

# Program Helps Kids Get READY! for Kindergarten

BY MARSHA HART  
FOR PORT ORCHARD LIFE

Most parents delight in playing and reading with their babies and young children. Though it may be seen as fun by both parent and child, research shows this play is vital to brain development and school readiness.

In the South Kitsap School District, parents and caregivers of children birth to age 5 can participate in READY! for Kindergarten, a program designed to help prepare children for kindergarten. The program is offered at Orchard Heights Elementary School. There are 275 spots in the program, with four dates set during the month of May, and it is free. The program was recently awarded a two-year \$11,000 grant from Kitsap County. The grant is funded from marriage license fees.

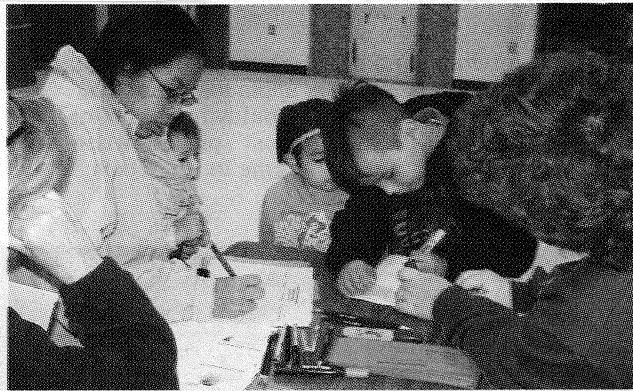
"The idea is when we look at how kids are doing in school, most children make a year's growth, but there isn't a single year that a child doesn't walk through the door working at the level of a 3-year-old, while those with the opportunity are operating at the level of a 7- or 8-year-old," said Terri Botsford, program coordinator.

With a little bit of support, she said parents and caregivers can enhance playtime with tools to boost learning. But she emphasizes that this program is not about forcing school on to children.

"This is play with a purpose," she said. "We know now what engages children and the important part is to keep it fun for the child."

Reading to children is very important for development, and it is part of the emphasis of the program.

"We are encouraging our parents to read to their children at least 20 minutes a day and spend five minutes a day playing with a purpose using the tools the READY! program provides," said Linda Munson,



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*READY! for Kindergarten teaches parents how to interact with their children to help them learn.*

director of Special Programs for the South Kitsap School District.

Though 20 minutes each day of reading is recommended, that means different things for different ages, Botsford said. For a toddler that may equate to four 5-minute interactions with a book, maybe just looking at the pictures. For older children the books can be a way to engage in conversation, she said.

Each participating parent or caregiver will receive a kit that includes essential tools and activities to make learning easy and fun.

Information is provided at an orientation, and a 90-minute session provides ed-

ucation about three main areas: literacy, math and social and emotional development, Botsford said. The teacher shows the parents how to use the materials.

"We have the most current brain research, and it shows that in those first five years as much as 90 percent of the brain develops, and that is the foundation for all future learning," Botsford said.

The whole idea is to support the parents, she said.

The READY! program has also been implemented at Discovery High School, an alternative school that has about 25 teen mothers working to get their education. It is something

that Mary Aykens, school counselor and family advocate for Early Head Start at Discovery, saw as a great program for the young women there.

"READY! for kindergarten is ideal," Aykens said. "It works right in with what we do and the girls love it. Not only do they get quality toys and books, they get instruction in how to do what we call purposeful play."

Though the program is new, and therefore data is not available yet to show the effectiveness of

READY! for Kindergarten, both Botsford and Aykens said they believe the data will eventually show the program is effective.

"The babies seem smarter and the moms are appreciating and noticing that," Aykens said. "They are given tools and know how to play; it isn't that they didn't interact, but they didn't know how."

Chelsey Kimball, 17, is the mother of 8-month-old Trinity Humphrey. She said the program has helped her as a mother.

"It gives a lot of information and shows a lot of good toys to play with the kids," Kimball said.

Trinity is crawling, pulling up on things and standing, and Kimball said she is very vocal and likes to eat finger foods.

She is on track with her development, and READY! for Kindergarten has given her information about that.

"It shows what they should be doing so you're not worried that they aren't developing fast enough," she said.