



COVER STORY



Genevieve Dimick, 2, of Marysville and Lainey Duquette, 4, of Yale (at right and on cover) are intent on their artwork during a Great Start Collaborative playgroup on the RESA campus. Working with the girls is Parent Liaison Jennifer Gunderson.

Playing is really learning

Social, problem-solving skills are far more critical to a child's success

Youngsters entering kindergarten should be able to recite all the letters in the alphabet. True or false?
Answer: Turns out it really doesn't matter much either way. That's one of the realities that early childhood educators are realizing as the state gradually expands the breadth and scope of educating pre-kindergarten children.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION is that rare issue that has broad, bipartisan support among Michigan lawmakers. Take this 2012 Twitter message from local state Sen. Phil Pavlov: "Early childhood education and parent involvement = better schools = better Michigan."

The parent part of the equation remains a work in progress. Some parents, for a number of reasons, provide little enrichment for young, growing brains during their child's earliest years.

And others have the idea that preschoolers should be treated just like small adults, working in a formal classroom setting.

NEITHER IS THE BEST CHOICE, said Riley Alley, director of the St. Clair County Great Start Collaborative, operated out of St. Clair County RESA.



'Kids are going to learn best when they're engaged and enjoy what they are doing.'

Jonah Duquette, 1, of Yale, finds activity suited to his age and interests in the playgroup.

"We get calls that parents are not happy with their preschool because all the kids do is play," Alley said. "Parents think they need to have a product coming home to prove their child is learning. They want to see that homework."

The Great Start Collaborative is a partnership of parents, child care providers, educators, businesses and other community members who are committed to promoting high-quality early childhood education.

ALLEY, WHO GAVE birth this year to her third child, said what many parents don't realize is that play is really a child's work.

"Even when it looks like they're playing, the kids are going to learn all the academic skills they need: letters in the alphabet, number recognition, colors and shapes," Alley said.

Most children quickly learn to recite the alphabet by singing the "ABC Song." What educators say is more important is for children to be able to identify individual letters and attach some significance to them.

That's why a common approach in preschools is to have each child focus on the first letter of his or her name. That means a youngster named Zachary may start on his ABCs by beginning with Z, Alley said. "Kids are going to learn best when they're engaged and enjoy what they are doing."

Becky Gorinac, the mother of two school-age boys, is a RESA assistant director of Education Services. She coordinates the countywide Great Start Readiness Program, a state-funded program that targets 4-year-olds whose families meet income and other eligibility criteria.

SHE SAYS THOUGHTFUL playtime is critical to a high-quality preschool education. She said the best preschool teachers help the children have fun while doing activities that help them learn letters and sounds, mathematics, motor skills and social skills. Registration shouldn't be in a teacher's vocabulary with children this age, she said, adding: "They're 4."

Gorinac said a good preschool classroom has a number of different

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Free books help set the right habits

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is getting a lot of St. Clair County young people reading. As of this summer, more than 3,500 children under the age of 5 have been enrolled in the program, which provides a free book each month in the child's name. The program is sponsored by RESA in cooperation with the United Way of St. Clair County.

The only criteria to register is that families must live in St. Clair County and have a child between the ages of 0 and 5 years old. A registration form [is here](#), or call (810) 455-4015. Children graduate from the program on their 5th birthday.



MAKE A DONATION

The Imagination Library in St. Clair County is funded through St. Clair County RESA, United Way of St. Clair County, and other local donors. If you want to contribute, please mail your check to: St. Clair County RESA Imagination Library 499 Range Rd. Marysville, MI 48040



Our cover story

The state's School Aid Fund pays for a student's education starting at kindergarten. Educators are increasingly aware, however, of the importance of education for children ages 0-5. A child's home situation doesn't always lend itself to a child learning what he or she should before kindergarten. St. Clair County RESA is committed to preschool programs that help our youngest children get the best possible start in life.

— Garth Kriewall
and Lisa Steinborn,
of the RESA
Communications Office



About this issue

"What We Do" is a publication of St. Clair County RESA that looks at local education-related issues. It is distributed electronically. To have someone added to the RESA electronic mailing list, email: kriewall.garth@sccresa.org.



Matthew Kreiner, 2, of Avoca, at right, smiles at his young friend Ethan Murphy, 2, of Port Huron during a Great Start playgroup session. Watching the boys is Ethan's mother, Brandi.

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opportunities for children to play and explore. And as the child moves from one to another, the teacher is observing and interacting with the children in meaningful ways that extend their learning.

"He thinks he's playing. He doesn't know how much he's learning," Gorinac said. Alley said an observant teacher seizes opportunities to educate as the child presents them: "Let's say two children are fighting over blocks. That's an opportunity to solve a problem. You ask the children some questions: 'How did that make you feel?' 'What can we do to solve this problem?'"

"You don't just take the blocks away. That's the easy answer, but not the right one," she said.

ALLEY AND GORINAC AGREE classrooms can look somewhat chaotic. "It doesn't always look like things are organized, but they are," Alley said. "The last thing kids want to do is sit down and do pen-and-paper things. We want our kids to be curious."

She and Gorinac also agree that skills in critical thinking and problem solving are really what prepare a youngster for success in kindergarten and higher grades.

"Self-help skills are a big one parents often forget. In kindergarten, the children need to put their coat on, put their boots on, button their pants," Alley said. Those are very real life skills for a child of 5.

Gorinac said this is also the time to reinforce lessons about taking turns, sharing, and self-control, all in the context of activities that look more like play than work.

Which raises the larger question: If children learn better when they're interested in what they're doing, why then isn't traditional education more like preschool?

Alley said, "That's a good question."