

Dare to dream

Discovery Children's Centre,
Winnipeg, Manitoba,
Canada

by Ron Blatz



"From our passions for reconnecting kids with nature, our ability to balance risky play with what is best for kids, our commitment to taking better care of our world (through composting and recycling) through to the incredible way we document our experiences and adventures, much of this would not have happened without the leadership and vision of Ron. We are a centre at the forefront of what is best for children and families because of the way we work together under the guidance and direction Ron provides." —

Terry Bussey, School-Age program Unit Leader

Discovery Children's Centre in the province of Manitoba, Canada, is a not-for-profit centre. In a jurisdiction where the government controls the maximum daily fee charged, the number of licensed spaces, and the operating grant that the government provides, it would be easy to become complacent and just live life with the cards you are dealt. But Discovery Children's Centre has never been willing to operate that way, believing that children, who may have little or no voice in a democratic society, can be heard if some adult will speak on their behalf.

As a country, Canada statistically has the second highest global percentage of mothers (with children under 12 years of age) participating in the country's workforce. This alone has placed great

stress on the Canadian people who then must find partners willing to help raise their children. Ron is convinced that if Canadians don't ensure these 1.3 million children are in great places, we will pay a heavy price in the future. This attitude has allowed Discovery Centre to develop a reputation as one of the highest quality centres in the Province. Even as it has grown from 35 to 230 children, quality has always remained a focus.

Discovery features three core programs: Infant (0-24 months); Preschool (2-5 years); and School-Age (6-12 years). It also has specialty programs:

- an 82-space part-time Nursery School for three and four year olds (designed for 'stay at home parents')
- an extended-hour program which operates 18 hours per day and six days per week
- a faith-based 'Christian Preschool' program for families with those needs.

Throughout these programs you will find about 14 children with 'special needs' (now known as 'extra support needs') who require extra staffing support, which is funded by the government. Discovery is passionate about inclusion and works hard to provide all children the same great experiences under the guidance of a team of caring educators. No single staff is given the

duties of caring for or educating the child with special needs. No special titles are given the more than eight staff who are funded under this program. All staff work with all children. Discovery's goal is to "raise up a group of peers who will be willing to help their friends with whatever needs they have, long after we are retired and out of the picture."

One of the things first-time visitors notice upon arriving at Discovery is the number of male teachers who work at the centre: 10. In a country where 3-4% is the norm, these male staff (25% of the total staff) do stand out. They tend to be louder, more active, more hands-on (playing, wrestling, running with the children); and this simply broadens the range of human experiences that the children are exposed to. There are always some children who respond better to male staff, and others to female staff, so having both available at the centre is a definite advantage. This is part of the rich experiences that Discovery children enjoy.

While most centres in Canada reflect the family of the 1970s, when it was the woman's job to raise and care for the children, Discovery reflects the modern reality where men are very involved in the lives of their children. In order to foster this change, Ron and a colleague organize four gatherings each year

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of a local group called “Men in Early Childhood Education” (MECE). Ron also serves on the leadership team of the World Forum’s working group that goes by the same name. Motivated by the results of a targeted advertisement in 2008 when Discovery received 32 male applicants for a job at his centre, Ron is a firm believer that there are many men out there who would make excellent teachers in early childhood programs; a key reason they often stay away is that they feel unwelcomed and unneeded.

Motivated by Jim Greenman, an OECD report on nature deprivation, and inspired by the many world leaders in the World Forum Nature Action Collaborative for Children, Ron and Discovery have led the way in central Canada in reconnecting children to nature. Even in this harsh Canadian climate, staff and children have discovered that spending up to 7 hours a day outdoors is not impossible and, in fact, invigorates everyone. In an outdoor space devoid of any traditional play structures, they delight in their natural ‘adventure playground.’ With its trees, dirt-digging pit (and at times mud-playing pit), hills, sand-digging pit, fallen-tree climbers, fire pit, tunnels, gardens, and tall grass, this space that went unused for 20 years has become the favourite place to be outdoors when at Discovery.

Discovery Centre attributes much of its success to the hard work of its seven Unit Leaders (supervisors). Choosing to trust the hearts and minds of the key people within the organization, not only brings out the best in them, and creates loyalty, but also enables Ron to stay connected with the world outside his four walls, in ways that have always come back to benefit the children at Discovery.

At home and work, Ron challenges people to “live for a

cause that is bigger than yourself.” As a fifth generation Canadian, Ron has followed that advice during much of his 32-year career as the executive director of his province’s largest single-site child care program in Winnipeg, Canada.

Donna Freeman,
Discovery Centre’s
Director of Programs
and Operations:

“We regularly have visitors in our centre. Sometimes it’s a group of students, at times we have directors from other centres come for a tour. I listen as Ron speaks to the group and how he is able to inspire them to tell them stories that give them confidence to bring back to their centres some of the amazing experiences that we are able to share with our children at Discovery.”



Ron Blatz is a self-proclaimed dreamer. And his dreams and vision are always for the children and families, and the staff who serve with him.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

