

A publication of the Addison Independent. April 6, 2023



# Celebrating Our Children

*Addison County Guide  
to Early Education*

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# Report shows the state of Addison County's Children

## Fewer kids in poverty, but families still struggle

By DARLA SENECA

Building Bright Futures Regional Manager for Bennington, Rutland, and Addison Counties

Each year, Building Bright Futures and Vermont's Early Childhood Data and Policy Center release a report on the well-being of young children and families in Vermont. "The State of Vermont's Children: 2022 Year in Review" includes data specific to Addison County as well as a wealth of information on the demographics, basic needs, health, well-being, development and education of Vermont's young children. The report also includes the 2023 Policy Recommendations of the Vermont Early Childhood State Advisory Council Network.

The number of young children in Addison County has decreased in recent years, as has the percentage of children living in poverty. In 2021, there were 3,116 children under age 10 living in Addison County, down from 3,328 in 2016. In 2020 (the most recent year for which this data was

available), 22.5% of Addison County's children under 12 were living in poverty, a decrease from 35.3% in 2015. State-level data also show a decrease in the percent of Vermont families with children under 12 living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), from 17% in 2015 to 13% in 2020.

The reality, however, is that the federal poverty level is not an accurate measure of family economic well-being. Many Vermonters earning well above the FPL struggle to cover the cost of basic needs such as housing, transportation and healthcare. This was especially true in 2022. On average, Vermont households paid \$603, or 11%, more per month for goods such as food, shelter, transportation and energy in total inflation costs in September 2022 compared to January 2021. As more and more pandemic-era

assistance programs are rolled back or eliminated, the financial pressures on Addison County families are expected to continue to increase.

One area the report highlights is the increased need for children's mental health services. Between 2018 and 2021, the rate of children ages 3 to 8 with behavioral or conduct problems, anxiety and/or depression in Vermont rose from 8.7% to 13.8%, while overall U.S. rates remained stable at 8%. In 2021, the number of Vermont children accessing routine mental health services reached its lowest level since 2012, while the number of children accessing crisis services increased. Access to routine mental health care can help decrease the need for crisis services.

**In 2020, 22.5% of Addison County's children under 12 were living in poverty, a decrease from 35.3% in 2015. The reality, however, is that the federal poverty level is not an accurate measure of family economic well-being.**

The accessibility of routine care is exacerbated by the mental health workforce crisis. In October 2022, the vacancy rate was 18.1% at Vermont's Designated Mental Health Agencies and Specialized Service Agencies, key providers of mental health services. In an ideal world, Vermont's children would receive preventative mental health care before problems develop, but Medicaid and the Mental Health Block Grant, two critical federal resources, cannot be used for prevention and promotion of mental health activities.

As we observe The Week of the Young Child, I encourage parents, educators and anyone else who is invested in the well-being of Vermont's children to check out "The State of Vermont's Children: 2022 Year in Review," along with the many other early childhood resources at [buildingbrightfutures.org](http://buildingbrightfutures.org). If you'd like to learn more or to connect with the Addison County Building Bright Futures Regional Council, feel free to contact me at 802-377-0119 or [dsenechal@buildingbrightfutures.org](mailto:dsenechal@buildingbrightfutures.org).



WE HAVE A very active community of daycare and early education providers in Addison County, with more than three dozen caring providers educating and helping raise our young children.

Photo courtesy of Otter Creek Child Center

"Celebrating Our Children: Addison County Guide to Early Education" was funded in part by grants from the Vermont Association of Education for Young Children, Addison Building Bright Futures, and Defending the Early Years.

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# Young brains need support

Early years are crucial to your child's developing brain

By DR. JOHANA "JODY" BRAKELEY  
**Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician, retired**

In the last few decades there has been an explosion in what we know and how we understand early brain development. In celebration of the *Week of the Young Child*, this is a review of some of the most current and relevant information about brain development in the early years. It may change how you view children and adults alike.

Young children make more than 1 million new brain cell connections every second — IF their living situation(s) allow.

In a nod to sugaring season, think of a maple tree as a metaphor for a brain cell. The "roots" of one cell connect with the "leaves" of the next cell...that's what we mean by "a brain cell connection." Brain pathways for all types of development (motor, sensory, speech, thinking and reasoning) all begin with a couple of little brain cells connecting. Through repetition, rehearsal, and practice more and more cells connect until millions of strong, fast, efficient brain cell pathways are created. It may take 25 years or more before an individual's brain is fully mature. In the meantime, children's brains need a lot of support and proper ecological/environmental conditions for development.

In addition to nutritious food, proper

clothes and shelter, and appropriate amounts of sleep and exercise, all children need stable, responsive, nurturing relationships with consistent, protective, interactive adults. Without these crucial personal relationships, brains cannot not develop their fullest abilities.

What is brain development? It is every little baby-step or milestone a parent can think of. A baby rolling over, sitting up, walking independently, self-feeding, coloring, writing etc., are examples of motor skills; they help us navigate and manipulate our environments. Seeing, hearing, sense of smell, taste and touch are sensory skills and are important for interacting with the world around us. Speech and other forms of communication help us share our thoughts, wants and needs.

Last to fully develop are our thinking and reasoning skills. In this category "Executive Skills" (ES) are a key component. ES are brain-based skills that help individuals complete tasks and become independent. Babies are not born with mature executive skills; they develop little by little over time. Examples of executive skills are: a) the ability to wait and be patient, b) being able to remain focused and pay attention, c) having mental flexibility to change one's mindset depending on circumstances, d) emotional regulation; being able to remain calm,

(See Brain, Page 9B)



**A YOUNG CHILD who is feeding themselves is also developing their brain by developing motor skills, which helps them navigate and manipulate their environment.**



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# Early education lays a strong foundation

By **BRIANNA HELLER**

When asked what I do for a living I respond, “I am a teacher.” When asked which grade I teach, I contemplate changing the topic because I know that when I declare that I teach preschoolers, I am likely to hear, “Oh, so you’re not a REAL teacher.” My teaching license, the students I teach and the families I serve say differently.

Early education is an incredibly undervalued profession, and is largely looked down upon by society. Ask any early educator; We have all heard it countless times. “You aren’t a real teacher.” “You’re just a babysitter,” or “Oh, that’s just daycare.” The younger the children in your classroom, the less respect you will receive. You teach in a play-based child-led program? You best come prepared to wax lyrical on the power of play, the importance of engaging children in their learning, and best practice in Early Education. We learn to censor ourselves, switching to “Child Care” instead of daycare, using Pre-K instead of preschool, putting emphasis on Early EDUCATOR just so we can be taken seriously by our loved ones, our

professional counterparts in grades K-12 and special education, college programs, and the community at large.

I am a proud Early Educator. Since the Orwell Early Education Program opened seven years ago, I have been teaching at an amazing child-led, play-based program where I serve a close knit community. My first group of preschoolers to go through the OEEP are now in fifth grade. This year, they are returning to my classroom as “reading buddies”; pairing up with one of my current students, reading to them and planning play-based activities that coincide with the book they read. I can see first-hand the effects of their

*“We are not babysitters. We are teachers. We are early educators. We are the foundation our future is built on.”*  
— Brianna Heller

early education experience through their confidence, creativity, kindness and respect.

Early care and education lays the foundation for children to be able to succeed in school. We as early educators

help children learn to identify and manage the emotions faced throughout the day. We help them embrace their excitement and joy, cope with feelings of sadness and loss, and work through feelings of frustration. We teach social interactions and help students develop negotiation

and mediation skills. We help children to develop kindness and respect for their peers, their community, and the world we live in. Thanks to early educators, children learn that they do not need to be everyone’s friend but we do need to be kind to everyone. We instill a love of learning in children from an early age. We do all of this through play, allowing children to learn through activities that are intrinsically motivating, freely chosen and individualized to the student.

So many of our grown up problems, whether within our family and friend groups, our communities, our workplaces or within a political context could be solved or eased if we all had learned to handle our emotions, respect ourselves, others and the environment, learned mediation and negotiation skills at a young age and valued learning enough to never stop studying and evolving.

But alas, our society does not value early education. The high turnover among early educators, poor pay and benefits, high tuitions and limited funding to offset tuitions, lack of access to quality care in underprivileged areas and the rhetoric that kids are only “playing” and we are babysitters shows how undervalued it really is. And so, it is our responsibility as educators to not only educate our children but those in our communities and our states at large.

In Vermont, we have state funded-Universal Pre-K where three- to five-year-old children receive 10 free hours



**BRIANNA HELLER**

of preschool a week. Although this is a good first step, that is all it should be — a first step. It is proven that quality early childhood education sets students up for success and we need to call on our lawmakers to make this accessible for all families.

Early care and education is a passion for me and I remain in my position because of the love I have for working with young children and their families. I know this is true of many of my fellow early educators. That does not mean we do not deserve to be respected and valued. Our passion should not be thrown in our faces. We should be paid and have access to the same benefits of our K-12 counterparts and it should not fall on the families in our programs. Our families deserve access to affordable early education as much as we

(See Heller, Page 8)

How you’re treated as a person is **JUST AS IMPORTANT** as the treatment you receive.

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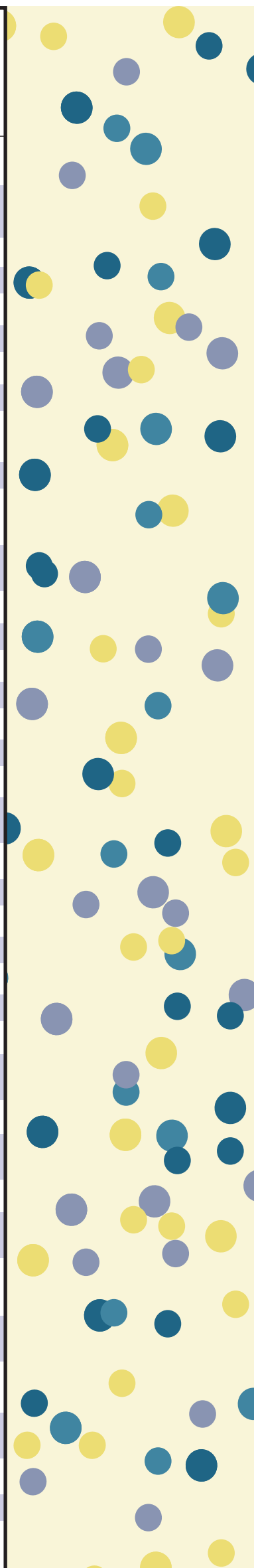
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# Addison County Daycare Providers

Name	Ages	Schedule	PreK partner	Town	Contact Info
Quarry Hill School	3-5	School Year/school day	Yes	Middlebury	www.quarryhillschool.org office@quarryhillschool.org
Otter Creek Child Center	6 wks-5 yrs	M-F Year Round	Yes	Middlebury	www.ottercreekcc.org office@ottercreekcc.org
College Street Children's Center	6 wks-3 yrs	M-F Year Round	No	Middlebury	cscdirector228@gmail.com
Evergreen Preschool	3-5	School year/half day and full day	Yes	Vergennes	Evergreenpreschoolvt@gmail.com
MAUSD Early Education Program	3-5	School year. 10 hour/week program	Yes	Bristol	lindsay.hance@mausd.org
MAUSD Early Education Program	3-5	School year. M-F 8-5	Yes	Bristol	heidi.bullock@mausd.org
Wren's Nest Forest Preschool	3-5	School Year M-F 8:00-4:30	Yes	Bristol	wrensnestvt@gmail.com
Carolyn Fogg *	Birth-12	School year M-F 7-4:30	No	Monkton	cfogg1979@gmail.com
Starksboro Cooperative Preschool	3-5	School year & summer program half day & full day	yes	Starksboro	starkcoop@gmail.com
Aurora Preschool	3-5	Year Round 7:30-5	No	Middlebury	auroralearningcentervt@gmail.com
Bristol Family Center	6 wks-6 yrs	M-F Year Round	Yes	Bristol	www.bristolfamilycenter.org, awhitcomb@bristolfamilycenter.org
Addison County Parent Child Ctr.	0-5 yrs	M-F, 8-4	yes	County in Middlebury	dbailey@addisoncountypcc.org
Bridge School Preschool	3-5	full year 8-3:30	yes	Middlebury	emilylambert@bridgeschoolvermont.org
Mountain Road Preschool *	0-5	Full year 7:15-4:45 M-TH	yes	Addison	mountainroadpreschool@yahoo.com
Misty Scott *	6wks - 12yrs	Full Year, M - F 7:00a - 5:00p	No	Vergennes	ckcc@comcast.net, 802-877-6977
Evelyn Burlock *	6wks - 12 yrs	Full Year, M-F 7:00-5:00	No	Vergennes	eburlock27@yahoo.com 802-877-2506
Mary Johnson Children's Center	3 mo-5yrs	Full Year	Yes	Middlebury	office@mjcvt.org/www.mjcvt.org
Midd. Cooperative Nursery School	3yr-5 yrs	Full Year	Yes	E.Middlebury	office@mjcvt.org/www.mjcvt.org
Orwell Early Education (MJCC)	3yrs-5yrs	School year	Yes	Orwell	office@mjcvt.org/www.mjcvt.org
MJCC's Midd. Afterschool Program	K-5th grade	Afterschool School Year Summer full time	No	Middlebury	school-age@mjcvt.org/www.mjcvt.org
Heather Armell *	6 wks-5yrs	Full Year, M-F 7:15-4:30	No	Monkton	littletykes2007@yahoo.com
Bethany Hallock *	Birth to 12	Full year, M-F, 7:30am-4:30pm	No	Ferrisburgh	gbthallock@juno.com
Donna Meacham *	Birth to 12	Full year, M-F, 7:30am-4:30pm	No	New Haven	dondarnea@gmavt.net 802-453-5383
Lincoln Cooperative Preschool	3yrs-5yrs	7:30-3:00 some aftercare available	Yes	Lincoln	preschool@gmavt.net
Sunshine Childcare *	Birth-5yrs	Full year, M-F, 7:00a-5:00p	No	Addison	sunshinecc21@gmail.com
Jennifer Cyr Family Child Care *	Birth-4 yrs	Year Round, Monday-Thursday	No	Middlebury	jennifercyr2@gmail.com
Addison County Early Learning Ctr.	16 m.-5yrs	year round, both M-F 8-2pm	Yes	New Haven	psutlive@cvoeo.org, Peg Sutlive
ANWSD Early Education Program	3-5 yrs	School Year only 8:15am-1:15pm Extended Care 1:15pm-4:30pm	Yes	Ferrisburgh	mtierney@anwsd.org, Marcie Tierney
Laura Weber *	Birth-12 yrs	Year round, M-F, 7:00 - 4:30	No	Hancock	lmw15vt@yahoo.com
The Ark Preschool/Kindergarten	3yrs-kinder & 3-10 years	M-F, 7:30-5:00	No	Waltham	arkdirector@victoryvt.org
Cornerstone Preschool	Ages 3-5	School year M-F 7:30-5:00	No	Vergennes	office@cornerstone-prek.com
Bridport Central School Preschool	Ages 3-5	School year M-Th 7:45 am - 2:45 pm	Yes	Bridport	Heather Adams, at 802-758-2331 or hadams@acsdvt.org
Mary Hogan Preschool	Ages 3-5	School year M-Th 8:15 am - 2:15 pm	Yes	Middlebury	Kim Forbes, at 802-382-1438 or kforbes@acsdvt.org
A.R.K. Child Care at Whiting	6 wks - 5 yrs	M - F Year round 7:30 - 5pm	No	Whiting	Rebecca Kerr, 802-623-7991 arkchildcare2018@gmail.com
Muffy's Family Program *	2 - school age	M - F Year round 8 - 4:30	Yes	Orwell	muffykgart@gmail.com 802-948-2561 (Leave a message)
Discovery Hill *	Infant to School age	Year Round - 7-4:30	Yes	Bristol	kidsfirstdhfcc@yahoo.com 802-989-1225
Stacey Rheaume *	6 wks - 12 yrs	M-F Year Round 7:00 to 4:30	no	Salisbury	rrheaume5@yahoo.com 802-349-5082
Bristol Preschool*	Ages 3-5	School year T,W,Th 8:00-3:30	Yes	Bristol	jankowski43@yahoo.com 802-453-4071

\* = Home provider





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July 24-28, Mon-Fri 9:30-11  
Ages 6 to 8  
Tuition \$115



Young Company Musical

## Matilda

July 5-23, Mon-Fri 1-4  
Ages 12 and up  
Tuition \$285



## Tempest Toss'd

July 24-28, Mon-Fri 10-12  
Ages 9 to 13  
Tuition \$150



## Broadway Bootcamp

July 10-14, Mon-Fri 9-12  
Ages 12 to 16  
Tuition \$150



Young Company Classical

## Arms and the Man

July 31-Aug 19, Mon-Fri 9-12  
Ages 12 and up  
Tuition \$285

Tickets: [townhalltheater.org](http://townhalltheater.org) ▪ 802-382-9222 ▪ 68 S Pleasant St, Middlebury, VT 05753

Follow us on IG @thtmidd and FB @townhalltheatervt.

Playgroups! Storytimes! Open gyms! It's all happening. Here's a roundup of the recurring baby/toddler programming in our area. All these events are free.

### Mondays

Playgroup at **Ilsley Public Library** (10 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **Lawrence Memorial Library** (10:30 a.m.)

### Tuesdays

Playgroup at the **Congregational Church of Middlebury** (9:30 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **Sarah Partridge Library** in East Middlebury (9:30 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **New Haven Community Library** (10:30 a.m.)  
 Storytime/playgroup at **Salisbury Free Public Library** (10:30 a.m.)

### Wednesdays

Storytime at **Ilsley Library** (9 a.m.)  
 Playgroup at **Bristol Federated Church** (9:30 a.m.)  
 Open gym at **Middlebury Rec Center** (10 a.m.)

### Thursdays

Playgroup at **Platt Memorial Library** (9 a.m.)  
 Playgroup at **Vergennes Congregational Church** (9:30 a.m.)  
 Open gym at **Middlebury Rec Center** (10 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **Vergennes Congregational Church** (10:30 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **Lawrence Memorial Library** (10:30 a.m.)

### Fridays

Playgroup at **Mary Hogan School** (8:30 a.m.)  
 Storytime at **Lincoln Library** (10:30 a.m.)  
 Homeschoolers open gym at the **Middlebury Rec Center** (12:30 p.m.)

### Saturdays

Playgroup at **Vergennes Congregational Church** (9:30 a.m.)

*Note: Most of these events follow the school calendar. If school is closed for a snow day, in-service day or holiday, so is playgroup.*

# Mini Bury

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## Universal childcare is here

Addison County has several options available

By MEG BAKER

In a high-quality preschool classroom, you might see a teacher kneeling on the floor to listen to a child's story from their weekend or helping two children negotiate over sharing a toy. Children busily put their items in their cubbies, independently wash their hands, and sign up for a classroom job—carefully finding or printing the letters in their name. A family stops to talk with the teacher on their way out the door and has a brief conversation that will be picked up at a conference next week. Perhaps a teacher notices that many children are building barns for their animals in the block corner and chooses a book about farm animals for morning circle and adds corn and toy tractors to the sensory table to extend the play. Children excitedly chatter to one another over a shared meal and get their coats on to go outside. A high-quality preschool is building the skills that children need throughout their lives: communication and physical skills; social-emotional skills like taking turns, coping with strong emotions, and negotiating with friends; developing independence with classroom routines and self-care; learning about the world; and early reading and math skills. Communities that invest in early childhood see the payoff in later years academically and socially.

Universal PreK (UPreK) through Act 166 is designed to help all Vermont families access high-quality preschool. Through UPreK, public school district funding pays preschool tuition for 10 hours/week, 35 weeks/year at many qualified community preschools. This makes those 10 hours/week FREE to all preschool families and expands the number of children who can access high quality preschool.

This school year, the three primary Addison County school districts — Addison Central SD, Addison Northwest SD and Mount Abraham USD — are serving a total of about 425 preschoolers aged 3-5 (not enrolled in kindergarten). Over 300 children, or roughly 76%, are enrolled in the UPreK program in 36 community partner sites around our region (2 registered homes and 34 center-based preschool programs). These children are enrolled as public school students

for those 10 hours and included in pupil census counts in local district budgets.

One benefit to this mixed delivery system for preschool is that families have some choice in preschool schedule, location and philosophy. For example, working families may need full-time care or a location convenient to their workplace. Some children may benefit from the specific supports offered by local programs including free meals or therapeutic care. Families may prefer a program that has smaller groupings or more outside time. Having family choice in preschool programming means fewer transitions for children needing full-time care and more flexibility in meeting child and family needs. With limited school capacity and hours, UPreK also increases access to high-quality programs.

All preschool programs must meet certain quality standards to partner with school districts, including having a teacher with a Vermont endorsement in Early Childhood Education (ECE) or Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE); aligning their curriculum with Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS); providing inclusive accommodations and supports for all children; and having 3 STARS or higher in Vermont's Quality Rating Scale. In addition, programs agree to conduct child progress assessments and hold twice yearly parent-teacher conferences. Local data on child progress shows that our quality preschool programs — public and private — are making a positive difference in children's development and learning.

Families who are interested in prequalified community preschools first enroll with the preschool program and then complete enrollment paperwork for tuition funding. Some families are also eligible for additional child care tuition assistance through the Child Care Financial Assistance Program.

For more information about Universal PreK, including how to choose a quality preschool program, locate a local prequalified partner program, or enroll in UPreK please visit: <https://mbaker61.wixsite.com/uprek>.

## Heller

*(Continued from Page 5)*  
 deserve to be shown our value.

We are not babysitters. We are teachers. We are early educators. We are the foundation our future is built on. I challenge all of my fellow educators, our families and our community members to become champions and advocates for Early Education.

*This piece is from Brianna Heller's acceptance speech in response to winning two national awards in 2022, the Terri Lynne Lokoff Child Care Teacher Award and the Helene Marks Teacher of the Year Award in 2022. Brianna teaches at the Orwell Early Education Program, a program of Mary Johnson Children's Center.*



# Here's help in your hunt for child care

How do I find child care? How can I pay for childcare once I find it? These are two huge questions parent and guardians frequently ask.

Fortunately, there is an agency in Addison County that can provide help for you — it's called Child Care Services at Mary Johnson Children's Center in Middlebury. Child Care Services provides help and information for all Addison County residents.

## Paying for Child Care in Addison County

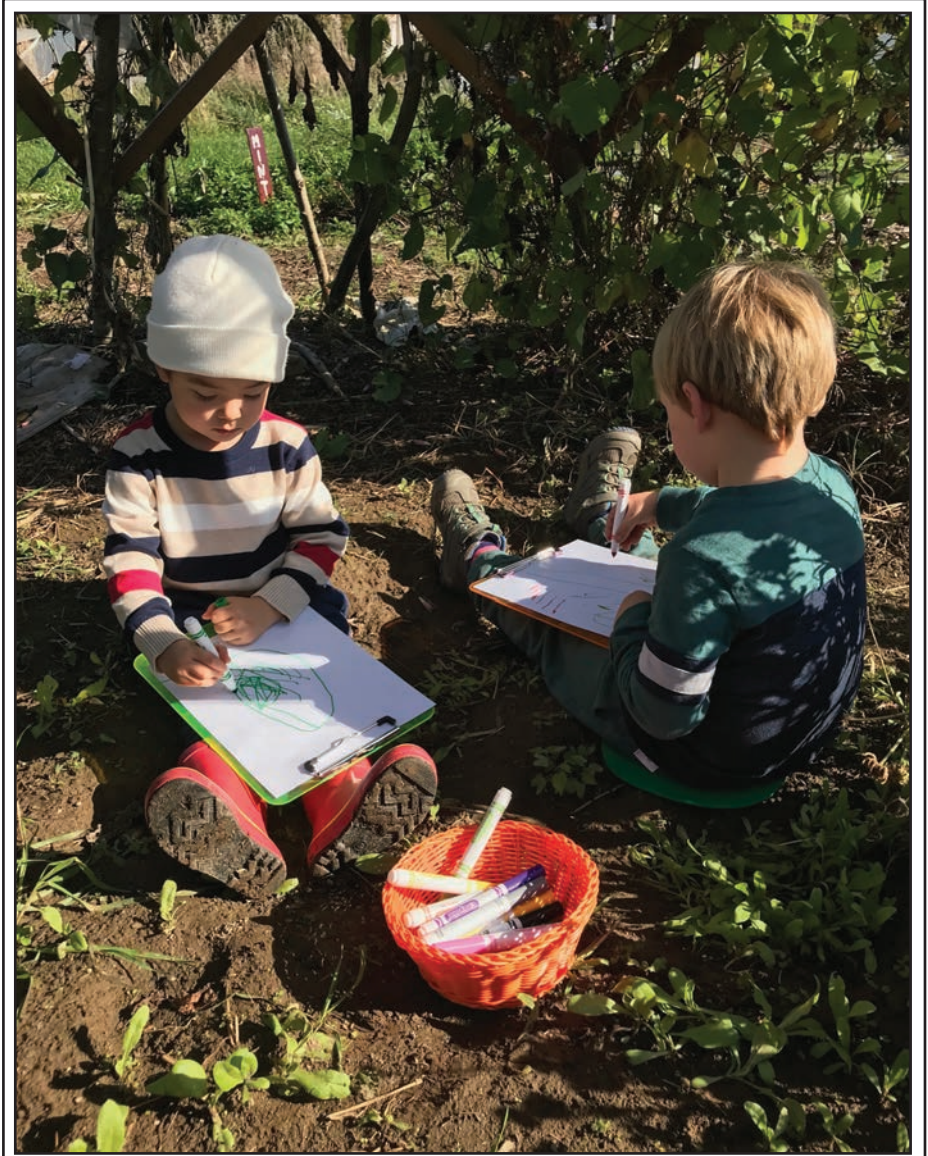
Addison County's Child Care Financial Assistance Program, also referred to as subsidy, helps eligible families and guardians pay for child care. Families may qualify based on gross income, family size and their need for service. MJCC's Eligibility Specialist assists families through the process of eligibility, including application completion, and determine whether families qualify and how much assistance may be provided.

Current Vermont eligibility guidelines can be found online here: [dcf.vermont.gov/benefits/ccfa](https://dcf.vermont.gov/benefits/ccfa).

## Finding Child Care in Addison County

Referral Specialist for Addison County Ginny Sinclair has up-to-date information regarding the different child care programs in the county, including available spaces. This referral support is free and helps connect families with programs that have openings and match their needs. The referral program also provides parents with information on how to locate a quality child care program, questions to ask providers when they call or visit them, and ways to build a successful partnership with their child care provider.

You can reach Referral Specialist Ginny Sinclair at [referral@mjcvt.org](mailto:referral@mjcvt.org), and Eligibility Specialist Rebecca Warner may be reached at [subsidy@mjcvt.org](mailto:subsidy@mjcvt.org). Both can be reached at 802-388-4303.



## Brain

(Continued from Page 4)

cool and collected, e) time management; being/doing things on time, and f) stress tolerance. These skills, along with judgment, social language, decision making, and more, all develop in the frontal lobes of the brain, located behind the eyebrows. And, like everything else in the brain, they require nurturing support and a lot of time.

When children and their families/caregivers experience "stress" that is chronic, recurrent, unrelieved and unbuffered (that means no one is present in your life to help you) it affects us in unhealthy ways. Brains and bodies do not develop optimally when the stress response is constantly activated.

We must keep in mind that every experience in a child's day is a learning experience. Learning is not confined

to "school" hours. Some experiences are truly great and others may be less helpful or even harmful. It is up to adults to ensure that all children grow in safe, stable and nurturing living/learning environments. They need consistency, routine and a healthy balance of stress. And, by the way, parents and caregivers need the same.

Children need time to talk and to be heard. They benefit from singing, reading, laughing and playing. All children need at least one, caring supportive adult in their lives — the more the better.

Whenever you look at a child, you should be filled with wonder and curiosity. One million brain cell connections form every second. What's going on inside that little head? As a community, we must do everything possible to nurture and support every child's tremendous potential.



**AMONG THE MANY abilities that a child develops are their "executive skills" — brain-based skills that help individuals complete tasks and become independent. Being able to remain focused and pay attention is a key executive skill.**

Photo courtesy of ANWSD Early Education Program



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# Little kids can use sharp tools

By IAN GRAMLING  
Vermont Youth Development Corps

We all know what happens if we give a mouse a cookie or what happens when we give a pigeon a bus. But what happens if we give a preschooler a sharp hatchet? Nothing but disaster... right?

Letting small children use sharp or supposedly “dangerous” hand tools isn’t anything new, and not something I invented. At first glance many would see it as crazy, dangerous or even negligent. I would argue that, with close supervision and instruction, it is exactly what many young kids need, and there’s a method to the madness.

I am in my third term of service with the Willowell Foundation as an AmeriCorps member, giving back to the folks that gave me an awesome high school education, and sharing my passion for the outdoors with local youth. In the years I’ve spent there, most of my service has been at Wren’s Nest Forest Preschool, which serves kids ages 3-5 and emphasizes nature based exploration and hands-on learning, much like Willowell’s other

programs.

My service has given me a venue to teach young children to use sharp bushcraft tools like knives, saws, axes, hatchets, machetes, pruners and hand drills, as well as fire lighting methods like lighters, matches and ferrocerium rods. As adults, we naturally want to keep these tiny bundles of chaos safe, but sometimes overdo it. I believe that the novelty of using a tool can be exciting

and empowering for young children, and it gives them a huge sense of agency and awareness of their own safety. Small children are far more competent and capable than many people give them credit for, and using tools is one way of helping children explore their potential.

This doesn’t mean you should

let your 11-month-old infant run a chainsaw. When using tools with kids, an adult needs to take into account the developmental levels of the children, and the type of tool being used. Using tools that are proportionally appropriate, if not outright designed for children, will make things far less frustrating for (See Tools, Page 14)

*The repetitive motions, using one’s muscles, the texture of wood, and the sound of sawing or chopping will satisfy many children’s urge for something tangible. Even the act of making a mess can be fun.*



**GIVING KIDS THE opportunity for supervised use of tools is a great sensory activity that allows them to use their hands. But this requires one-on-one time with a focused adult in a safe area.**



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# Mix nature and kids, you'll get joy and wonder



By SUSAN PARE

Here in Addison County, outdoor play is a regular part of our dynamic, inquiry-based, joy-and-wonder-filled early childhood programs. Research tells us that outdoor play from birth to age five produces developmental outcomes that simply can't be achieved indoors. Outside, there is space for active movement, with limitless opportunity for learning by observing, experiencing, trying and doing. Addison County's early educators are lovers of sunlight and fresh air, have a true respect and for and honest appreciation of young children, and relish diving headfirst into experiential learning. Learn more about a few of our programs below!

Nature is an invaluable partner in our therapeutic work with children here at the **Addison County Parent Child Center**. Immersion in the natural world, coupled with nurturing human relationships, soothes anxiety, decreases aggression and fosters resilience, self-regulation, physical development, attention and social skills.

The **Lincoln Cooperative Preschool** is an outdoor-oriented school. Our outdoor classroom allows us to eat outdoors in any weather, and have rest time outside in sleeping bags on mats for most of the school year. Outdoor free play; sledding; riding strider bikes; sand, water and mud play; gardening; outdoor block building;

*(See Nature, Page 15)*



## Help us piece together our past. Join the MJCC History Project!



**Mary  
Johnson**  
Children's Center

In 2020 MJCC had a **50<sup>th</sup> birthday!** We are looking for memories, stories, pictures and all interesting tidbits for our Center history and timeline.

**You can help!** Did you or your child attend MJCC? Were you involved in our programs or community events? Did you work for MJCC? Chances are you have a story to share!

Can you name the "founding mothers" from 1970? Or the Directors who have made MJCC what it is today? Do you remember "Middlebury Day Care Center" in its first location in a church basement? Or the purchase of the old Otis farmhouse on Water Street in the late 1970's which we still call home?

Send your thoughts and ideas to [history@mjcvt.org](mailto:history@mjcvt.org), or leave a message at the Center (802-388-2853) and we will be in touch.

# Kool with a "K"

By  
CAROLYN  
FOGG and  
COOKIE DANYOW

As parents, our children are our priority, and this includes their education. We dedicate endless hours to teach them new skills and techniques so they can be ready for life! As you repeat a new skill, often multiple times in one sitting, your precious child looks at you with those adoring eyes, going through the motions, probably thinking about when it will end so they can watch "Paw Patrol" or play outside.

Each day or weekend you set aside time to work on teaching that skill and it seems like they're just not picking it up. Then an older cousin or friend comes over to play for the afternoon, happens to show them the same skill during "play time" and BOOM, they've got it! As parents and providers, we would love to think it's all the hard work and dedication we've put in but we have to wonder why they didn't pick it up sooner, like when we were working with them. What does this older child have that we don't have? It's the power of play in a multi-age group — in other words, you get to play with the cool older kid and learn at the same time.

According to research by Dr. Karyn Purvis, "Scientists have discovered that it takes approximately 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain, unless it is done in play, in which case it only takes 10 to 20 repetitions. Whether it be board games, crafts, puzzles or imaginative games, a child is always learning." (Oaktreekids.com/blog). The play (a.k.a.

learning) in a mixed age classroom setting is often more complex. Older kids become the teachers, helping them practice executive skills and empathy (leadership with less conflicts) and the younger kids rise to the expectations of the older kids, quickly absorbing these new skills and demonstrating them proudly for all to see!

So what does this look like in a home childcare setting, in which the ages can range from birth to 12 years old? For example, in one area, the toddlers are playing together and trying to establish who's in control with a fun game of "that's mine!" Meanwhile the preschoolers are at the play kitchen setting up their restaurant. Since they ALL want to work in the restaurant, they quickly realize there are no customers to serve. They head over to the arguing toddlers and ask if they want to play. With an astounding "YES," the group goes over to the table.

The toddlers sit next to each other, and are served drinks and asked what they want to eat. The preschoolers write down their orders, go over to the kitchen, cook the food using their own special recipe and serve it to ravenous toddlers. Throughout this game, the toddlers are learning social skills, practicing fine motor skills, developing communication and learning what happens at a restaurant. The preschoolers are learning the same skills just at an elevated level. The toddlers are happy to be included and the preschoolers are overjoyed to play while being in charge and they are all learning! After a fashion, and in true toddler style, they get bored and notice the babies crawling around. They get on their hands and knees and crawl over to the babies. And just like that, the

## The power of multi-age, play-based learning in a single classroom setting



**WHEN YOUNGER CHILDREN play with the older "cool kids," there is learning going on that is faster than when children simply drill skills with adults.**

toddlers become the older cool kids and the babies are happily following them working on their gross motor skills, social and emotional learning and spatial awareness!

As the day progresses, school age kids arrive, making them the incredibly cool older kids! As everyone eats snack, they talk about the events of their day, things that are happening later and build relationships that will last for years to come.

This shift in dynamics happens multiple times throughout the day in a home childcare environment. The smaller group size in a home childcare provides a more intimate, family-like learning space where kids have the consistency of one

provider and the same friends there for a longer period of time, ultimately leading to strong bonds being formed. Our role as adult educators is to gently guide play and learning so that there are as few upsets as possible along with introducing new techniques and skills to scaffold their play and learning to keep them engaged. But the deep learning and mastering comes from play and unscripted reinforcement by the "older Einsteins" as THIS is the secret educational weapon of a home childcare mixed age setting.

So the next time you're wondering why your child just isn't understanding a skill, ask an older cool kid for help!

## Challenges of providing childcare



**BRISTOL FAMILY CENTER Lead Teacher Abigail Gendreau reads to a child on a cold day this winter. Educators like Gendreau every day must balance their responsibilities to their charges, their educational requirements and their own sustenance.**

By **ABIGAIL GENDREAU**  
Lead Teacher, Bristol Family Center

As an early educator for the past 10 years in a medium-size, non-profit childcare program, the hurdles and challenges I have faced are immense. You wake each day to bust your butt knowing you are doing what is essential for your community. As many have likely heard, early educators do not make nearly what they deserve for the work that they put in. We have a responsibility to not only each child we serve, but we also have a responsibility to each of the families we serve, and that is a lot of pressure.

Each year when annual raises approach, I am always so hesitant to face my employer to see what she has to offer me. Now that might sound crazy, but for me I receive health insurance through the state of Vermont and any increase in income results in an increase in my health insurance premiums. I have been faced with questioning if I should deny my annual raise that I know I deserve. It is unnerving thinking that a little raise might tip my budget.

I personally believe that those who are educating and teaching others should be continuous learners themselves. Licensing and STARS regulations require educators to engage in 30 hours of professional

development/training hours each year. This is something I far exceed every year. It also means I have to spend personal dollars out of pocket to pay for training and use my own personal time to ensure I am continuing with my professional development. I have spent countless hours writing and applying for grants and scholarships to access as many funding sources as possible to continue my education.

The Northern Lights Career Ladder is a nice incentive to pursue higher education as well as the fact that with higher education you qualify to make more money but this still doesn't solve the issue of the fact that my health insurance is going to increase.

In 2022 I walked across the stage with my Associate's Degree as a first time college graduate in my family. It was at that point that I told myself I need to keep going. This is the field that holds my heart, these are the children of our future, and I will continue to advocate and educate those around Early Education. I am planning to receive my Bachelor's Degree and Teaching license in the spring of 2024, and until then I balance full-time schooling and a full-time job as a Lead teacher working 40-plus hours a week while also coaching a varsity cheerleading team.



## Tools

*(Continued from Page 11)*

them. At first I gave them an adult size forest ax to split wood. Not only was it too heavy for some of them, and most simply didn't have the upper body strength to use it effectively. Over time, I scaled down the tools I had them use, and now they are having a much easier time with an old Boy Scout hatchet, or simply using a knife to baton firewood into kindling.

There is no such thing as being overkill with safety, and this requires one-on-one time with a focused adult in a safe area. I like to follow a certain protocol every time I hand a tool to one of the kids: They have to create a safety circle and announce to everyone they're using a sharp tool. There is zero room for mistakes, and an adult supervising needs to be watching the child, stepping in as necessary to adjust posture or hold the tool with the child while they work. Situational awareness helps make sure no one else enters the

work zone. It is essential teachers who want to undertake this should be caught up on their first aid, and I strongly advocate for carrying medical supplies on your person and knowing how to deal with an injury should one arise.

Finally, tool use is a great sensory activity that allows kids to use their hands. The repetitive motions, using one's muscles, the texture of wood, and the sound of sawing or chopping will satisfy many children's urge for something tangible. Even the act of making a mess can be fun enough. When I asked a student of mine why he liked using tools so much, he simply replied "I like the sawdust."

*Writer's note: Many thanks to my fellow educators and the parents at Wren's Nest Forest Preschool for support and photos, Jon Turner for the use of his farm as our classroom, and the neighbors for the use of their forests. Also, to Su White of the nearby Quarry Hill Preschool for her additional photos.*



## Nature

(Continued from Page 12)

swinging; and imaginary play climbing in the trees are all part of our afternoons.

At **Otter Creek Child Center**, we emphasize nature and outdoor experiences while focusing on the importance of play. We have two outdoor classrooms; one for infants and toddlers and one for the preschoolers. Both outdoor classrooms were designed and developed with the support of the administrative staff, teachers, children and their families, and are wonderful learning spaces.

**Quarry Hill School** offers authentic opportunities to explore the natural world, providing children with limitless ways to move and observe. Being in the natural world grows the connection between children and the land. Observing, exploring and adventuring through the seasons helps us understand our outdoor spaces, and is a part of our evolving curriculum.

At **Starksboro Cooperative Preschool**, the majority of each preschool morning is spent outdoors — moving, exploring and learning through play. Our day includes morning meetings in the garden, adventure walks in and around the fields

of Lewis Creek, and regular garden-growing activities. We build strong muscles and cultivate both resiliency and a deep respect for nature. There is always time to listen to bird calls, dig for worms, follow tracks, find sticks and ask “why?”

**Wren’s Nest** is a nature-based program for preschool-age children, with a holistic, interdisciplinary, and sensory-based approach to learning. Children come away with a deep level of comfort and love for the land they play and learn on. Above all, Wren’s Nest creates a space for children to cultivate their natural sense of awe and wonder.

**Bristol Family Center** teachers believe in the importance of spending time outside each day. Outdoor play is an integral component of learning at BFC, as it allows children uninterrupted time to learn more about themselves through their active curiosity, problem-solving and wondering. BFC is blessed with large open playgrounds where children can safely test their own strengths and take risks, building confidence and making genuine connections to math, science, literacy and social studies, always with teacher support.



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## Playgroups! Storytimes! Open gyms! It's all happening. Here's a roundup of the recurring baby/toddler programming in our area.

*All these events are free.*

**MONDAYS:** playgroup at **Ilsley Public Library** (10 a.m.); storytime at **Lawrence Memorial Library** (10:30 a.m.)

**TUESDAYS:** playgroup at the **Congregational Church of Middlebury** (9:30 a.m.); **Sarah Partridge** storytime in East Middlebury (9:30 a.m.); storytime at **New Haven Community Library** (10:30 a.m.); storytime/playgroup at **Salisbury Free Public Library** (10:30 a.m.)

**WEDNESDAYS:** storytime at **Ilsley Library** in Middlebury (9 a.m.); playgroup at **Bristol Federated Church** (9:30 a.m.); open gym at **Middlebury Rec Center** (10 a.m.)

**THURSDAYS:** playgroup at **Platt Memorial Library** in Shoreham (9 a.m.); playgroup at **Vergennes Congregational Church** (9:30 a.m.) with the Bixby-sponsored storytime at the church in Vergennes (10:30 a.m.); open gym at **Middlebury Rec Center** (10 a.m.); storytime at **Lawrence Memorial Library** in Bristol (10:30 a.m.)

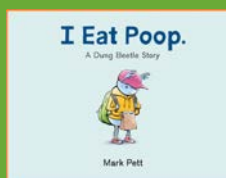
**FRIDAYS:** playgroup at **Mary Hogan School** in Middlebury (8:30 a.m.); storytime at **Lincoln Library** (10:30 a.m.); homeschoolers open gym at the **Middlebury Rec Center** (12:30 p.m.);

**SATURDAYS:** playgroup at **Vergennes Congregational Church** (9:30 a.m.)

There is also a new session of Music Together starting up at **Middlebury Community Music Center** this week (Sun, Mon, Thurs & Sat sessions). That one's not free, but it's another great option for getting out and about with your little one!

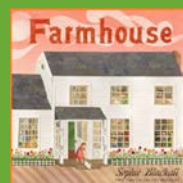
*Note: Most of these events follow the school calendar.*

## We know kids!



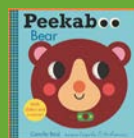
Our bestselling picture book of 2022-2023 is proof enough, we think!

*I Eat Poop: A Dung Beetle Story*, by Mark Pett



But for those who prefer something more dignified, might we recommend?

*Farmhouse*, by Sophie Blackall



And for the littlest one...

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