

Pentagon Child Development Center

Washington, DC

interview by Bonnie Neugebauer of *Child Care Information Exchange* and
Lisa Jacobs of Knowledge Learning Corporation

When you're visiting the Pentagon Child Development Center operated by Children's World Learning Centers, you're not visiting a typical child care setting. At this center you pass by military police when you enter the building, and security cameras monitor classrooms and playgrounds. The location cannot be disclosed to the general public. All of this is a haunting reminder of what the staff and families at this center went through nearly two years ago during the terrorist attack on the Pentagon. So how does a child care center rebuild an atmosphere of trust and safety and make families want to enroll their children? You have Shirley Allen as your center director, that's how.

A member of a military family herself, Shirley understands the anxieties of her families and staff. "We're working on getting back to the way we were before 9/11," said Shirley. "The teachers, parents, and kids are going on with day-to-day activities without the worry of something happening." Through her own dedication to this center, and, more importantly, her own dedication to children, Shirley has amazingly restored a sense of calm, safety, well-being, and trust to this center. In fact, after touring

the center and sitting in Shirley's office, we could tell that everything in the center, everything in the classrooms, everything we saw in our interactions with the staff, was a reflection of Shirley. Her entire focus is on "her kids" and her staff — a focus on providing a safe and healthy environment and on rebuilding the trust of a safe environment.

After the attack on the Pentagon, enrollment at the center plummeted by nearly 90 percent. Since that time, however, Shirley has been implementing strategies to rebuild the center's enrollment, now almost 70 percent of what it was before the attack, with many of these enrollments being returning families. So what made her staff stay and parents come back? Trust. "We sometimes underestimate the importance that trust plays within a program," said Shirley.

"I spend a lot of time in the classrooms so that I really know how my teachers are feeling. The key is always being available to my kids, parents, and staff so that they know everything is okay." In particular, parents who were enrolled in the center during the 9/11 attack



have confidence in what the center is doing to ensure the safety of the children. According to Shirley, "having this type of relationship has been very important to us because these families trust that we will continue providing safe, quality programs for their children. And they communicate that trust to other families."

Shirley attributes the successful turnaround of the center to her staff. She

builds morale among her staff and within the center through ongoing training, keeping an open two-way dialogue, and just having fun. "We are family here. I like to have fun and I'm very silly," says Shirley. "And I really enjoy my staff. During our lead teacher and focus meetings, we sit on the floor together and discuss specific topics. We talk about center issues and concerns and come up with solutions together as a team. We then implement these solutions as a team, and I empower my lead teachers to be part of their rooms."

Families are provided with a variety of parent education materials, and Shirley also has a Parent Advisory Group that holds meetings to discuss center and room issues, staffing, and curriculum. Shirley says that she and her staff are constantly working as a group toward maintaining quality and focusing on how they are all one family — with their families. They have weekly brown bag lunches with their parents and work together to focus on the social and emotional development of the children, while also emphasizing the compassion they offer to the children in their programs.

In addition to working at the Pentagon Children's World, which is now owned by Knowledge Learning Corporation,

Shirley has worked with children at the Charleston Naval Base and on military bases in Scotland and Puerto Rico. During her time in Japan, she worked as a family child care director where she trained people to care for children in homes, and taught English in a Japanese Catholic high school. Having a degree in speech pathology, Shirley also has held various other teaching and education positions.

After 24 years of working with children in early care and education, Shirley now considers the Pentagon to be her home.

"I made up my mind that the Pentagon is my baby. It gives me lots of challenges, but I thrive on challenges. The Pentagon is a special place to be. There's always something going on here and I like it that way."

When we asked her to share the highlights of her 24-year

career, she beamed with pride and fought back tears as she explained, "It's most important to me that parents are happy and they trust me — these are their kids. That's all the acknowledgment and recognition I need. But most importantly, you really have to enjoy what you do. You have to like working with kids. It's so rewarding, and oh my goodness, I just love them! It's one of the highlights of my life."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER