

## Working with the funny, fresh and innocent

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Under the careful supervision of Jackie Leckwee, 48 of UW–Madison’s brightest young minds congregate each morning in a small building tucked between the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and the School of Human Ecology.

Like the 41,000 other students on campus, members of the group occasionally have relationship problems, trouble following directions and difficulty staying awake during the day.

Unlike the rest of the student body, this group also plays with blocks, sings and dances with abandon, and guzzles gallons of juice.

Leckwee, site manager at the [School of Human Ecology’s Linden Drive Preschool Laboratory](#), has made a career out of the development of these students, who range in age from 2 to 5 years old.

“They’re so funny, fresh and innocent,” says Leckwee, an academic staff member who has worked in a variety of capacities at the school since 1978. “The way they think about things makes me laugh. They have a truly unique way of viewing the world — that’s what keeps the job from becoming stale.”

The preschool has multiple roles, providing high-quality services, assisting in educating early-childhood specialists and providing research subjects for early-childhood studies. The program is geared toward parents of faculty and staff, but it is also open to the public.

While Leckwee’s Linden site works with older children, a slightly larger satellite lab based at Bethany United Methodist Church takes children from 6 weeks to 5 years. Both UW–Madison sites are licensed by the state of Wisconsin and accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs and the city of Madison.

With a daughter who attended preschool at the Linden lab, Leckwee can appreciate the challenges of balancing family and work.

“I feel proud that I play a small part in making people feel more comfortable about their children while they’re working,” she says.

A Madison native, Leckwee attended UW–Madison as an undergraduate and stayed on campus as a research assistant after graduation, eventually taking a position as a teacher at the lab. By the mid-1980s, she moved from a teacher-director of the program to full-time director, responsible for budgeting, accreditation and administration of the lab.

She is known for her ability to balance her many roles, ranging from paperwork to cleaning up a juice spill, says Jill Riley, site manager at the Bethany lab.

“Jackie fills in around the classroom, grocery shops for the program, tills the gravel on the playground, supports staff and makes time for hugs as children are passing her office,” Riley says. “She has a strong commitment to young children and has impacted many lives.”

Leckwee recalls serving as the lab’s animal control officer, chasing escaped aquarium frogs and even removing a dead rodent from the lab’s playground.

“Basically, it’s never the same thing two days in a row,” she says.

Although the children provide the program’s variety and spark, its evolution has been spurred by changes in working patterns in American society. Preschool at UW–Madison dates back to 1926, when it was established with roughly 10 children, in response to a request from neighborhood mothers.

Through the years, the program has had several sites and goals, but its focus began to crystallize after settling into the Linden location in 1957. It was then that the program assumed its research and training component.

As more women returned to the work force after having children, demand increased, creating the need for increased capacity and the second lab site, Leckwee says.

A typical day at the lab for children involves a combination of activities to improve social, language and other skills, “free choice” time, reading time, snacks and short naps.

The program has become extremely popular. At any given time, the lab can have a waiting list of up to 150 students, though other options are available on and around campus. Fees have also gone up substantially from 50 cents per day, (as they were in 1937) to today’s range of \$189-\$288 per week for full-day care, depending on the child’s age.

Leckwee says she understands that the cost can be prohibitive, but students receive exceptionally high-quality programming from lead teachers who have been with the lab for an average of 10 years — almost unheard of in the private sector. The center receives minimal funding from state taxes, so fees fund most of its entire operation. Students are also the beneficiaries of state-of-the-art teaching techniques developed by UW–Madison faculty.

One of the most fulfilling parts of the job is noticing how children learn and grow each day, Leckwee says.

“When they first come into the program, they’re still developing social skills, so there can be problems with grabbing, or hitting or biting,” she says. “But as you watch them, by the time they’re 4, they become more sophisticated in conflict resolution and identifying problems and possible solutions.”

“They’re like little sponges, absorbing everything.”

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27 Bascom Hall   
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Email: [contact-us@uc.wisc.edu](mailto:contact-us@uc.wisc.edu)  
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Fax: 608-262-2331