



Elizabeth Arnold

Owner/operator of Just Like Mine Child Care
Lincoln, Nebraska

Nebraska Can't Work Without Her

"Kids are just little citizens in our community. They are members of our community who deserve respect and happiness. We can't just warehouse them. We need to put them in a place where they are learning to be kind and productive and creative and resilient. Our future as a society can be better based on how we teach these young kids right now. They will be the ones solving our complex national and global problems. Think about that! That's going to be a great world to live in." – Elizabeth Arnold

More than 20 years ago I wanted to be an elementary education teacher. But I had a 2-year-old, a 1-year-old, and I was pregnant. I wanted to stay in school, but I also wanted to take care of my children. I applied for a child care subsidy from the state, but I wasn't eligible because my household income was too high

by 27 cents! So I decided to just stay home, and eventually I had five kids, which is great training for being a child care provider.

As my children began to go off to school, in 2010, I started taking in other people's children. It didn't make sense to jump through all the hoops to get licensed because I could only take

in a couple of kids in addition to my own. So for many years I was a license-exempt provider. I got my first subsidy contract with the state in 2012. For children who qualified, the state paid me \$13.50 a day. More than 10 years later, the state pays \$16.50 a day to license-exempt providers, but they pay \$40 a day for licensed providers. In 2020, the ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) money helped fund some of my start-up costs and my own children were all in school, so I could care for more children, so it made sense for me to get licensed.

Now I'm licensed for 10 kids, but I have found that my sweet spot as far as giving them the attention and love they deserve is five or six. I have five right now, spanning the ages from 10 months to 4 ½. I call my business Just Like Mine because I treat these kids just like mine. I want them to just be kids exploring the magic of childhood, spending time outside, building strong relationships with the other kids and adults around them and learning about their community. Having the security of a family-like atmosphere with mixed ages and the same adult caring for them over the years creates a strong self-concept where they will know: I am loved, I am strong, I am capable. And that will make them successful in school.

Typically my day starts at 5:30 a.m. I take my own daughter to school, and then I come home and get in about an hour of homework for my own classes. I will graduate with my associate degree in the spring! About 7 a.m., I set up "invitations," which are what we call the personalized activity stations that I know my kids will really be drawn to when they arrive. By 8:30 a.m., everyone has arrived and all the children have played a little bit, and then we have breakfast together. After that, we do circle time or kids play independently. The older ones often teach the youngers something. They like getting to be leaders and they are patient with the little ones.

Many days I take them out on a community trip, which kind of distinguishes my program. We go to the Lincoln Zoo, or the Children's Museum,

or to the Sunken Gardens. Recently we went to the Quilt Museum where an older man who was there quilting took the time to tell my kids about how his great-great-grandpa had started that quilt and how the quilt would still be there long after he's gone. That story inspired the kids to want to learn how to quilt too and it's a good example of how kids are really just little citizens in our community. They are members of our community who deserve respect and happiness. We can't just warehouse them. We need to put them in a place where they are learning to be kind and productive and creative and resilient. Our future as a society can be better based on how we teach these young kids right now. They will be the ones solving our complex national and global problems. Think about that! That's going to be a great world to live in.

When we're out in the community, we often get compliments from strangers. At the library yesterday, the guy next to us in the parking lot rolled down his window to say, "Your kids are the best behaved kids I've ever seen. They stay right where they are supposed to be. They don't fight or push." It really matters to get that feedback, and I'm so proud of my kids. But they are able to do that because I never do for a kid what they can do for themselves. They are capable and smart human beings who are learning self-care, independence and resilience.

Usually all of the kids are picked up by 5 p.m., and I can roll into my own family day with dinner and homework and cleaning. Sometimes there's an unusual circumstance, like a parent having surgery, and I'm fine with taking a kid in early in the morning or even keeping them overnight. I think of myself like grandma or aunty, helping the parents as much as I'm helping their kids. That's why it's important to me to keep my fees reasonable and even to give a longevity discount to families who have stuck with me year after year.

One thing that really helps here is a program called Lincoln Littles, which is a scholarship fund for families who don't qualify for a subsidy but still really can't afford child care. Licensed

providers sign up for the program and then, when you have a family with an emergency need, like they lost a job or have a new baby or a medical crisis, then Lincoln Littles will pay their fees up to \$5,000 per child per year directly to the provider.

What we need in Nebraska is more programs like Lincoln Littles that help families and help providers run a sustainable business. Nebraska also reintroduced a school readiness tax credit this year, so now parents can get a refund for using a licensed provider. That's an opportunity to really support licensed-exempt providers and help them get licensed. We should be providing mentors and explaining all the licensing paperwork. The state should give non-punitive feedback to folks so that they can achieve a higher quality rating. There should be start-up grants that actually pay for all the costs of starting a licensed program. For example, hard-wired smoke detectors alone cost around \$6,000, but the start up grants are only \$5,000. It won't even cover that one requirement, much less everything else.

Families need help, too. Recently, Nebraska turned down federal money that would give every family that qualifies for free and reduced lunch an extra \$50 per kid, per month during the summer when children aren't eating at school. They said the \$300,000 in state administrative fees was too high. But the real cost here is going to fall on families and child care providers because kids have to eat. I'm going to pack snacks for them, and if I have extra apples from the farmer's market, I'm going to send them home to hungry families.

I'd like to get businesses and government and private sources on board supporting these kinds of changes. That's one reason I take my kids out into the community, so that legislators, employers and neighbors can see the promise of children and home-based child care in our community. The future of child care is in homes. We already have the infrastructure and the capacity. We just need to build up the staffing by trusting home-based providers to

run quality programs, by treating us as capable, smart human beings. In the past year, I've started college. I've achieved the state's highest quality rating. I've applied for NAFCC (National Association for Family Child Care) accreditation. I am a professional. Pay me well, and I'm going to stay in business. I'm going to love these kids and teach them and take great care of them because I'm stewarding the future of my community.