

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

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Jessica Arce, Family Child Care Educator

Written by Stephanie Thompson

Seventeen years ago, when Jessica Arce's daughter was in preschool at the Latin American Community Center in Wilmington, Jessica was a regular volunteer. That volunteering role turned into a paid job at the community center, and she later worked at a local Montessori preschool as well. When a medical issue in her family led her to seek a more flexible work environment, Jessica's colleagues gave her the confidence to strike out on her own. "A teacher there sat me down and said 'You're a great teacher. You do a wonderful job. Kids love you.'" She's been a family child care educator for 10 years now, naming her program Nature's Habitat Academy.



*Jessica Arce,
images by Stephanie Thompson*

Jessica is bilingual, and she writes her lesson plans in both English and Spanish. The children she currently cares for range in age from 1 to 6 years; some are bilingual, while others are not. Jessica forges warm connections with and between all of the families and children. Those connections are among the things she's proudest of in her program. The children call her "Tia"- "aunt" in English. Families invite her to their children's events and birthday parties. They send her photos and keep her updated on their activities even after they leave her program. She says she gets a lot of Christmas cards!

Those strong bonds also provide a unique opportunity to build and sustain her program. Several times per year, Jessica hosts an open house. Current and former families are invited, along with their children. Families are also invited to bring friends who have young children. “I provide snacks, inflatables, and activities. Parents have a little break and have fun and can talk to other adults while their children play with kids around the same age.” During the open house, Jessica introduces herself to the prospective families. Then, the current and previous families share what they liked about the program and what they can expect if they enroll. This approach has proven very successful for finding new clients- Jessica says that from Day 1, she hasn’t had any open slots in her program.

Jessica acknowledges that there are some challenges in her work. She has the funds to pay an assistant in the morning, or if additional support is needed, but would like to have the budget for a full-time assistant. For example, when a child is unwell, they may need more attention or the usual rhythm of the day may be disrupted. Additional support can help ensure that everything continues to run smoothly. Jessica also mentions that having an assistant allows her to engage in self-care when needed: “If I’m having a rough week, I take 30-40 minutes to take a walk. I love walking outdoors- I clear my mind, come back and reset myself.”



Jessica Arce engaging in truck play with one of her students.

Another way that Jessica finds support is through DIEEC’s Spanish-language Community of Practice (CoP) and her Quality Improvement Specialist, Erika. “She respects what I do, and she gives me feedback that helps me.” Jessica also mentions the What’s Up Wednesday calls that keep her up to date. She’ll be a repeat attendee at DIEEC’s 1st State Family Child Care Conference this November 16 and is looking forward to the breakout sessions and connecting with her colleagues in the field.



Jessica Arce explores a Halloween-themed sensory bin with a student.

Jessica starts each day early with a cup of strong black coffee, and prayer. She checks over her room, making sure everything is safe, in good order, and ready to foster positive learning experiences. One of her favorite parts of each day is seeing the children enjoy the activities she’s created for them. “You are raising these little humans to be great people in the future,” Jessica says. “This stage in their development is so important.” She also loves receiving spontaneous hugs and hearing “Tia, I love you!” “If you’re going to start in this field,” says Jessica, “it has to be because it comes from your heart.”

DIEEC’s weekly What’s Up Wednesday updates are available in English and Spanish. Learn how to sign up on our [Family Child Care Network page](#).

Learn more about joining one of DIEEC’s family child care [Communities of Practice](#).