

Teaching Healthy Relationships and Respect Within Owatonna's Preschool Programs

By Trina Kasper, early childhood social worker

Preschool is a crucial time for children to develop social and emotional skills that will shape their future relationships and interactions. It is important that adults who support young children are purposeful in the ways they help children learn to not only respect each person, but appreciate their uniqueness and ultimately build healthy relationships. Owatonna Public Schools begins helping children develop these skills far before they enter kindergarten. Within Owatonna's Little Learners and Bright Beginnings preschools, students and staff focus on social emotional and relationship development almost constantly as these core skills are embedded into the heart of the program.

Our preschool classes are designed to offer a multitude of social opportunities for students. Staff do this through both adult-facilitated games and activities as well as child-driven play interactions. Throughout all of this, teachers are nearby – supporting students by scaffolding their social interactions to teach preschoolers how to communicate their needs, listen actively, and resolve conflicts peacefully. They may assist children in finding the appropriate words to use, prompt them when they need support, or practice social interactions along with them. By promoting positive communication skills, we empower children to express themselves respectfully and build strong connections with others.

As children practice kind interactions throughout the day, staff have also committed to creating an inclusive and diverse classroom environment. Each early learning classroom operates as a “school family” where each member of the family is valuable. We celebrate every student in the school family and wish them well on the days they are absent. Students have helper jobs that allow them to contribute to the school family alongside the adults. We have also aimed to incorporate books, toys, and activities that represent different cultures, abilities, and backgrounds, in order to expose preschoolers to the richness of diversity and teach them to appreciate and respect differences.

Early learning staff also recognize the concept of respecting and valuing others starts with the adults. Children learn by observing and imitating adults, so our teachers and staff are purposeful in modeling respectful interactions. Within our early learning rooms you will find warm and inviting staff who work to treat everyone with kindness, empathy, and respect – even in challenging situations. The early learning teachers use consistent and concise language that is easy for students to repeat and use while solving their own conflicts. By teaching children to respect every person, regardless of their differences, we instill in them a sense of empathy, kindness, and acceptance. This not only helps them build positive relationships with their peers but also prepares them to navigate a diverse and multicultural world.

Every day, early learning staff help preschoolers develop skills they need to navigate the world with respect, empathy, and appreciation for others. Owatonna early learning is currently enrolling for the 24-25 preschool year for both the 3-year-old Little Learners preschool and the 4-year-old Bright Beginnings preschool. Families can learn more and enroll at isd761.org/preschool.