

Cobleskill Campus Child Care Center  
Maureen Maillard, Director  
121 Schoharie Parkway North  
Cobleskill, NY 12043

Dear Maureen:

Like many parents, my husband and I like to think of ourselves as exceptional parents; however the success of our two young children, Santino and Michael is largely due to the excellent work of the teachers at the Cobleskill Campus Child Care Center. I believe there is no work more important than theirs.

When my first child was born, we heard great things about the center so we elected to visit and ultimately enrolled him. Immediately, we were impressed with the staff and the quality of care he received. In a matter of months, he learned so much and was doing things that hadn't even occurred to us to teach him. Within a year or so, I began to hear the term Reggio Emilia referencing a "new" approach to teaching at the center. One of the teachers, Christy Robarge, took time to explain the approach to me and how it was being used in her classroom. As a teacher, I found the concept exciting. She explained how her and her colleagues decided what topics to cover based on the interests of the children. If a few of them asked about a particular topic, such as dinosaurs or birds, then they spent time reading books, doing projects and learning about that particular topic. At the time, they were learning about worms. My son knew everything there was to learn about worms and it didn't end there. He applied that knowledge to other things around him and started asking questions. For example worms live in the dirt so where do bugs live? How do worms make other worms which led to how do people make other people. Luckily for Christy he asked me this question. The manner in which worms reproduce simplified things. People were a bit more complex!

I have witnessed each of the teachers working with my children interacting in brilliant ways. I've often wondered how teachers could have used the Reggio approach in the infant room and every day they surprise me with their creativity. Hisako Gohara worked in the infant room and has unfortunately returned to Japan. We were lucky enough to have her as a caregiver for both of our sons. Julia Teller, another teacher in the infant room, and Hisako created activities for the infants that allowed them to touch and explore flowers and their parts. They use materials and everyday things to teach infants about the world around them and they create activities based on the interests and reactions of the infants. It's really something to see.

Echo Warner and Ellen Burke often use materials from nature to teach children about the world around them in a manner consistent with the Reggio approach when deciding what to talk

about based on the interests of the kids. Echo (often dubbed the gardening guru) often brings in items and pictures from her own garden for the children to see, smell and taste. On one occasion, Echo brought in pictures of her carrot harvest. She had a wheel barrel filled with carrots. The kids got to see the pictures, talk about carrots, how they grow, how they look, smell and taste. Up until then my son, Santino, had no interest in eating carrots but that forever changed after this activity. To this day, carrots are one of his favorite vegetables. When children showed an interest in beavers Echo and Ellen worked with them to interactively research beavers. Echo brought in wood and pictures of beavers. They are also involved in some kind of gardening project. I attribute my son's love of gardening to her involvement and I'll forever be grateful to Echo and Ellen for this gift to my children.

In my opinion, Melissa Jones and Carolyn Chevalier have the most challenging job in the center. They run the Tiny Tots room, containing (quite literally) children 18 months to 2 years of age. At this age, children have very little desire to do one thing for more than 30 seconds at a time and they often lack the ability to communicate desires effectively. Despite these challenges, Melissa and Carolyn teach their toddlers meaningful lessons each and every day. If children take an interest in something, then they run with it and teach them about that topic using the resources at hand. My son, Michael, loves to water the flowers and help me garden because of the gardening activities they do regularly. When the children took an interest in birds, they built their own nests out of clay, grass and sticks. Now Michael never misses an opportunity to check out a bird of any kind. Toddlers often love tractors and trucks. Melissa and Carolyn spend time reading them books on tractors, talking about different types of tractors and even taking the children to see real tractors elsewhere on campus. The kids even got to sit on the tractors!

Tanya Adams and Janet Masterson also use the Reggio approach to teach children about the world around them. Tanya and Janet follow the interests of the students closely and cultivate them continuously. I often wonder how they keep up with the kids and their changing curiosities! Tanya and Janet are creative in their approach to teaching and are experts at anticipating what will appeal to the children. They reinforce those lessons with stories from age appropriate books and teach letters and numbers to children using a variety of methods. Some children enjoy using shaving cream to draw the letters and numbers while others prefer play dough. Some like to paint and some just like to use a pen or pencil. I was particularly impressed watching them cover the topic of space. The children talked about planets, spaceships, and UFOs. They read books on the topic, built a spaceship and items that looked like UFOs. I looked forward every day to reading the newsletter and seeing what they were working on.

The Reggio approach that the center uses is exactly what I think schools everywhere need. As a teacher, I truly wish that the New York State Department of Education would go visit the center and model their approach to learning improvement on what is going on there. The Reggio approach is built on the premise that all students are individuals and the relationship with their teachers, parents, and community is considered when creating the learning environment.

Having my youngest child start as in infant and graduate from the center to attend Kindergarten for the first time was a wonderful experience. I will always be grateful for gift of curiosity and its cultivation. 100 years from now, those gifts will affect far more than him, and the world will surely be a little better because the talented, dedicated people at the Cobleskill Campus Child Care Center were important in the life of a child. The staff should be truly proud of that accomplishment.

Sincerely,

Francesca J. D'Amico-Bailey