

Dare To Care: Explore+Discover's Fresh Approach To Early Learning

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For the last decade, if not longer, the preferred type of childcare among most affluent city parents has been to hire a nanny—with the appeal of having a trusted, experienced, and loving adult focused solely on your child. But the local nanny vs. daycare vs. au pair debate may soon go through a shake-up with this month's opening of a daycare center rooted in the kind of developmental activities and experiences, community-mindedness, outstanding facilities, and experienced and educated teachers one more typically expects from the best nursery schools in the city.

If the center, [Explore+Discover](#), sounds like a game-changing experience in early childcare and learning, its founders think it's also an idea that new parents will deeply value. "Think about that parent who is going back to work after being home with her baby for a few months; think about the busy stay-at-home parent who could use quality help for half the day but not the whole day," says Daniel Koffler, co-president of K3 Learning, the education company starting Explore+Discover, and a new father himself. "Those parents will know that their children are not only being taken care of in a warm and wonderful environment, but they're going to be engaged by teachers who really understand babies and toddlers in fun classes with music and movement and all that great stuff."



Jacqueline Marks and Renee Bock. Photo by Karilyn Sanders Photography.

For children ages 3 months to 2 years, Explore+Discover has transformed a 5,000-square ft commercial space on 2nd Avenue and East 26th Street into an early childhood dreamscape of color and cheer, with eight classrooms, a central gathering space, a children's library, and a private room for nursing mothers. Rare for a daycare facility, there's also a secure and private outdoor play space adjoining the side of the building. A child can be enrolled at Explore+Discover for two, three, or five days a week, for half or full days, with the center open from 8am to 6pm. Admissions is rolling.

To create a daycare center like no other, K3 recruited veteran NYC early-childhood educator Renee Bock as Explore+Discover's educational director, to hone its vision and oversee the implementation of the flagship site as well as future locations. She's been joined by Jacqueline Marks, a onetime colleague of hers at the JCC in Manhattan, now the director in charge of the everyday running of the center. The women's passion for their work infuses their conversation, especially when talking about Explore+Discover's approach to caring for and educating little children, which, they say, is, in part, inspired by their experiences with an educational philosophy known as Reggio Emilia.

Started years ago by an Italian educator, in general terms, Reggio favors a learning environment in which children have an active and welcome role in the unfolding of an activity. There are lots of nursery schools across the country that incorporate Reggio principles, including such popular local schools as Beginnings, Tribeca Community, and the nursery at the JCC in Manhattan, where Bock and Marks originally met. While Explore+Discover's curriculum itself is

an amalgam of many influences, you can hear distinct echoes of Reggio's child-centered approach in its plans and hopes.

"We work with the assumption that children are born learning and the first three years are an incredible time of potential, and that every day counts. We believe in responsive education and care, and that curriculum and care are related to each other," Bock says. "Attachment is a central component of a child's learning at that age, so we're bringing all those strands together to develop a responsive curriculum that engages with children's interests, age-appropriate developmental phases, uses exploration, and is play-based."

Marks elaborates on the "three core components" of their approach to day care and early learning. "Our vision of the child is that they are competent, creative, and capable from the start. That's our underlying understanding of who the children are that come to us," she says. "We view families as our partners and work in tandem with them. We also see teachers as researchers. You'll see teachers observing and recording what children are up to. The teachers review their findings to understand who these children are and what they're interested in, and make adjustments to the curriculum based on the group that they are working with."

Reflecting on how children develop, Explore+Discover's classes are broken down into three age groups: 3-9 months, 10-17 months, and 18-24 months. Respectively, there are eight, ten, and 12 students per class, and each class has three full-time teachers. The plan is for each cohort of teachers and students to stay together for the duration of the children's time at the school. Not surprisingly, Bock and Marks are very excited about the team of educators they have assembled, nearly all of whom have a Master's or an advanced degree in education or early childhood.

And here's something you don't hear every day about daycare training: Last month Explore+Discover hosted a two-week-long event, called the Creative Brain Institute, in which leading experts in infant and toddler education and neuroscience visited the center to discuss early childhood development with the staff.

While caring for and educating little children is their essential mission, Bock and Marks intend Explore+Discover to be a place where parents and private care-givers also feel like they're a welcome and active part of the community. It's even built into the center's design: After dropping off their children, parents and caregivers will be able to chat in the community gathering space, and at other times they'll be able to assemble there with their children for sing-alongs, parties, and other special family-minded events. Bock says they also plan to support parents with special seminars for them on popular topics in child development and behavior.

While it's not a matter of child development, Explore+Discover also plans to play a leadership role in helping their families navigate the nursery school admissions process in the city. With lots of experience in this area, Bock and Marks know how important an issue it is for many local families, and they've already been reaching out to local nursery schools to let them know about Explore+Discover, and how they'll soon enough be guiding lots of families through the process.

But first thing's first. If there is a kind of bottom line to the Explore+Discover experience, it's this: To encourage children to explore, and be curious, and enjoy what the world has to offer them. Stimulating all the senses of the children, Bock says, especially those who are pre-verbal, is a crucial way of involving them in the larger world.

And as for daycare vs. nanny?

Naturally, Bock hopes that parents will look at an early learning center like Explore+Discover and see an approach that offers all the advantages of a caring nanny and more: An educated and loving community dedicated to their child's well-being.

For more information about Explore+Discover, visit explorediscover.net.