

Across the way from the calming scenery of Lake Alice, the sounds of children laughing and playing fill the air.

Baby Gator Child Development and Research Center, located at 1049 Museum Road, is a child care service that caters to undergraduate and graduate student families at the University of Florida.

The Museum Road location is just one of three centers that service the university; the other facilities are located on Newell Drive and at P.K. Yonge Elementary. The Newell Drive location services student families from the college of medicine, and the PK Yonge location is open to UF Health and university employees. Museum Road is the largest center, servicing around 70 families, according to Assistant Director Kelly Jamison.

Aside from being a resource for families, Baby Gator also provides numerous opportunities for students who are looking to work, volunteer, or get class credit. Baby Gator hosts students from the College of Education who work on their practicum alongside the teachers for six weeks and do everything from class management to lesson planning, Jamison said.

Jamison, whose son also attends Baby Gator, said that she and other parents enjoy the “peace of mind” that comes from having their children so close by.

“What I love most about Baby Gator is knowing that we’re helping families provide a great foundation for their kids,” Jamison said.

The care provided by the faculty and staff at Baby Gator is “top-notch”, according to parent Annie Oxarart, project coordinator for the School of Forest Resources and Conservation.

Many parents, like Oxarart, heard about the facility through word-of-mouth from friends and colleagues who work at UF. The convenient location and the excellent care that

Oxarart's 3-year-old receives are just a few of the aspects that Oxarart enjoys the most about Baby Gator.

"I love that he's loved all day long and that the staff and students who work here are so excited to see him," Oxarart said. "I like that a lot of effort is put into their lesson plans even at such a young age and that they're posted online because it helps me jog his memory when I ask him later."

Baby Gator is in the midst of planning their "Building the Love" fundraising campaign to raise money to turn the playgrounds currently surrounding the center on Museum Road into greener spaces. The new design will emphasize natural materials and remove a lot of the plastic and concrete that currently exists there.

The campaign culminates in a gala hosted at the university President's House, where attendees can take part in a silent and a live auction and bid on goods and services donated by the community, art pieces, jewelry and much more.

Beyond the play space provided for the children, the core of Baby Gator is made up of teachers who love their kids and love what they do.

"Baby Gator provides a safe and caring environment for students and faculty to leave their children while they get their education so they can impact the world," said Alex Avelino, infant teacher at Baby Gator.

Avelino and the rest of the teaching staff go above and beyond to utilize campus resources, have special guest speakers and demonstrations and the convenient transportation.

"I love working for the university," Avelino said. "I mean, there are child care services everywhere, but being on campus is an experience. Go, Gators!"