



WAISMAN
CENTER

Waisman Early Childhood Program

INTEGRATING RESEARCH, TEACHING AND OUTREACH



 Office of
Child Care and
Family Resources
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Introduction

The Waisman Early Childhood Program (WECP) is a child development and early learning program for children from UW-affiliated families and a teaching and research facility for University of Wisconsin-Madison students, faculty and staff.

WECP first opened its doors in 1979, as a result of state legislation allocating funding for a preschool at the Waisman Center research facility on campus. Since that time, WECP has grown to become a state-licensed, City of Madison Accredited and Nationally Accredited (NAEYC) early education and care program with a mission of including children with special needs in a regular education setting.

WECP has capacity for 100 children between the ages of 12 months and eight years old. Year-round, half-time (7:30-12:30) and full-time (7:30-3:30 or 5:30) enrollment is available, as well as a full-time summer program for children through completion of first grade.

Some other highlights of WECP include:

- An inclusive environment for *all* children, the WECP prides itself on maintaining about 1/3 of its enrollment space for children with special needs
- Small class sizes and low student-teacher ratios
- Large classrooms, all of which open up to a 1.5-acre Discovery Garden, an innovative environment for children to learn through outdoor play
- Placement site for: UW-Madison SoHE, School of Ed, Occupational Therapy, Kinesiology, Rehab Psych, Communicative Disorders, UW-Whitewater EC/ECEEN dual licensure program, both Edgewood College and Madison College student practicums, student teaching and service learning
- Located within the UW's Waisman Center, an internationally recognized facility concerned with human development and developmental disabilities, the program is able to draw upon the expertise of UW researchers, educators and clinicians
- A research setting in which relevant educational and developmental issues can be studied

Child Care in the Bigger Picture

Seth Pollak is a researcher, a parent and an advocate for campus child care. Head of the Child Emotion Lab at UW-Madison, Pollak has done several studies at Waisman Early Childhood Program (WECP) and says the accessibility of both the early childhood center and the research facility housed within the same building is invaluable, especially for longer-term studies that are often short sessions, but require multiple visits.

“When people are really little...you can’t have parents bringing them back every day,” says Pollak. “So what we’ve done is use the fact that kids are here every day for school for learning studies... it’s great, we just kind of roll a computer right down to the preschool.”

One major study that Pollak and his team conducted at WECP investigated whether children understood the antecedent to people’s emotions. The study involved a robot, which the children were instructed to teach about feelings. The researchers would show an adult feeling an emotion and the robot would respond, for instance “I think this mom is angry because her child painted on his bedroom wall.” If the child thought that was an appropriate reason, they gave the robot a reward.

“What we found was that actually very, very young children were able to understand the social dynamics of all the different situations that could or could not cause emotional reactions,” says Pollak, adding “...children whose parents didn’t have very good emotion regulatory skills, for example parents that beat their children, those children ended up reasoning that almost anything can cause a parent to become angry and so it turned out to be just a really, really rich experiment that’s ended up being cited a lot in the field.”



In addition to the benefits to research, Pollak stresses the benefits of campus child care in early intervention of developmental delays. He says quite often parents who are at home with their child may overlook possible delays because they haven't been exposed to a large sample of children to know the difference.

"One of the things we know about early childhood development is if an issue arises, maybe a speech and language issue, a motor issue, a cognitive issue, the very best thing is to have it identified and treated right away," says Pollak. "One of the really nice things about being in a place like the Waisman Center is with children participating in so many different studies and working with different students, very often if there's some kind of delay it's identified right away and then really highly trained people can give parents advice about what to do and have something corrected before it becomes a bigger problem, before it affects a child's self-esteem or self-concept."

Pollak appreciates child care from more than just a researcher's lens. While he and his wife, Jenny Saffran, who heads the Infant Learning Lab at UW-Madison, didn't even have children when they were on the job market, Pollak says seeing the WECP influenced their decision to come to UW-Madison. Ultimately, their two children ended up attending WECP, which Pollak was extremely grateful for.

Pollak believes the university needs to continue investing in their early childhood programs. "I feel like campus child care is...just critical for the mission of the university, and unless it's widely available and really high quality, people are going to have to cut corners to make things work for themselves, and they're probably not going to cut the corner of not caring for their own child."

A prospect that becomes more and more important as the culture of our society shifts, from one in which extended family used to be close enough to care for young children, to today's norm where family units are spread all over the place, often leaving young parents trying to start a career in the lurch for child care.

"I think that unless universities are willing to pick up and understand that in order for parents to contribute meaningfully, professionally, they have to have good, high-quality places for their children to be during the day, you're going to continue to see disparities, particularly for women."

How Does Your Garden Grow?

There is a lot of growing happening at the Waisman Early Childhood Program, and it's more than just the kids. WECP is home to a magical community garden that is instilling hard work and healthy eating in the students through hands-on experiences every day.

Robin Mittenthal, Global Health Administrative Program Manager at UW-Madison whose two children attended WECP, helped maintain the garden from 2010-2015. He was very intentional in planning out the garden each year because he wanted it to be a workable project for the teachers and kids.

"First and foremost, I want [the teachers] to have ownership and convey ownership to the kids as much as possible," says Mittenthal.

During his tenure as WECP's head gardener, Mittenthal used the garden to enhance the curriculum happening in the program. In April, before planting, he would bring in seeds and photos of plants so the children could understand the transformation between stages. He also germinated pea seeds in between paper towel inside of petri dishes. After two weeks, the pea shoots actually start to push open the petri dish on their own. Laying the various stages of pea seeds and shoots together is what Mittenthal refers to as his "pea movie."

Because of increasing responsibilities, Mittenthal has taken a step back but teacher Katie Schultz, along with several coworkers, have started doing more with the garden including using it as a teaching tool.

Recent expansion to the garden has allowed kids easier access to help with weeding, planting and harvesting, according to Schultz. This year's crop includes items kids are familiar with, like green beans and pumpkins, as well as some unfamiliar foods like kohlrabi.

Often, the lesson will continue with a fun cooking project in the classroom. A recent chocolate beet cake had many more kids pining for beets than normal. Schultz says the variety of produce has been a great experience for the kids.

Additionally, the kids are learning important life lessons about caretaking and the transformation that occurs from seed to harvest.

“The personal responsibility they’ve gained, the excitement that they have from [the garden] has been overwhelming,” says Schultz. “Every day they ask if they can go to the garden.”



Research Potential Aids Professionals *and* Students

When Psychology student Lauren Huckstadt envisioned her senior thesis project evaluating children's bias towards people with disabilities, having the Waisman Early Childhood Program on campus, one-third of whose enrollment is children with disabilities, was the ideal setting.

"What we were interested in was developing a few measures that could even be used to look at children's attitudes toward people with disabilities, which is a hard thing to do with preschoolers because how do you convey the diversity of different abilities and disabilities," says Kristin Shutts, PhD, Huckstadt's supervisor at the time.

Huckstadt started her research by spending time in the classrooms, getting to know the staff and children, so she would be a familiar face when it came time to do interviews. While observing the children in the group setting can glean a certain amount of information, working in a quiet setting with individual children was a better way to get the information they needed. Shutts says children really appreciate the idea that someone other than their parents is genuinely interested in what they think about something.

Different tasks were used to determine preference. First, they were presented with photos of a child in a wheelchair versus a child just sitting in a chair and asked how likely they are to make friends with each person. Another task involved giving the participants information about a child with a disability like "They have a hard time staying in their seat in class" versus a potentially negative piece of information about a typically developing child like "They forgot their lunch yesterday." Again, participants were asked how likely they were to befriend the child from each description.



Their research determined that there is a small amount of bias from children towards people with disabilities but Shutts says their sample size for the study was small. Also, their secondary goal of determining differences between inclusive and non-inclusive preschools was difficult to measure since it is unlikely to find a preschool where not one child has some type of disability.

But Shutts says the measures are there if researchers are interested in further pursuit of the topic. Even she has thought about revisiting the work and WECP.

“Really the experience in WECP helped us, especially through talking to Joan and the staff...[who] are all so knowledgeable,” says Shutts. “I think [the experience] really helped Lauren think about how you would even design a study like that. [WECP] was such a supportive study development environment, I felt that it was a really rich place to even think about some of these issues and think about how you could develop these measures.”

Shutts says that WECP “could be a really amazing place for people doing longitudinal work” as you can go right in and observe the children without relying on parents bringing them in, and that you can observe several times over a longer time period. Plus, “Joan’s unending enthusiasm for research happening there,” according to Shutts, is another great reason to tout this campus resource.



Physical Education and Movement for Every Body

It was an injury that led Tim Gattenby into the field of adapted physical education. When he was told he'd never be the same, and he experienced what it was like to have a physical disability, he was motivated to change his track from physical therapy to adapted physical education. Thirty-one years after he was told to “build and

establish the program” at UW-Madison, things are going strong, with three classes, upwards of 300 students participating and 100 clients every semester.

Much of the coursework is done at the Natatorium in Gym 6, where adapted fitness equipment abounds and Gattenby is on hand to instruct, when necessary, on an exercise movement or activity. But often, after initial announcements and questions, the class is on their own, working in small groups with their client.

There has been one other essential element that's been included in the past three years: field work. “For a long time what we were missing was school experiences, especially early childhood experiences,” says Gattenby.

Each semester, Gattenby sends two to three students over to the Waisman Early Childhood Program to do the same kinds of adapted physical education with a younger crowd. Students work with special needs children one-on-one but also use the large motor space at WECP to work with smaller, integrated groups.

“The kids’ opportunities to socialize with each other is much more possible with movement,” says Gattenby.

Adapted PE takes the developmentally appropriate physical education program and finds ways to make it work with special needs kids—be it physical, cognitive or emotional needs—by providing the least restrictive environment possible and including everybody.

The students who take Gattenby's class are either interested in becoming medical professionals—doctors, physical therapists, nurses, occupational therapists, etc.—or may be pursuing a career in physical education, in which case they need a certificate in Adapted PE.

Gattenby says a common shortfall with clients' experiences is that they have several care providers, all of whom are not communicating with each other to build a cohesive program for their client. He's excited about this new group of professionals, who he is intentionally training to care more about the client than the classwork, and to be more communicative with all the players involved.

"These new professionals will go out and connect more of the dots about communication," says Gattenby.

Eventually, Gattenby hopes to have greater collaboration with early childhood programs like WECP. It's all a matter of having the time and making sure everyone is on the same page.



Treating Autism, the Natural Way



With the prevalence of diagnosis for autism spectrum disorder continually growing and 50 percent of those diagnoses happening by age 4 in Wisconsin¹, increased treatment options and early intervention is a necessity. Having a space on campus where treatment could be provided was crucial to Molly Murphy, lead supervisor and program director for the Waisman Autism Treatment Programs.

“There was a real interest in kind of creating a safety net or catching some of those families who are coming to the clinics for diagnostics, and providing some direct service to them,” says Murphy.

She felt it was important to give families with young children more of a typical early childhood experience, so she sought to treat kids in a naturalistic setting rather than a clinic setting. She found the ideal partner in Joan Ershler, director at Waisman Early Childhood Program.

Starting Together piloted in April 2016, serving ten families with children between ages two to five. It is an early behavioral treatment for autism based on applied behavior analysis and a research-based model that came out of UC-Davis called the Early Start Denver Model, “which has shown some really nice progress for kids in a more naturalistic approach to autism treatment,” says Murphy.

For three hours, each day, she and her staff take the components of a high quality early childhood experience and enhance it with intense, one-to-one teaching based on each child’s individualized treatment plan, incorporating support in

¹ “A Snapshot of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Wisconsin,” CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/documents/comm-report-autism-full-report.pdf>

communication, social interaction, play skills—wherever they need a boost. The other three hours are spent on typical early childhood routines like meal time and large motor time. Murphy calls it “enhanced preschool.”

Starting Together converted a conference room in the WECP building into their main classroom. They also use one other room at WECP for individual play space, and have access to their library, gym, outdoor play areas and a small kitchen area. Utilizing these common areas has the added benefit of allowing for some natural crossover between the children in both programs, too. Another crossover is the “Good Neighbors” program—WECP kids come in at the end of their rest time to be play partners to the Starting Together kids.

The space at WECP has been “exactly what we needed,” says Murphy, who has big plans for the future of autism treatment programs’ collaboration with campus child care and believes in the potential to create support programs within all five child care centers affiliated with the UW.

“There’s this opportunity to embed full day care for families so that there are fewer transitions,” says Murphy. “That they could be receiving an intensity of treatment in the context of a child care program, I think that would be amazing support for families.”

Murphy has had a few families already ask about wraparound care, and hopes to make it a possibility in the future. This past summer, two children who attended WECP in the mornings came to Starting Together for treatment in the afternoons. Having more opportunities for interaction in the WECP is also extremely beneficial for the older children with autism who will be moving on to kindergarten in the near future.

With regard to the future of Starting Together, Murphy is encouraged for the growth of the program and collaboration with WECP.

“Kids are playing and talking and happy,” says Murphy. “I think being happy is the first step to being able to learn. Having this connection to being in WECP where we have a space that’s so attractive to kids, there’s toys and places to climb and places to run and all the things that every kid wants to do!”



In Summary

The Waisman Early Childhood Program (WECP) is affiliated with the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is a model program for meeting the needs of a developmentally diverse group of young children. With approximately two thirds of the children in the program typically developing and up to one third that may have a special educational need because of a developmental delay or disability, WECP fosters the individual growth of *all* children in their abilities by providing knowledgeable, professional, experienced educators; developmentally appropriate practices; and family support.

Since opening its doors in 1979, WECP has encompassed the Wisconsin Idea in everything it does. The center is a crucial resource to university and community families, including those requiring additional support because of a special need. As a past recipient of a grant from the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment Fund, WECP educators have worked with Head Start classrooms to mentor and coach their staff. Their stable, workable environment is also a natural, comfortable setting for children, making it a pillar for child-related research studies. With so many experienced educators on staff, it is also an ideal setting to provide real-life practice and teaching to university students.

WECP, and the campus child care system as a whole, is an integral piece of the university because of the many resources and supports it provides to faculty, researchers, students, student parents and the community-at-large.

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