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A visit to SPARK Center, a program of Boston Medical Center

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While The SPARK Center resides within one of Boston's most urban communities, you wouldn't know it getting there. Exiting off of Boston's busy I-93 highway toward Mattapan, you're met with long stretches of rolling hills, vibrant green grass, trees, a quaint town center, and space - a luxury in Boston. Amidst this setting, away from the traffic, you'll find The SPARK Center, a cheery New England-style house with a red-striped roof.

At first glance, The SPARK Center appears to be like any other early childhood center: classrooms with names like 'The Dolphins'; children's splash-paint artwork displayed on the walls; infants, toddlers, and preschoolers engaged in circle time. But if you take a closer look, you'll start to see what makes SPARK unique: its integrative model of care. You will begin to notice not only the presence of educators and administrative staff, but caregivers who are not usually found in early childhood centers: a nurse, a social worker, and multiple psychologists. You will also notice a consulting neuropsychologist, pediatricians, music therapists, and multiple physical, occupational, and speech therapists bouncing in and out of classrooms.

The SPARK Center has pioneered a whole-child approach to address the multi-dimensional needs of Boston's most at-risk children, recognizing that vulnerable children need more than educational supports to flourish. The Center's integrated model of care provides medical support, mental health interventions, and educational services to children of all ages.

History and Future

The SPARK Center didn't always exist as it does today, though its roots were always grounded in a whole-child approach. The Center began as a merger between two previously existing Boston Medical Center programs: The Children's AIDS Program and The Family Development Center. The Children's AIDS Program (CAP House) was formed in 1989 as a response to the pediatric AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early-mid 1990s.

The first of its kind in the Northeast, CAP House became a sort of amalgamation of services evolving in whichever way was necessary to accommodate a new population of vulnerable children and families in Boston. Through its uniquely therapeutic daycare, preschool, and parent support programs, HIV and AIDS infected infants and toddlers were given the opportunity not only to survive, but to thrive.

By the late 1990s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Boston had abated, and in 2004, the CAP House was able to expand its mission to serve a new population of vulnerable children. Remaining an early childhood center with a clinical engine, the program opened its doors to other high-risk children at The Family Development Center, which offered therapeutic preschool and family services for at-risk children with suspected abuse and/or neglect, who also lived with complex and overlapping

education, health, and psychosocial needs. Due to its broadened undertaking in the Boston community, CAP House adopted a more inclusive name: The SPARK Center (Supporting Parents and Resilient Kids). SPARK continued to expand, and in 2010, a new group of fragile children (very low birth-weight babies) born too early and too small began to attend the center to obtain specialized care and attention.

In keeping with its expanded mission, The SPARK Center's focus is also now on one of the most critical (and perhaps underappreciated) problems which face children who have particularly difficult early childhood experiences: toxic stress.....without the aid of supportive and nurturing relationships to buffer its effects, cortisol (dubbed the stress hormone) is able to rise to a toxic level, and can damage the developing brain architecture, often leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

One of the most important things The SPARK Center does each day is provide a buffer to each child's experience of stress, bringing it from a state of toxic, to tolerable, through responsive and nurturing relationships and an individualized approach to each child and his or her unique circumstances.

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