



Nancy Blieden, Anthony Doelle and Carrie Doelle

# EARLY EDUCATION

## PRESCHOOL CHANGES LIVES WITH PROGRAMS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

Located within a group of other non-profit organizations called The Corners, Walnut Lake Preschool sits in a perfect location. The preschool is a private non-profit program of the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute and is an educational facility that works specifically with preschool-aged children who need specialized instruction based on their emotional, behavioral, and developmental challenges.

Co-director, Dr. Nancy Blieden, has a special place in her heart for both small children and community involvement with kids. "As a child when I was in nursery school, I was helped by a lot of people in the community. This is something that stuck with me," she says.

Prior to her involvement with Walnut Lake Preschool, she facilitated programs for deaf children under three years old in New York.

In January 2008, Walnut Lake Preschool opened with two students. The school now has eight students, and Blieden says she's happy with the growth. The staff is primarily volunteer, and each child has a specialized curriculum based on the students' individualized needs.

The student ratio is 8:2 with two professionals in the room. "Our staff is unique in the sense that we work as a team. The teachers and clinicians work together on behalf of families. There is a family consultant who is assigned to each family who will follow them as their child moves on to the next school," explains Blieden. Along with the growth of the students comes growth of the school. "We are now accepting applications for a new early fives class," says Blieden.

With the excitement of this growth, many parents are overwhelmed with joy to see their kids grow, thanks to the caring and individualized programs offered at Walnut Lake Preschool.

Carrie Doelle has witnessed the development firsthand in a short time with her son, Anthony. She enrolled him at the end of April. "This school has changed our lives; there is nothing like it. I feel we would be lost without the program. I love the fact that they will still be involved with our son when he moves on to another school," she explains. Anthony came to the school with communication difficulties and was not speaking in sentences, Doelle said. "He had a limited ability to communicate," she said.

"Now, he is speaking in sentences and having conversations. He is much calmer and focused. He is also very confident and curious," she says excitedly. Doelle appreciates the fact that the school looks at each child's specific needs and incorporates it into their curriculum. As a supporter and parent of Walnut Lake Preschool, Doelle believes in the importance of early childhood intervention.

Donor and supporter Gayle Ellias was introduced to the school through her involvement with the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute. She also was motivated to help for personal reasons. "My father's mother passed away when he was three years old. He was traumatized and, at the time, there were no such services for the young. It is important to provide adequate services to children, based on their specific needs, at a young age," she explains. In addition to her personal feelings, she also sees the need as a professional. She is a social worker who has worked with children throughout her career.

Another donor, Helen Vlasic, is equally impressed with the program. "Early intervention is so important. Life can be difficult, but with strong support at an early age, this can prepare kids emotionally and socially - which will give them the tools for success for both school and life."

Ellias agrees, "The students have specific needs and Walnut Lake Preschool is addressing those needs while bringing the kids together to make a cohesive group, regardless of their differences. It is wonderful to see the unique diversity and growth of both children and families."

 - Yvette Stines

[walnutlakepreschool.org](http://walnutlakepreschool.org)