



# Conscious Discipline®

## SUCCESS STORIES: THE PLAYING FIELD

### Wisconsin childcare center serving children experiencing homelessness alongside children from advantaged backgrounds provides trauma-informed care through Conscious Discipline

#### CHALLENGE

Wisconsin has some of the nation's highest levels of socioeconomic disparity and disparity between white children and their non-white peers. This gap is widened when accessibility to high-quality early childhood programs is determined by family income. Children most in need of trauma-informed care often attend understaffed programs with limited training and resources.

#### SOLUTION

Conscious Discipline Certified Instructor Abbi Kruse founded The Playing Field, a center that provides high-quality early childhood education to children from low-income families and families experiencing homelessness alongside children from advantaged backgrounds. The center implements Conscious Discipline to address the trauma and chronic stress of many children.

#### MILESTONES

**100**

Percent of staff receive ongoing Conscious Discipline training

**100**

Close to 100 percent attendance at Family Nights, which focus on building connection between parents and children

**52**

Children served: 1/3 privately funded, 1/3 on scholarship, and 1/3 Early Head Start, with families experiencing homelessness given priority for Head Start funds

**4**

Years of implementing Conscious Discipline

**0**

Children suspended or expelled in the center's four-year history

#### SIGNIFICANT OUTCOMES

- **Decreased Behavior Aggression** - Staff members observed a significant decrease in acts of aggression and defiance in children.
- **Learning Gains** - Once safety and connection are established, children experiencing homelessness and trauma can successfully learn the same material as their peers.
- **Increased Family Connections** - With close to 100% attendance at Family Nights, staff noted changes in the way parents interacted with and connected to their children.
- **No Suspensions or Expulsions** - Through Conscious Discipline, teachers have the tools they need to work with challenging behaviors and teach new skills rather than relying on suspensions and expulsions.

#### KEY PLAYERS



**Dr. Becky Bailey,**  
Author, Educator,  
Child-Development  
Expert and Founder of  
Conscious Discipline



**Abbi Kruse,**  
Founder/Executive Director  
of The Playing Field and  
Conscious Discipline  
Certified Instructor



**Michelle Henner,**  
Program Director of  
The Playing Field



**Sara Aspenson,**  
Mentor Teacher at  
The Playing Field

*"We celebrate these children every day. I hope that they leave here knowing that they're valuable. Everything we do, all our interactions with children are geared toward sending that message: You are valuable. Your family is valuable. Your work and your ideas are valuable. Once we've met their need for connection and safety, they can learn just as well as any other child. The sky's the limit for them."*

**-ABBI KRUSE**

At The Playing Field, Conscious Discipline begins on the bus. Children participate in goodbye rituals with their families, receive greetings and I Love You Rituals from staff, and sing songs about safety. When they arrive at school, the entire School Family greets them.



# Conscious Discipline®

*Conscious Discipline is a trauma-informed, brain-based self-regulation program combining discipline, social emotional learning and school climate into one integrated process. It helps adults create an environment of safety and connectedness that fosters learning and problem-solving. Adults and children learn to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, empowering them to reach their goals.*

When Abbi Kruse began visiting and working in early childhood programs in Wisconsin, she was immediately struck by the disparity she saw.

“Children who had the best of everything at home also had the most talented teachers, low ratios, an excellent curriculum,” Kruse said.

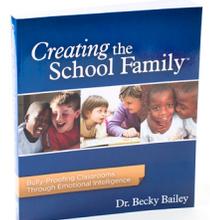
She also noted high levels of segregation, with predominantly non-white children in the low-income centers. Soon, Kruse learned that Wisconsin has among the nation’s highest levels of economic inequality, as well as more disparity between white and minority children than any other state in the nation.

This sparked Kruse’s idea for a unique early learning center, where children experiencing homelessness and poverty would receive high-quality education and care alongside children from more advantaged backgrounds.

A Conscious Discipline Certified Instructor, Kruse planned to weave social emotional learning into the fabric of the school from the start. In fact, the center was founded on the principles of Dr. Becky Bailey’s book *Creating the School Family*<sup>1</sup>. “I knew that with Conscious Discipline and the School Family model, I could meet the needs of all children, even if those needs were really different. It was an ambitious idea, but that gave me the courage to try.”



Abbi Kruse



## About The Playing Field

Kruse called her Madison, Wisconsin center The Playing Field, a nod to the school’s mission of leveling the playing field and to its emphasis on play.

The school’s website explains, “For a family who can afford it, Madison offers a wide choice of high-quality early childhood programs. At The Playing Field, we commit to making the highest level of quality available to children from varied backgrounds.”

1/3 of the center’s children are privately funded, 1/3 are funded by scholarship and private funds, and 1/3 receive funding from Early Head Start. Families experiencing homelessness are given priority for Head Start funds.

<sup>1</sup> *The School Family* by Conscious Discipline founder Dr. Becky Bailey explains how to create a positive school climate built on a healthy family model. The School Family model emphasizes connection and cooperation that ensures the inclusion and optimal development of all its members.

The Playing Field is licensed to care for 52 children. This year, they gave up eight enrollment spots to create a Care Room designed for students with high levels of stress, frustration or fear. The Care Room is equipped with crash pillows, an enclosed hammock, a stationary bike and other resources for children to express their feelings and expend built-up energy caused by trauma and chronic stress.

The school also has a center-based family specialist who supports families with setting goals and getting housing and job training. Families can use money from an emergency fund to meet short-term needs such as diapers and wipes or boarding in a hotel room when it's too cold out. If the children need medical or dental care, the specialist ensures that they get to their appointments.

The staff washes and dries children's clothes, gives them baths if needed and keeps food in all classrooms. Children from all over the city are transported to The Playing Field via bus each morning. At The Playing Field, teachers work to build close bonds with their students, and many teachers transition with their students throughout their time at the center.

## Trauma-Informed Training and Care Through Conscious Discipline

Playing Field staff members need unique skills to work with children who have experienced what Kruse calls "severe, unimaginable trauma." With high levels of trauma and chronic stress come behaviors such as relationship-resistance, defiance, aggression and shutdown.

Kruse said, "Nothing has prepared teachers for what they're going to face when they come here, no matter what education or background they come from. Our teachers are fantastic, but we've never hired anyone who has the skills. Conscious Discipline is trauma-informed care. It allows us to equip teachers with the skills they need to do this really hard job."



Mentor teacher Sara Aspenson and toddlers toss a Brain Smart Choice Cube, which features enriching activities for connection and calming.

Conscious Discipline training is part of the onboarding process at The Playing Field, and nearly the entire staff has attended the Summer Institute, an intensive seven-day overview of Conscious Discipline that incorporates hands-on practice.

Some teachers have even returned to the Summer Institute as Helpers and have attended the Advanced Institute, a more in-depth experience to which advanced practitioners must apply. Kruse herself does extensive training with her staff and brings in one additional Conscious Discipline trainer every year.

Trainings focus on the brain, trauma, self-regulation, connection, and seeing behavior as communication and conflict as an opportunity to teach missing skills. "The staff must see behavior as communication," Kruse emphasized. "Otherwise, the trauma-impacted kids will always be judged as 'bad,' and we won't be able to teach them the skills they need."

Center director Michelle Henner agreed, adding, "I think for the children, we're oftentimes their 'people.' We can see them for who they are instead of judging their behavior. Traditional discipline would punish or isolate these children. We can see their behavior as communication instead of judging. We recognize their pain, stress and behavior as a call for help. That's why they're successful here."



Michelle Henner

Being able to self-regulate, Henner said, has also been critical for staff members. "I think the most essential piece for teachers and staff is being able to understand what our own triggers are, to know how to respond to those triggers and how to self-reflect. Without that self-regulation and ability to reflect, there's no way that I could access the skills needed in those classrooms."

Kruse and Henner largely credit the skills learned through Conscious Discipline with the absence of suspensions and expulsions in the center's history.

Kruse said, "Despite having children with such high levels of trauma and stress, we have never expelled or suspended a child. With Conscious Discipline, we've been able to work through everything that has come our way."

Multiple children have been expelled from other schools before arriving at The Playing Field. At the center, teachers have the tools to work with children and teach them helpful skills instead. Henner said, “I can think of numerous kids that without Conscious Discipline would be expelled from any other program. Because of Conscious Discipline and the skills the teachers have here, these kids have been able to succeed.”

## Conscious Discipline Implementation at The Playing Field

Children at The Playing Field practice Conscious Discipline from the moment they board the school bus each morning. They participate in a Greeting Ritual<sup>2</sup> as they board the bus, then do I Love You Rituals<sup>3</sup>, deep breathing and a Brain Smart Start<sup>4</sup>. Together, they sing songs about safety. The goal is to disengage stress that children may be carrying from home, enabling them to learn when they arrive at school.

When the bus pulls up to The Playing Field, the other children and staff members rush out to greet it, chanting, “The bus is here! The bus is here!” In the classrooms, children do another Greeting Ritual and a Brain Smart Start with their class.



The Safe Place self-regulation center is equipped with a Friends and Family Board, breathing icons, Feeling Faces and other resources that help children shift their inner state from upset to calm.

Teachers create structure and safety with visual schedules and routines. Classrooms are equipped with a Safe Place<sup>5</sup> and an area specifically for I Love You Rituals. Students have School Family Jobs that allow them to be of service and feel a sense of belonging. Teachers focus on building connections, giving children the skills to manage their emotions, and seeing misbehavior as a call for help rather than a sign of disrespect.

In mentor teacher Sara Aspenson’s classroom, children “check in” when they arrive by moving their photo from “Not Here” to “Here,” placing it next to a commitment for the day. Commitments include statements like *I will notice when anger gets ahold of me*, *I will tap someone on the shoulder and say their name to get their attention*, and *I will practice being a S.T.A.R.*<sup>6</sup>



Sara Aspenson

The children then join Aspenson for a morning meeting that consists of a Brain Smart Start, Safekeeper Ritual, Wish Well<sup>7</sup>, group I Love You Ritual, and a calming activity.

Every child has two photos of their family inside the classroom, one inside a picture frame on the Friends and Family wall and another that is Velcroed on top, so the child may hold the photo or take it with them to the Safe Place. The Safe Place also contains a “Calm Box” with a pinwheel, a heart hug pillow, sensory materials, and kid-friendly books on how to manage big feelings.

Another Conscious Discipline structure in Aspenson’s classroom is a Kindness Tree. When children notice acts of kindness or helpfulness, they clip symbolic flowers, snowflakes, and leaves to the tree. Below the tree, Aspenson has posted visuals of kind acts, such as *Sharing materials is helpful and kind* or *Checking on a friend is helpful and kind*.



Each morning, children in Sara Aspenson’s classroom “check in” and make a commitment for the day. Commitments help children become consciously goal-oriented.

<sup>2</sup> The Conscious Discipline Greeting Ritual starts the day with attunement and connection. Children choose how they would like to be greeted and share a moment of connection with a staff member or peer.

<sup>3</sup> I Love You Rituals are one-on-one connecting activities that incorporate eye contact, touch, presence and playfulness. They promote optimal brain development, increase attention span, build self-esteem and amplify cooperation.

<sup>4</sup> The Conscious Discipline Brain Smart Start promotes an optimal learning state and consists of four activities: an activity to unite, an activity to connect, an activity to disengage stress and an activity to commit.

<sup>5</sup> The Safe Place is a self-regulation center where children can go to change their state from upset to composed in order to optimize learning. It’s designed to guide children through the five steps of self-regulation.

<sup>6</sup> S.T.A.R. is a deep breathing technique that stands for Smile, Take a deep breath, And Relax. It shuts off the fight or flight response, allowing children to calm and choose a healthier response to their upset.

<sup>7</sup> Wishing Well provides children and adults with a way to support one another and calm themselves.

## Conscious Discipline's Impact on Children

Kruse, Henner and Aspenson have seen Conscious Discipline powerfully transform the lives of children. Children learn to self-regulate, offer empathy and form meaningful connections with others. They're also able to learn and succeed in the classroom.

Kruse said, "Developmental delays in homeless children are well-documented. But we are seeing such an increase in their ability to learn once they know they're safe and loved. Once we've met that need, they can learn just as well as any other child."

Some of the four-year-old children in Aspenson's classroom have been with her since they were ten months old. She said, "One of the major successes is just to see the children using the skills and language that they've learned—going to the Safe Place and using it correctly when they're upset, utilizing their right to pass when they don't feel ready, offering a breathing pillow or a family picture to a friend in need—I see evidence every day that the children are able to self-regulate and offer each other empathy, which is an incredible thing for any child that age."



Michelle Henner shares a playful moment of connection with a student after coaching him through his upset.

Frequently, students also demonstrate a significant decrease in aggression. Within the span of one school year, children have gone from 75 acts of aggression hourly to 16 daily, or from 12 acts of aggression hourly to just one or two a day.

A child who came to The Playing Field at age four was struggling after his parents' divorce. He threw chairs, cursed at teachers and scared other students with his behavior. Teachers saw his behavior as a call for help and worked with the child to establish safety and build caring relationships.

Now in kindergarten, the boy recently had a parent teacher conference, where his teacher remarked that he is the most successful child in his classroom. His mother credits The Playing Field with his success and told Henner, "Without The Playing Field, my child would be expelled."

As Henner reflected on success stories, she said, "There are just so many little moments every day. All day long."

## Developing Empathy

Kruse recalled one two-year-old child who was homeless when he first enrolled at the center. Unsure where he would sleep each night or whether he would have a bed, the boy was severely stressed. His chronic stress manifested itself with biting, and the child routinely bit both students and teachers.

Kruse and other faculty members emphasized the four keys to connection: eye contact, touch and presence in a playful situation, as well as skin-to-skin contact. Within a week, the child stopped biting.

Since then, Kruse said, he has become a highly empathetic child. On one occasion, he offered his bucket of water to a classmate when hers was kicked over. Another time, when the child's mother was upset, Kruse looked over to see the boy breathing deeply and wishing his mother well.

Henner spoke of a child who enrolled at age two. Every day on the bus, he yelled that he hated the bus, hated the school, hated everyone. More recently, a newer student was nervous about the bus ride. The boy reached over and engaged the child in an I Love You Ritual.



Two children share the playground Safe Place, providing each other with support and encouragement.

## Being of Service

When a young girl arrived at The Playing Field after being expelled from multiple preschools, her mother was close to losing her job. She was constantly called to schools to pick up her daughter and felt tremendous relief at The Playing Field.

When they drove by her daughter's former schools, the mother said, the girl looked out the window and said, "Those people hate me." At The Playing Field, the girl repeated this refrain any time conflict happened: "Everyone hates me."

Kruse quickly noticed how much the girl loved the babies at the center. She gave her the job of Baby Doll Circle Time Helper in the baby room. The child's photo was even on a visual schedule in the baby room, so the younger children knew when she was coming and would run to her. As her self-esteem grew, the girl began proudly saying, "Babies love me." The parents of the babies commented on how kind, gentle and beloved by their children she was.



A young child naps with Sophie, a Conscious Discipline storybook character who models skills like assertiveness, conflict resolution and managing big feelings.

## Building Connections

Another student, Henner said, "has had more trauma than I could ever wrap my head around." He was removed from foster care because of physical abuse and placed with a foster family already enrolled in The Playing Field. "When he arrived, he was the most relationship-resistant child I have ever seen. He would avoid eye contact and wouldn't let anyone touch him. It seemed like he didn't have behaviors because he was so shut down."

After the first year, the child began throwing things, pushing children and demonstrating other challenging behaviors. Instead of reacting with frustration or anger, teachers at the center recognized this as progress. The boy was no longer shut down. They tried to do I Love You Rituals to connect, but he was uncomfortable. They turned the rituals into a game and persisted in their efforts to bond with the child.

Henner shared, "He has come so far now that he can sit in the group and do I Love You Rituals with everyone. He can go to the Safe Place when he feels anxious or overwhelmed. He has made connections with both his teachers and classmates. He is very successful at jobs in the classrooms, and he can engage in play outside without being aggressive. Without Conscious Discipline, I don't know that we would have ever been able to connect with him."

## Seeing Behavior Differently

Henner's own son was one of the first children enrolled at The Playing Field. She noted that his skills in self-regulation and assertiveness have grown tremendously as a result. Kruse's granddaughter has attended too, and the impact on her perception of others is apparent.

When a boy at the center hit Kruse's three-year-old granddaughter, the girl's cousin asked, "Who is this kid? Is he your friend?"

Her granddaughter thought the question over for a minute. "Yes," she replied. "He is my friend. He just doesn't know what to do with anger."

Kruse said, "She never sees other children as a problem because the staff doesn't see them as a problem. She never labels other children as bad because the staff doesn't label them as bad. Even at three-years-old, she had the empathy to understand that they just need help managing their emotions."

## Conscious Discipline and Families

The impact of Conscious Discipline extends beyond the children at The Playing Field. "It's huge for all of our families," said Henner, "whether they're privately funded families, families experiencing hardship or families in the foster care system."

At first, Kruse was concerned that privately funded families wouldn't choose The Playing Field. However, privately funded spots are consistently filled a year in advance. People believe in the center's mission and want to be part of doing things differently.

All children and parents interact with people they wouldn't normally find next door, developing empathy and new perspectives. Regardless of their background or circumstances, families benefit from skills such as self-regulation, assertiveness and conflict resolution.

John, a Playing Field father who works in risk management, has extensive experience assessing childcare centers. He and his wife chose The Playing Field for its emphasis on diversity and its excellent quality. "I've kind of seen it all, and they're as good as it gets," he said.



Families practice I Love You Rituals at a monthly Family Fun Night. I Love You Rituals foster connection, cooperation, self-esteem and language development.

The Playing Field hosts Family Fun Nights every other month, incorporating elements of Conscious Discipline. Both transportation and dinner are provided, and family nights attract close to 100% attendance. "With the families, we concentrate mostly on connection. Some of the adults need the connection as much as the children do," explained Kruse.

Families make bedtime routine books and refrigerator magnets with I Love You Rituals. They learn positive intent and how to see behavior differently, along with some of the Conscious Discipline language that the staff uses at school.

Both Henner and Kruse also visit homes and connect with families through phone calls, text messages and checking in regularly. Henner said, "A lot of our parents have experienced trauma as children, so they don't know how to play and engage. We start with the basics. How do you engage with your baby? What does that feel like for you? I often do connecting activities with the parents so they can feel it themselves, and then ask them to do it with their child."

If interested, families can request additional Conscious Discipline training. One parent eventually told Kruse, "I'm disciplining how I was disciplined. I can't connect with my kids and I'm losing them. Can you help me?" Kruse visited the home, took the family on outings like bowling, and did connection activities with the mother and her five children. The Playing Field eventually helped the entire family find counseling services in the community.

Andrea, a mother at The Playing Field, said, "They're not just watching our kids. They interact in our personal lives too. What's being taught here, it comes home. Not everybody has a support system. This is my support system. I think I would be lost without the family I have at The Playing Field."

## What's Next?

The Playing Field has gained recognition for its unique model and powerful outcomes. They've received visits from the lieutenant governor, Department of Workforce Development, Department of Children and Families and others to see their work in action. A delegation from Norway toured recently to observe the center's trauma-informed practices.

Soon, The Playing Field may serve more children through a proposed training school for plumbers. Plumbers Union Local 75 is planning a school where people can receive apprenticeship training and continue their journeyman education. The building would have a childcare center inside.

The potential partnership could benefit low-income families sending their children to The Playing Field who are looking for job opportunities. If funding is available, Kruse said the new school would follow a similar mixed-income model, with priority spots going to members of the Local 75.

"It's really exciting," Kruse said. "Alongside Conscious Discipline, we've built a model that works for children, for all children. Visitors can't believe there are over 50 kids here because when you walk in, it feels calm. You can look in a classroom and not identify which kids are funded and which are unfunded. They just look like kids."