difference between childcare and preschool. Preschool is the two and a half hours that, for example, Granite District has preschool and it's two and a half hours each day or several days a week. There are private preschools all over the state. They are not regulated by the state. There is no regulation for them. If the children are in care more than four hours then the program has to be regulated. We're regulated through the State Department of Health, and the Bureau of Childcare Licensing, and we have a lot of rules that we have to follow. Licensing regulators are in our building at least twice a year. They will drop in once a year and have a scheduled visit once a year to go through every classroom, ask every teacher questions, check our records. It is very thorough. And they don't mess around with us. They want to know that we're doing a good job. They are, as far as I'm concerned, to help us make sure that this is a safe place for children.

Interviewer

What is the difference between day care and Head Start?

Joan Nichol

Oh, good question. Head Start and day care. Number one, Head Start, for the most part is a half-day program. There are now some full-day Head Start programs that are equal to childcare. The difference is Head Start is federally funded so that it doesn't cost the parents to attend. It is for low-income children. They have different thresholds of income than our state does for childcare subsidies. They generally have the same goal of having children ready for kindergarten. I haven't seen their statistics lately on their success of children being ready for kindergarten and so I can't speak to that.

Interviewer

The state of Utah doesn't fund Head Start, where other states do.

Joan Nichol

The state of Utah does not but Salt Lake Head Start did receive funding through the School Readiness Bill and I'm not sure exactly how much or for what specific

programs.

Interviewer

How do parents know, how do they access information on the best childcare centers? Or preschool? Anything to do with your child? Where do they go, how do they know?

Joan Nichol

I think 80 percent of the people that walk in our door are referred by another satisfied parent. It's parents talking to parents. Work talking about you know, where is your child, I need to find a new childcare. Where should I go? The state has a website called Care About Childcare that gives you basic information about each program that is licensed in the state both in-home and center-based programs. That's a really good place to start because it gives you geographically an idea of where you could go. I think the best thing is to go visit and talk to people and see what's going on in classrooms. Visit different times of the day. And ask a lot of questions. We have a questionnaire that we will give to parents that says if you're going to visit other programs, here's some questions you might want to ask. So that they have an idea of what makes a really, really good program. There are four things nationally identified to look for or that set apart early care and education programs as being high quality. The first one is do they use a research-based curriculum? For example, our We Can curriculum, there is research behind it that shows that using this curriculum and doing it properly will help the children be successful in kindergarten. The next one is staff training. Do your staff have regularly scheduled professional development classes and courses that they take and are they well rounded? Not just on how to do ABC's and 1-2-3's, but do they also talk about the emotional needs of children and the physical needs of children? The third one is do you engage parents in your program? Are you teaming with parents to help these children be successful? Do you have parents help you out in the classroom, go on field trips with you? Do you hold parent nights where parents come in with their family and learn different things or you bring in a guest speaker? We've had people come in and talk about brain development with our parents. We did an entire math night around Dr. Seuss one time that was just so fun and it children and parents all loved it. The fourth thing is is there an assessment program going on so that you know that you're accomplishing something? So those are things to ask when you go to visit other programs and find out just because they say they're quality doesn't necessarily mean much.

Interviewer

What does the future look like for Utah's children in terms of early care and education, opportunities for families?

Joan Nichol

I think the future of early care and education in Utah is very bright. I think that with the state legislature this last session recognizing the need for school

readiness as low as preschool is a huge step for our state. This is the first time that the state of Utah has given any funding to preschool programs. I think that it will be a boon to this entire state in that children will now have more opportunities to learn and be ready for success in kindergarten. And I'm speaking mostly about low-income children who don't have the same opportunities as some of their peers. These children need opportunities to learn and to grow and to experience things. They need to be able to... do something. [Laugh] They need to... I don't know what they need to, let me think about that.

Interviewer

They need to be on equal footing with children their own age. Closing the achievement gap. I love that.

Joan Nichol
Right.

Interviewer

Everybody has equal opportunity at this age as well.

Joan Nichol

Okay. These children, the low-income children that we deal with come from backgrounds where they don't have a lot of books in their home and their parents, some parents don't read to them. And so we feel like if we can get a book every month into every child's home, that's part of what we do so that the entire family can read more because we know that reading is so important for children, even before they start kindergarten, to understand what is the front of the book, the back of the book and turning a page. Some children don't even understand that. So the achievement gap can be huge, it can be narrow, but we want it to be none for these children. We want them to start kindergarten just the same as all of their peers.

Interviewer

Children are our most important commodity.

Joan Nichol

Absolutely. Children are the future of our state and our nation. I look at the children in our care and in our classrooms and I say one of you could be the governor. In a few years we could say, "I knew him when he was in our four-year-old classroom -- or her." And I think that we have that responsibility of helping every child in our program, no matter what their income, their background, whether they're a single parent or dual parent families. We have a responsibility to give them every opportunity to be successful in school and in life. And helping them learn leadership skills, learn self-regulation skills are what it's all about. Yes, they need to know academics, but they need to know those social skills probably even as much or more in order to be successful. So I see our state as just moving ahead and really becoming a leader in our nation in helping

close this achievement gap and helping children be successful in life.

Interviewer

What are your capacities in terms of staff training for kids who might have some mental and emotional issues? I mean when do you know when it's time to call the Children's Center or it's time to bring in some other professionals or psychologists?

Joan Nichol

When we have a child who is struggling in a classroom, whether it be socially not getting along with their peers, having -- a lack of skills or displaying behaviors that are what we don't normally see day to day. If that goes on and persists for more than a couple of weeks then we start asking questions. Luckily we have the Special Ed department at Granite District will come in and they visit with us probably three times a month to say, you know, "Do we have any children who maybe need to be evaluated" for whatever reason -- hearing, social skills, you know, you name it, they will come in and work with the family. Not with us, but they work through the family to get the children the assessments that they need so that we can get them the help that they need. We know that through Granite District we can get training for our staff on specific needs of children and beyond that, we know that there are plenty of people in the community that we can call on and have them come and work with our staff. Generally it's after hours, our staff will come to staff meetings or trainings after hours to learn about how to specifically meet the needs of a specific child.

Interviewer

How did your centers get chosen? Why you?

Joan Nichol

I don't know. [Laugh] I asked that question of the folks at Granite District, why did you choose us? And they said it's because number one, because we have already in place a research-based curriculum that we have classrooms set up to, in the learning environment that they were looking for. And number two is because we serve a high population of low-income children.

Interviewer

I've been reading about two generational approaches or mechanisms. Parent/child in education and all these other areas. So successful children create successful parents you mentioned earlier. Explain.

Joan Nichol

We see two generations learning in our environment, not just the children, but their parents as well. We love to put ideas in our newsletter to parents about how children learn and how they can help their children learn. And we find that parents come in and tell us that they learned something as well. So it's fun to be able to teach two generations, not just one. We find that parents, when they're

working with their children are more aware in their environment of how they can help their children and it helps them learn. They become more knowledgeable about areas that they want to teach their children. And we find this is part of the teamwork that we have, and the teamwork philosophy we have in that we are not just here for children, we're here for families, we're here to help the entire family be successful. And we are here to --

Interviewer

If you could talk to policy makers about what you do and the world of children in Utah, what would you say to them?

Joan Nichol

Oh... I would love to have policy makers visit and see what young children are doing and are capable of doing in early care and education. I think they would be amazed. I see and talk to policy makers once in a while and they have no idea that a three and four-year-old can be doing and are capable of what they accomplish every day. I think they would be amazed. I think they would be thrilled and I think that it would help them understand the need for additional funding to reach out to even more children, especially low-income children in our state so that they can be successful. Long-term, it increases our tax base, it reduces our social cost in our state and it helps us be better citizens.

Interviewer

Why should we care about our youngest children?

Joan Nichol

Our youngest children are our leaders. They are our governor in a few years, they're our senators, they're our business leaders. They're going to be taking care of you and me. And so I want them to be ready. I want them to be successful beyond all wild dreams because I want somebody that's going to take good care of all of us. And I think that it's our responsibility at this young age to have them ready. This is when their brains are learning the most, this is when they need to be doing and experiencing and having fun and growing.

Interviewer

What are the social costs if they're not?

Joan Nichol

Oh, social costs for children who are failing in school which means that we haven't done our job in preschool means that the number of beds in our prisons will increase. The number of people on... social programs needing government funding will increase. The number of families who are struggling and not able to access so many great things in our state. If you have little money, you don't have a chance to enjoy the great outdoors that we have and the opportunities in this state. So many children we find, children who live in Kearns, have never been to the zoo. That's in our county. But the families can't afford it. The cost to get into

the school is prohibitive to their family. So the children don't have the opportunity to see the animals and to experience all the fun things that other children are experiencing. So lack of education is probably the biggest prohibitor of success in life.

Interviewer

What can we do as individuals and as a community to lift children up? What can we do to help young people and their families?

Joan Nichol

Every citizen in this state is responsible to help every child in this state become successful. That is part of a program that we use in our centers that start with our one year olds and go up to our 12 year olds. And it's called Developmental Assets. It's a program that helps us to know how we can help every person that we see -- not just the children in our program -- be a better citizen. It starts with looking them in the eye when you talk to them. It starts with calling them by name and not just saying, "Hey you." It's waving at the teenagers in your neighborhood to let them know that you know they're there. It's so fun to say I'm making a difference in their life. It's fun to talk to parents and say, shake their hand. If you meet a child, shake his hand. The child is so flabbergasted that you would shake their hand, but they don't forget you. And so there are just so many simple, simple things that we can do to make a difference in the lives of children, help them grow, and ultimately help them be great citizens.