

# UK extension works to get kids kindergarten-ready



Whitney Morrow, Carter County family and consumer sciences extension agent, reads "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" to young children attending her Play Date program at the extension office. Photo by: Katie Pratt, UK agricultural communications.

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Grayson, Ky., – In Carter County, Whitney Morrow of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service is working to ensure children in her county get off to a good start.

Morrow's monthly program simply titled, Play Date, is designed to strengthen young children's social and mental skills before they ever step into an elementary school. Open to any child not already in school, the program lets children work through a series of activities that build motor skills and comprehension, while giving them an opportunity to interact with others.

A mother herself, Morrow began the program in 2013, because there were few organized opportunities for early childhood development in her community. She developed the activities from UK's Literacy, Eating and Activity for Preschool curriculum, What's in the Doctor's Bag curriculum and Kentucky Early Childhood Standards.

"I started it when my second child was an infant, because I was looking for something to get my kids together with other children," she said. "Many of these kids do not have other opportunities to interact with kids their age. Parents have reported an increase in their social skills and their language development, and we know those are huge things that impact school readiness."

Additionally, Morrow wanted to improve the county's kindergarten readiness rate, which at the time was around 40 percent. Kindergarten readiness means the child is academically, socially and emotionally ready to start school.

“The first five years of a child's life is a time of enormous growth -- physically, socially and intellectually,” said David Weisenhorn, senior extension specialist for parenting and child development with the UK College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. “For a child to be a successful adult, they need a healthy, supportive foundation. When a child is behind when they start, it's very difficult for them to catch up.”

In the five years since Morrow started the program, she has had more than 200 children come to the program, and Carter County's kindergarten readiness rate has increased nearly 15 percent.

Carter County resident Jennifer Rogers has brought both of her great-grandchildren, now ages 7 and 4, to the program for several years. She's their primary caregiver while their parents are at work. She said the program has been helpful to parents and caregivers, as it has provided the children with an opportunity to get out and be with their peers.

“They have learned to share with the other children, which I think is really hard and a part of growing up. It's a good thing for them to learn this,” she said. “There is nothing else in Carter County for these children to attend.”

Morrow's program is just one example of how the UK Cooperative Extension Service is working to improve communities through early childhood educational efforts. Agents in several other counties have similar programs and initiatives targeting the development of young children and also showing parents that some of the standards are pretty easy for them to work into their everyday interactions with their children.

“Parent involvement is a critical component,” Weisenhorn said. “The parent really is the most influential person in a child's life, especially in those first five formative years. Having a parent read to a child at home, not only allows the child to hear words and how they sound, but it sparks their imagination and creativity. The children also develop a love for reading in the process.”

To view the video, click [here](#).

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