

## Getting their feet wet- Gesell Institute affords students hands-on experience

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University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point students aren't the only people learning on campus. Children between 2 and 4 years old also learn at UWSP through the Gesell Institute for the Study of Early Childhood, an early childhood center and research facility sponsored by the School of Health Promotion and Human Development.

The Gesell Institute, in the College of Professional Studies building, resembles Munchkin Land with tiny chairs, tables, toys and even toilets made for children.

Director Lorrie Richardson speaks supportively to the children, encouraging them to be creative and independent. Roughly 35 UWSP students work in the center as teachers and supervisors. The Institute "gives (students) a chance to get their feet wet ... It gives them an advanced look at what they're in for," Richardson said. A majority of the student workers are pursuing degrees in education.

Just as Richardson encourages children to make their own choices, she also affords freedom to the student workers, pushing them to develop their own teaching methods.

Senior Carolyn Spoerl, who is pursuing secondary English education, says working in the center has helped her development as a future educator. "High-schoolers are a lot like pre-schoolers," Spoerl said with a smile. "They have the same problems ... You have to use diversion strategies with teenagers just as you do with young children."

Early childhood education major Kia Carlson says working in the Institute has given her a richer understanding of children's needs. "This is where I can start my career and get my foot in the door ... You get the variety of teaching everything," Carlson said, adding that during her brief time as a student worker, she has developed her own repertoire of lesson plans.

### What do Gesell student workers say about what they do and learn.

#### 1. As a student worker in the Gesell Institute, what do you do?

I help set up projects, keep the room looking nice and help clean up when the day is over. I also work with the students and help them with their projects. Basically, I just help keep the preschool running smoothly.

#### 2. What, to you, is the purpose of having the Gesell Institute on campus?

Gesell being on campus is beneficial to a lot of people. The early childhood majors are able to observe and work with the preschoolers, and many other majors also take part in various aspects of the preschool. It's great for the university students to have access to this program, and it's also nice for the preschoolers to see older students working. It's a good model for the preschoolers.

#### 3. What are the benefits you experience as an employee of the Gesell Institute?

I have developed some good relationships with both the children and other work study students. I also have really enjoyed working with "Teacher Lorrie." I've learned a lot about classroom management from her. She also helps us understand the reasons children demonstrate certain behaviors.

#### 4. What have you learned from the Gesell children and their families?

I've learned many things -- including some Spanish! I've also learned how important it is for the family to be involved with the student's education. All of the families at Gesell emphasize education, and it's clear that the students already understand that education is important.

#### 5. As a future educator, why do you think it's important to have an opportunity to work in the Gesell Institute, either for student work or research?

Working at Gesell would be beneficial for anyone going into the education field. Students can immediately apply some of the education techniques they've learned, and they also have a strong support network. I also have been able to learn how to interact with parents, and this experience will really help once I begin teaching.

All the children and teachers wear heart-shaped felt tags with their names written in puffy paint. On a typical day, children explore everything from language arts and math to science and cooking.

UWSP departments including family and consumer science, education, psychology and sociology use the center to study children and conduct research based on their observations. "We're the training lab for people ... It gives us the opportunity to reach out to (classes) and allow them to use our space and our resources," Richardson said.