

PLAY & LEARN

By THERESA WINSLOW
Staff Writer

Bryce Payne was quite literally soaking up gobs of information earlier this week under the guise of fun.

"I love this," the 5-year-old declared earlier this week as she kneaded a pile of "goop" in her prekindergarten class in Annapolis. "It's very squishy."

Bryce may have thought she was just playing at Play and Learn, but teacher Beth Grant said the activity also packed plenty of academic punch. Grant said her students learned about measuring while

Group pushes for kindergarten readiness

making goop, which is a mixture of glue, water, borax and food coloring, and also boned up on their colors. Bryce, for example, discovered firsthand that green goop results when blue and yellow

goop are combined. Grant added that the activity provided a chance for students to work on their social and motor skills, too.

"That's the way you get 'em," she said with a laugh. "You trick 'em into learning."

Nevertheless, it helps get them ready for kindergarten — something a new county group is also focused on.

The Anne Arundel County Early

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Dylan Peace stretches out "goop" made in Beth Grant's class at Play and Learn at Annapolis. The activity earlier this week was a lot of fun for students, but a lot of learning was also taught. Lessons about counting and color and emphasized social and motor skills, which are important for kindergartners.

By Paul W. Gillespie — The Capital



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From left, prekindergarten students Stella Kim, Walker Lipinski, Sam Howard, Anthony Spinelli and Meghan Myers make "goop" in Beth Grant's class at Play and Learn at Annapolis. A new group, the Anne Arundel County Early Childhood Coalition, wants to make sure more local children are ready for kindergarten.

READY

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Childhood Coalition, an umbrella organization for several agencies, wants to improve upon the number of children who have the necessary skills for kindergarten when they begin school.

Last year, 72 percent of county students were judged fully ready for kindergarten, about the same as the state average. This means, however, that 28 percent of students weren't quite up to the task, and the coalition wants to cut into this number.

This year's results aren't in yet, said Kathy Wick, acting early childhood coordinator for county schools, but she's in favor of the coalition's mission.

"It's that idea of the village raising the child," she said. "There are many agencies that work with children, and this is attempting to bring everyone together."

Group dynamics

The coalition, which formed in 2008 and consists of about 40 people from more than a dozen agencies, is making its push now because April is the month of the child.

Debbie Moore, senior policy analyst at the Maryland Family Network and co-chairwoman of the coalition, said children in public and private preschools, as well as private child care, are typically the best prepared for kindergarten. Children in Head Start do OK, too, but those at home or in an informal child care arrangement can lag behind. Wick said poverty plays a big part in the statistics for kindergarten readiness.

The coalition is in the process of organizing several events aimed at improving readiness, which generally involves working on the very things the students at Play and Learn were

SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Here's a list of resources for parents of preschoolers, courtesy of the Early Childhood Coalition of Anne Arundel County and other sources:

- Annapolis Family Support Center, 410-269-4478.
- Anne Arundel County Child Find (ages 3 to 5), 410-766-6662.
- Anne Arundel County Family Child Care Association, www.aacfccca.org.
- Anne Arundel County Infants and Toddlers Program (birth to 3), 410-222-6911.
- Anne Arundel County Network of Care for Children & Family Services, 800-485-0041 or annearundel.md.networkofcare.org/family/home.
- Anne Arundel County Partnership for Children, Youth and Families, 410-222-7423 or www.aacounty.org/partnership.
- Anne Arundel County Public Schools'

prekindergarten and kindergarten programs, 410-222-5441 or www.aacps.org.

- Anne Arundel County Tot's Line, 877-817-TOTS (8687) or www.totsline.org.
- Arundel Child Care Connections, 410-222-1728 or www.arundelccc.org.
- Chesapeake Children's Museum, 410-990-1993 or www.theccm.org.
- Head Start and Early Head Start, 410-626-1900 or www.aacecc.com.
- Maryland Family Network, 410-659-7701 or www.marylandfamilynetwork.org.
- Maryland State Department of Education Office of Child Care, 410-514-7850 or www.msde.maryland.gov/MSDE/divisions/child_care/child_care.
- The Parenting Center at Anne Arundel Community College, 410-777-2159 or www.aacc.edu/parenting.

tackling: motor and social skills, as well as language, math and reasoning.

"It's the most important period of time in anyone's life," said Deborah Wood, founder of the Chesapeake Children's Museum and a member of the coalition.

"And yet (it's) the period of life we invest the least amount of dollars (on)," Moore added. "Less than 10 percent of what's invested goes to kids under 5."

Nevertheless, Wood said much of what can be done to help doesn't involve extra funding. Just reading to children makes a big difference, as does singing a song with them, she explained.

The coalition is also in the process of completing a calendar that will be available at local restaurants and in publications. It will provide a list of free events and ideas for educational activities, such as telling a story about the pictures that clouds make, or

creating a water piano by filling glasses to different levels with water and then tapping them with a spoon.

Special events planned for next month include a conference on learning through the arts, which includes a free family concert by Jim Gill, both at the DoubleTree Hotel Annapolis; and talks on the importance of play, how to get children to love reading, and managing behavior, all held at Franklin's Toys in Severna Park. (Store owner Jeff Franklin is also a co-chairman of the coalition.)

"There's so many things we can do to make a difference for the (28) percent," Wood said.

For more on the coalition and upcoming activities, call the Anne Arundel County Tot's Line at 410-266-3842 or 877-817-TOTS (8687), or visit the Web site at www.totsline.org.

twinslow@capitalgazette.com