

# Starting kindergarten on the right note

By KRISTEN COUNTS  
Special to the Record-Eagle

The first day of kindergarten can bring back memories both good and bad. Local agencies are addressing the latter by teaming up with parents to help children acquire the skills and confidence they need for a positive first day.

"A child entering kindergarten needs to do a number of things with some proficiency," said Sue Zell, early childhood supervisor for the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District (TBAISD). "A key ability is being able to leave home and a parent for a few hours without getting upset."

Other necessary skills include dressing and undressing, taking turns, sharing, being able to say their full name and knowing colors and the parts of the body. It's also helpful if a child knows how to use a pencil and scissors.

"The children do come to kindergarten with many, many different ability levels. The good teacher takes them as far as they can go," said Janie Tavener, kindergarten teacher at Willow Hill Elementary in Traverse City.

Programs like Way to Grow and Northwest Michigan Human Services Agency Head Start provide parents with a wide variety of services to prepare them and their young children for school.

"Preparation for school is ongoing from birth," said Zell.

Services offered in the five-county Grand Traverse region by Way to Grow — affiliated with TBAISD — include parent meetings, play groups, home visits, hearing and vision screenings, developmental screenings, cultural enrichment activities, field trips, and classes on infant massage, lap activities and infant sign language.

One school readiness coordinator, who oversees school readiness activities and transition to kindergarten,

is provided in each of the elementary schools. Way to Grow also has established toy and book lending libraries at each school.

"And it's open to all families at no cost," added Zell. "That's the beauty of the program."

The local chapter of Head Start provides programs for expectant parents of low-income status and their children up to 5 years of age. The services, offered in 10 northern Michigan counties, are provided through home visits for children up to age 3. Home visits and child care programs are options for older children.

Head Start also provides training, equipment and support to existing daycare centers, and services to children in those centers. And it assists parents with making sure that the child's medical and dental health needs are met.

"We work with the family," said Marsha Miller, special projects manager at Head Start.

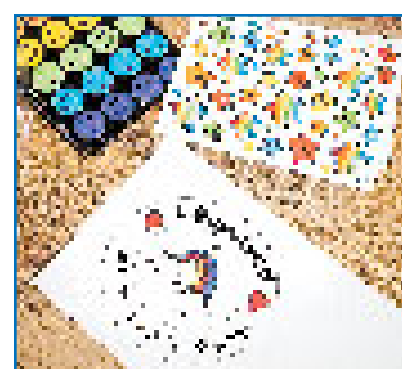
Parents and children can feel much more at ease on the first day of kindergarten if they are all familiar with the school.

"One of the most important things that school readiness coordinators do is get kids to school before kindergarten," said Tavener, noting organized activities at school for parents with babies and preschool children. "They (kindergartners) look so confident and comfortable in school on the first day because they have been there many, many times."

Jackie Bannon, team coordinator for Head Start in Antrim County, said that parents can help their children feel at home at school by taking them to meet school staff and even finding out where the bathroom is before school starts.

Tavener, who has been teaching for 29 years, suggested taking the child to play on the playground, checking out the lunchroom and going into the gym.

"I think all or most kindergartners in Traverse City will have home vis-



Suggested web sites:

■ [www.tbaisd.k12.mi.us](http://www.tbaisd.k12.mi.us)  
(TBAISD Way to Grow)

■ [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)  
(National Association for the Education of Young Children)

Record-Eagle/Elizabeth Conley

Jane Tavener prepares "care packages" for her upcoming kindergarten class at Willow Hill Elementary in Traverse City.

its or special visitation to the school," said Tavener. "Let them know little things like how they will go to and from school. Kindergartners will think about those things and worry all day long."

Tavener said there are numerous activities that parents can provide their children with to get them ready for school.

"One of the most important areas is in social skills — listening, taking turns, sharing, following directions," she said.

"Kids are great, given the opportunity to direct their own social interactions," said Miller. "They deal with sharing and disagreements on their own. It just comes out of exposure of being with other kids."

For social gatherings, Miller suggested looking to play groups, story times, preschool and community outings.

"They should have opportunities to express themselves in small and large group activities," said Sallie Van Avery, team manager for Southern Counties (of Northern Michigan) for Head Start. "Have children help around the house. Let them know they are valued ... Bake cookies for a neighbor. Make something for a parent at work ... Children who are kind and patient are more prepared for school. They have a sense of self-worth, which is invaluable."

Zell said every kind of play has some underlying value for school.

"One of the fallacies with today's children is you give them a lot of toys and they will be fine (in skill development). A toy is not always stimulating, a creative thing," she said.

Items around the house that are good for play include cups, pots, pans and old clothes. Miller suggested role-playing with the old clothes as a way to develop language skills.

The importance of language skills was emphasized by all.

Tavener said, "Success as a reader is dependent on range of vocabulary."

Children's vocabulary can be expanded through simple conversation. Miller suggested that parents use open-ended discussions.

"Make sure that they understand the words. Connect them with what they already know," Miller said. "Get them out in the community. Keep talking to them."

Zell suggested, "Have them look at the pictures (from a book) and tell the story in their own words."

"One of the most important things is to read to your child," added Tavener. "This is more important today than ever. In the past we communicated verbally but today, with computers, e-mail, fax ... written information is so important. We can't emphasize it enough."

Kristen Counts is a local freelance writer.

## Project HERO

Continued from Page 1

A highlight of the show was when Adam Percy, a student and member of the band Blisstripp, lip-synched the song "Hero," imitating pop idol Enrique Iglesias.

"We intend to do this circus every year from now on," Kathy Herman said. "Everyone can do something."

Herman does not dwell on the possibility that some students may fail to live up to their Project HERO pledge.

"If I can save one person," she said, "then the whole project is worth it."

Johnson hopes to help out with the event again next year.

"I've been asked if I would teach more of the students, possibly hold a one or two day seminar," she said. "We could expand on the tricks, and on what they did this year. I'd like to start some kids at a younger age, and have more people in it as performers."

Students were warm in their praise of Herman, who has sponsored Project HERO for many years.

"Mrs. Herman is so energetic in all she does, the total product is amazing," said Jason Stewart. "And the little kids were awesome. They got to come down from the bleachers and be in it. I was with the smaller ones — they're not afraid to laugh."

Added senior Trevor Pelon,

"They cheered when they had their faces painted by the high school's artistic people. I would do it again. For sure!"

Project HERO has been in operation at Suttons Bay since 1993. The acronym stands for Helping, Educating, Reacting and Organizing against substance abuse among younger students.

It has grown to include 182 high school students who pledge to remain drug, alcohol and tobacco-free for the school year, and to actively take the "no use" message to elementary students.

The high school students, who must belong to a school club or athletic team, pledge their commitment to the organization's goals. In return, they receive HERO T-shirts and a set of cards, similar to sports trading cards, which carry their pictures and birth dates, and information about each member.

The cards are distributed to all students in the Suttons Bay Elementary School, signed for them by high school members at an autograph signing in the spring, and actively traded by younger students.

"The highlight of the year is the presentation of a program, such as the circus, written and produced by HERO members, taking the anti-use message to elementary classes," explained Herman. "We hope to make an impact all the way through the school."

Sheila Garrett is a local freelance writer.



Heidi Gregory, a senior last year at Suttons Bay High School, applies clown makeup.

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