

# Family-focused literacy program expands to Menasha

Jen Zettel, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 11:11 a.m. CST March 11, 2016  
Jen Zettel: 920-996-7268, or jzettel@postcrescent.com; on Twitter @jenzettel

## Even Start program starts in Menasha

MENASHA - Something relatively simple, like making playdough at home instead of buying it, can impact a child in numerous ways.

Homemade playdough saves money, since most of the ingredients can be found at home. Children can help their parents make the squishy toy, which means they spend time together talking and choosing colors. And then there's the play itself.

That was a segment of a recent Even Start Family Literacy class at the Menasha Boys & Girls Club. The program started Feb. 4 in Menasha, following on the success of a similar program in Appleton.



Yoana Andrade reads through a book with her son Dylan Miranda during parent and child literacy time while in the Even Start Family Literacy program in Menasha. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK – Wisconsin)

Even Start works with children from birth to pre-kindergarten and their parents, said Colette Kolb, an associate dean of general studies at Fox Valley Technical College. The goal is to give them the best possible foundation for school.

"It's a fabulous program, which is why we wanted to expand it," she said. "We know that catching families with young children is going to make the biggest impact in the long run."

A three-year \$98,000 grant from the United Way Fox Cities will pay for supplies and cover some staffing costs. Fox Valley Technical College will pay for educators, as well.

The Menasha Boys & Girls Club provides space to run the classes three times per week. The Menasha Joint School District is the fourth major partner.

Even Start's purpose is two-fold. Children are introduced to books, learn from an early childhood educator and spend time with children their age so they know what to expect when they get to school. The focus on literacy gives them a jump on those skills, as well.

Even Start also educates parents, whether they need help with basic parenting skills, learning English as a Second Language, navigating the school system or pursuing a high school diploma or higher education, said Maureen Hermsen, the Even Start Family Literacy instructor and an adult basic education instructor at Fox Valley Technical College.

From 8:30 to 11 a.m., parents work with Hermsen on skills they hope to acquire. Families must live in the Menasha Joint School District and qualify for free or reduced-price school meals to take advantage of the free program.

"I'm checking off things I want to make sure I'm talking about — routine bedtimes, good dental care — but some of the questions just come up based on experiences they had at school or something they encountered in the community, so we also spend that time sharing parenting ideas, getting the information as to how they advance what they're doing between home and school," Hermsen said.

Parent Yoana Andrade particularly enjoys the last half hour of each class when parents join their children to sing songs and read books together.

Even though Andrade's son Dylan is only 8 months old, she noticed he is more engaged with books.

"He tries to identify the colors," she said. "He's so little yet, but he tries."

Even Start's focus on the parent and child is what attracted Andrade to the program.

The adults often grow the most confidence in their parenting skills, Hermsen said.

"Another awesome thing I see is empowering those parents," she said. "You are the number one teacher — building confidence in the moms and the dads. Sometimes they don't even know they have that power within them."

Parenting skills are reinforced through monthly home visits. Instructors look for how literacy skills and routines are maintained at home, Hermsen said.

The group in Menasha is small right now — only five families — but Hermsen believes it will grow as word spreads.

### **STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

A grant from the United Way Fox Cities helped the Even Start Family Literacy program expand.

Classes meet three times per week in the mornings at the Menasha Boys & Girls Club.

Children from birth to pre-kindergarten do activities with an early childhood educator.

Their parents work with an instructor on literacy, parenting and English as a Second Language.



Gabriela Trejo and Maria Rangel read a book together with help from teacher Xoua Moua during the Even Start Literacy program at the Menasha Boys and Girls Club. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)



Maureen Hermsen, head of the Even Start Literacy program, writes down different scents that could be incorporated with homemade playdough Tuesday in Menasha. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

### Learn more

Even Start will hold an open house from 9:30 to 11 a.m. April 19 at the Menasha Boys & Girls Club, 600 Racine Street. Anyone interested in participating should call 920-832-4312 to learn more or to receive a screening form.