The University of Wisconsin Preschool Lab
Integrating Teaching, Research and the Campus Experience

school of human ecology
UW PRESCHOOL LAB

# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 2  
Ecology Life Lessons .................................................................................................... 3  
Majoring in the Future ................................................................................................... 5  
Hands-On OT .................................................................................................................. 7  
Staying Balanced .......................................................................................................... 9  
What Exceptional Programming Looks Like ................................................................. 11  
Toddlers and Touchscreens ............................................................................................ 13  
In Summary ................................................................................................................... 15  
Contributors ................................................................................................................. 16
Introduction

The School of Human Ecology’s Preschool Laboratory (PSL) is a child development and early learning program for community children and a teaching and research laboratory for University students, faculty and staff.

The Preschool Lab is a State Licensed and City of Madison Accredited program with capacity for 102 children between the ages of 6 weeks and 5 years old. Year-round enrollment is available with both full-time (7:30-5:30) and part-time (8:30-2:30) schedules available.

The program dates back to the 1920’s, when “the Lab” originally served as a cooperative nursery school to help young mothers develop parenting skills. Over the years, Preschool Lab has undergone numerous changes that reflect society’s ever increasing need for high quality programming options for young children and support for families. In 2012, the School of Human Ecology completed a renovation and expansion of its 1914 facility, encompassing the Linden Drive Preschool Laboratory site. The larger facility offers state of the art space, expanded teaching and research opportunities, as well as infant care on the central campus.

Some other highlights of the Preschool Lab include:

- Three observation rooms with two way mirrors; equipped with sound, touch screen with moveable cameras to observe specific play areas in the classrooms
- Year-round research capability. For more information, e-mail Professor Heather Kirkorian @ kirkorian@wisc.edu
- Direct observation in the classroom or outdoor areas can be arranged. For more information, e-mail Jill Riley @ jillriley@wisc.edu
- Placement site for: SoHE Internships, practicums, student teaching, and service learning
- Volunteer opportunities
- Direct access to the SoHE Lehman Research Lab from the PSL site
- Information about using the lab can be found on our web site: www.uwpreschoollab.wisc.edu
Ecology Life Lessons: Preschool Lab Offers Graduate Students Valuable Field Work

When Ellen Damschen wanted to get her ecology students out in the field to practice teaching and communicating their science to others, she chose the Preschool Lab-Linden Site for its inquiry-based curriculum as well as the program’s willingness to allow students to apply their academic knowledge to real-life situations.

Damschen, who believes “inquiry-based learning is applicable to all ages,” wanted her students to see and apply learning in this format to have as a tool if they eventually become undergraduate educators.

The field work at the Preschool Lab was part of a graduate seminar in the spring semester entitled “Science Communication Workshop for Ecologists” that Damschen, a professor in the Zoology Department at UW-Madison, offered because she recognizes the need for scientists’ ability to adapt their message for their audience and educate at various levels.

“Every national science grant we write has to address how the science is going to be translated to a broader audience,” says Damschen.

Limited to 12 students, the course covered how to integrate their science clearly through basic public speaking skills, graphic arts, small group communication, media and outreach—the aspect which led the students to the Preschool Lab, a logical bridge between the University and real-life experiences, according to Damschen.

Kris Krystofik, an Instructional Specialist at the Preschool Lab, briefed students ahead of time on different learning styles and developmentally appropriate practices in working with young children and shared research indicating early science education has a strong connection to literacy achievement in elementary school. Added to the fact preschool children are natural scientists, constantly
exploring the world around them to figure out how things work—skills scientists use daily in their careers.

“It’s really refreshing to work with preschoolers, they just have this innate curiosity,” says Damschen, adding that her students “were just blown away by the children’s curiosity and knowledge.”

Dividing into small groups, the students focused on one of four topics: Birds & Adaptations for Different Habitats, Trees and Decomposition, Entomology Development using the Tobacco Horn Worm, and Prairies and Oak Savannahs: Looking at Local Historic Ecosystems. Each group fully explored their subject matter in ways that were meaningful to the children. For example, the Tree group honored the preschoolers’ deep connection to the 300-year-old President’s Oak that was recently felled on campus, which the classroom used to visit monthly and journal about. Helping the children understand what happens when trees are cut down by showing examples of trees in different stages of decomposition—all the way down to the worms in the last stage—as well as educating them about seedlings and using cross sections in determining the age of a tree led into a discussion of the greater theme of life and death.

While the relationships formed at the Preschool Lab are enduring—Damschen hopes to plan a follow-up “field trip” to the Biocore Prairie at Picnic Point during the summer—the feedback and experiences the graduate students received during the seminar will serve them in their careers. Damschen attributes the strong link between the University and its early care and education centers for making that possible.

“Any of the early care and education centers on campus could be a good outlet for broader impact activities and are potentially underutilized for doing that,” says Damschen.
Majoring in the Future: How the Preschool Lab Shaped Kayla Dunn’s Career

The Preschool Lab provides hands-on experience working with young children and their families through its internship program which has been an important foundation for countless students pursuing a career in Early Care and Education or a similar field.

It was during her last semester in the HDSF (Human Development and Family Studies) program at UW-Madison that Kayla Dunn learned of the Preschool Lab. Transferring from Minnesota State-Mankato her junior year because she couldn’t find a major that appealed to her, Dunn was instantly attracted to the HDFS major here. Since a requirement of the curriculum was to complete an internship, Dunn researched her options and discovered the Linden site conveniently located on campus.

“It seemed like the right fit [and] I knew it was something I’d enjoy” says Dunn, who applied for and acquired the internship, working in a preschool-age classroom.

For PSL Director Jill Riley, the goal of the internships is to provide meaningful hands-on experience in child development and working with families that serves students in a variety of potential careers beyond Early Care and Education.

“Students have the unique opportunity to see what they have been learning about in their courses be ‘brought to life,’” comments Riley. “It is rewarding to see their excitement when they have those ‘ah ha’ moments.”

Student interns are assigned supervising teachers, who act as mentors and work with students to set individual goals. The student and teacher have meaningful, ongoing discussions about these goals and how they’re able to see the child development lessons learned during classes actually occurring right before their eyes.

In December 2014, Dunn graduated and faced the realities of finding a job. After asking around for advice and familiarizing herself with other Madison-area centers, Dunn always came back to square one: PSL.
She quickly accepted an assistant teaching position they had available but, about a week later, Dunn learned there would be a merger of the Mineral Point Road site with the Linden site. She was asked to help out at the Mineral Point Road site temporarily, which quickly developed into a lead teaching position in their toddler classroom.

“Through my internship experience I realized my passion was with the younger age group,” comments Dunn. “I love [being the lead toddler teacher]. I’m very happy that’s how everything worked out so far.”

Dunn truly credits her experiences at PSL for making such a strong impression on her, commenting that the abundance of resources and the inquiry-based curriculum at the Preschool Lab were part of what drew her in, as well as the people she worked with.

“A lot had to do with the people I worked with, the parents and the children ...I just felt really comfortable and open with all of them,” mentions Dunn. “Even as an intern, they went out of their way to get to know me and help me.”

As Dunn prepares for the future, especially with the impending closure of the PSL site on Mineral Point Road at the end of the summer, she can only hope for the best—which, for her, would be finding another opportunity with the Preschool Lab.

“[The Preschool Lab’s] literally been my life after college and during college,” says Dunn. “I’m really thankful for them as a whole, because coming right out of college having a job is really hard. They really did care for me and my future. They didn’t just leave me hanging at the end of it [and] I really appreciate it.”
Hands-On Occupational Therapy: Thanks to the Preschool Lab

For Beth Larson, the experience with the Preschool Lab has been two-fold: both as a mother and an educator, Larson has utilized the high-quality care and learning happening at the Preschool Lab to her advantage.

Larson, an Associate Professor in the Occupational Therapy Program within the School of Education, sent her students to the Preschool Lab to gain knowledge they couldn’t get sitting in a lecture hall.

“It was one of the steps we took because students always want more hands-on opportunities to interact with children, see children within their context and how they interact,” says Larson, stressing the value in students having real, authentic experiences with children, as opposed to the artificial ones they may be presented with in class.

Occupational therapy is essentially “what people do throughout their day,” according to Larson, so much of the pediatric program revolves around learning through play, making the Preschool Lab a natural fit for students to practice their first interventions.

Engaging in art activities with children is a key way for students to understand variations in hand skills. Having the observation windows to witness children’s natural play and how they use tools in their learning environment is also key to authenticity. According to Jill Riley, Director at the Preschool Lab, authentic assessment (versus testing) of children’s development is the program goal and a primary indicator of high quality early education.

Larson, who led a workshop for Preschool Lab teachers demonstrating biomechanics for hand skills and ways to design their art curriculum to incorporate these skills, is constantly impressed with the program.

“The Preschool Lab is very dynamic,” states Larson. “[They’re] always looking for ways to make things better for all children, to be more developmentally in tune with the best learning experiences and to adapt experiences based on the needs of individual children.”

The dynamic environment at the Preschool Lab has been a great benefit in Larson’s role as educator, and has been even more compelling in her role as parent. When her children were ready for a preschool program, choosing the Preschool Lab was a given. However, she also had twins to enroll in a program with 25 applicants and only five spots available. She was able to secure two spots in fall 2009, when her twins were 2 ½.
Larson felt fortunate knowing her children were in capable, caring hands while she was teaching and working in the pediatric lab with her students.

“Patti and Katie, Mollie and Jillian (teachers) were just so great with each age group. Patti is the Mr. Rogers of preschool! These teachers dealt with the children with so much respect and on their level,” comments Larson.

She also appreciated how adept teachers were at handling social negotiations between the children non-intrusively by giving the children skill sets to work within their individual limits to resolve conflicts, rather than telling the children what to do. Again, Director Riley comments on the importance of social emotional development for preschoolers as being a primary focus and key ingredient for “school readiness” when children enter kindergarten.

Creating a sense of community for parents is another priority at the Preschool Lab, which provided different opportunities for parents to get together and talk about issues, from potty training to sleeping. Many of the relationships both Larson and her children made at the Preschool Lab have continued over the past five years, even though the children are in different schools, living in different neighborhoods.

“Centering on the family connection was something the entire program and staff put a lot of effort and intention into,” she stresses. “You knew it because you felt welcome.”

While Larson’s children are now attending public school, she continues to collaborate with the Preschool Lab to ensure hands-on training experiences for Occupational Therapy students enrolled at UW-Madison.
Staying Balanced: Campus Early Care and Education Allows Faculty to Teach and Parent

As a scientist, Ellen Damschen fully supports the strong research-based mission of the Preschool Lab. A scientific perspective resonates with her core values and she and her family have eagerly participated in research projects with the Preschool Lab. However, as a faculty member in the Zoology Department of UW-Madison who, along with her husband, achieved tenure while raising a young child, Damschen wants to be very clear that campus early care and education has had a much deeper significance in their support of faculty in achieving both their professional and personal goals.

In fact, the Preschool Lab exists because of its mission of "teaching, research and outreach" for SoHE and the UW-Madison campus, but providing high quality early care and education is an added benefit to faculty, academic staff, students and community families.

“If asked why I sent my daughter to the Preschool Lab, it is because it is a high-quality, on-campus provider,” says Damschen. “As a first-time parent and family where both parents are working and both trying to achieve tenure, it was really important for us to feel we could leave her in a place where people loved her and not have to worry about whether she was safe or being engaged in a stimulating environment.”

The search for early care and education sort of happened in a whirlwind for Damschen. She and her husband, John Orrock, were both working as ecologists at Washington University in St. Louis, when positions opened up at UW-Madison, a promising spot for them to land career-wise. Then, the week they moved to Madison, Damschen found out she was pregnant. They had to act quickly and make a plan.

When a spot became available at the Preschool Lab on Mineral Point Road, even though it was only part time and a far commute from the couple’s east side home, they made it work because they knew how hard high quality infant care was to come by. Their family easily made the switch to the new facility on Linden Drive when it opened, saving time on their ride in—they typically take the bus or ride their bikes when the weather is warmer.
“It is incredibly important to save time on transportation so we have time to both do our jobs and get home to spend time as a family,” says Damschen, adding that she and her husband make a point of dedicating time when they get home to family matters and leaving the remainder of the days’ work for after Ella goes to bed.

Damschen not only appreciates the convenience of campus early care and education, but the fact that “we can leave her with a community of people that know her and are invested in her learning and development.”

Another crucial aspect of the program that Damschen and her husband appreciate as fellow scientists, is the inquiry-based curricula at the Preschool Lab.

“We actually call it school because while it’s early care and education, it’s also education using an inquiry-based approach with highly-skilled, trained, compassionate teachers,” comments Damschen.

Damschen, who achieved tenure along with her husband in summer 2014, feels strongly that the availability of campus early care and education was key in accomplishing this goal.

“It was critical to both my success as a mom and as an academic,” says Damschen.

And Damschen believes campus early care and education is a critical support piece for many other faculty and staff in similar situations: trying to advance their career, possibly in tandem with their partner, while also raising a family.

“That’s the thing these days, if thinking about retention and recruiting of top faculty,” says Damschen, “the preschool program plays an integral role. It gives faculty with young children a better chance of being able to maintain an effective work-life balance, which is critical for their happiness and productivity.”
PSL: What Exceptional Programming Looks Like

Chris Lalande, a software development team lead with DoIT Academic Technology on campus, has been involved with the Preschool Lab as a parent and a contributing UW staff member. Lalande worked with Heather Kirkorian to develop software for Kirkorian’s research on technology and young children. More importantly, Chris and husband John, parents of two young girls, serve as parent liaisons to the Preschool Advisory Committee.

Daughter Ellie is five and a "Fox" (Preschool Room), and Caroline is three and a "Porcupine" (Toddler Room), but their fall birthdays meant the girls had to start at a more standard commercial day care center initially because PSL enrolls new children in a cohort in August each year. Lalande believes this gives her a valuable perspective on how lucky they are to be at PSL.

“While I continue to refer people to the community center we utilized previously, that program was limited in what they could do in the infant room in particular, with the standard state licensing 8-to-2 infant to teacher ratio,” says Lalande. “Things like spending time outside, doing art projects, going on walks and field trips were challenging and rare accomplishments – and I can’t say that I can blame them. If I were in charge of 4 infants, I’d be lucky to keep them fed and diapered, much less do anything else!”

The Lalandes’ experience at PSL was noticeably different from the first day Ellie enrolled. The additional help from assistants and students, as well as a conscious decision to have fewer children in each classroom, allows more one on one attention, and frees up hands to take children on walks and spend time outside almost every day, if not several times a day.

“Most mornings our children are so absorbed in the activities, sensory bins, or art projects that the teachers have out when we arrive, they are excited to go into the classroom, and goodbyes are a non-event,” comments Lalande. “Even when Caroline went through a phase where she struggled with drop off, the teachers worked with us to create a routine and structure to the morning that got us through this phase quickly; and we felt everyone’s needs were supported.”
In addition to the abundance of staff, the Lalandes appreciate that PSL has a very dynamic combination of seasoned, experienced staff alongside younger, enthusiastic staff & students.

“There is a lot to be said for having someone on your caregiving team who has seen it all, and the children thrive with that kind of consistency and calmness,” says Lalande. “I will admit to having watched teachers resolve conflict, handle groups, redirect undesirable behavior or handle meltdowns….and co-opted many of those phrases and strategies for my own parenting.” Meanwhile, the school is consistently exposed to students who are studying the latest in early childhood learning literature, and the staff has access to researchers, faculty and continuing education through a high quality university program. Says Lalande: “This combination is unique and I believe gives the school a completely different vibe [from] day care centers that either have long time staff unwilling to change or adapt…or more junior staff in constant turnover.”

When the Lalandes’ second daughter, Caroline, was born in December of 2011, Ellie had been at PSL long enough that they had started to take these benefits for granted.

“Sure, there are some daily annoyances – clothes with paint stains, shoes full of playground gravel, wet children at pickup from water play, or the inevitable colds and fevers that come with little children in child care,” says Lalande. “Once we went back to having one kid who was inside all day, and to whom art projects were rare, it was crystal clear to me how lucky we were to have dirty, tired, busy children. We are grateful for the University’s commitment to campus child care, to early childhood education, and, most of all, to the incredibly talented staff at Preschool Lab for taking such great care of our children.”
Toddlers and Touchscreens: Facilitating Research on Young Children and Interactive Screen Media

Heather Kirkorian’s groundbreaking research has gone national: cited in *Time*, the *New York Times* and *Wired*, just to name a few. And most of it is happening right here on campus at the Preschool Lab.

Kirkorian and her team are studying the impact of screen media on cognitive development and social interaction in young children and what, if anything, they can learn from interactive screen media, most recently with an emphasis on touchscreen tablets—a very hot-button topic with parents, educators and anyone else invested in the role of technology in early childhood education.

When Kirkorian first came to campus in 2010, she found herself with just a cubicle and no lab space in the Middleton Building. “So I was in a bit of a jam,” says Kirkorian. “I couldn’t do my research without a lab.”

Instead, she developed a new approach to research by actually going into preschools and thus began her strong working relationship with the Preschool Lab directors and staff. Kirkorian says she has easily been able to connect with teachers because they are eager for information about her research, which she attributes to the fact that the Preschool Lab’s overall mission includes a commitment to research.

“I think maybe sometimes teachers, even more than the parents, are hungry for information about how kids use technology and what’s beneficial and what’s not,” says Kirkorian. “It’s just really easy to do things here.”

Kirkorian is also pleased with the facilities she has at her fingertips, including the Lehman Lab housed right within the SoHE Building, connected to the Preschool Lab, and the observation windows that allow uninterrupted viewing of the children in their natural environment.

“Having that physical resource with the tight connection between the lab and the preschool has made it a lot easier to get new studies up off the ground,” comments Kirkorian.
One unexpected outcome of her work with the Preschool Lab is how much influence it has had on her teaching. She recalls a time when she had a group of her graduate students use the observation booth, which just happened to coincide with the Preschool Lab Instructor setting out a tablet for the children to use.

Kirkorian admits she initially only planned to stay a few minutes to help her students get acclimated, but she ended up staying much longer because she found it so intriguing to watch the children in their natural environment and observe how different they were.

“I’m a lab researcher—we bring kids into a sterile environment and give them specific tasks to do and very rarely do I just observe kids in the wild, so to speak, with technology,” comments Kirkorian. “So it’s definitely influenced my thinking about how these things unfold in the real world, outside of the lab...I’d say I learned as much, if not more, than my students did that day, so that was fantastic.”
In Summary
The Preschool Lab is an exceptional campus resource. Since 1924, the preschool lab has served thousands of children and families while contributing to the academic mission of the greater university. As a part of the UW campus child care system, faculty, staff and student families seek high quality early care and education for their children at this centrally located campus resource, allowing them to thrive in their academic and professional careers while being physically close to their children.

Hundreds of UW Madison students complete thousands of hours in practicums and observations to learn best practice from the stellar, research-based early education program and experienced staff, ultimately leading many into successful careers after graduation. The Preschool Lab also serves students and faculty by providing numerous and diverse options for research and hands-on learning experiences. And finally, but most importantly, families who enroll at the site state the “added value” from student practicums and research opportunities also state that the experienced and skilled staff are peerless in their ability to answer a multitude of questions related to child guidance, development and parenting. As one mother recalls “I’m so relieved to know that there is a teacher who cares for my child just as I would and who supports me in the process.”
Thank you to the following contributors:

- Candice Wagener, Writer and Editor
- Ellen Damschen, Associate Professor, Department of Zoology
- Kayla Dunn, Associate Instructional Specialist, Preschool Lab
- Lynn Edlefson, Director, Office of Child Care and Family Resources
- Paula Evenson, Administrative Support Specialist, Preschool Lab
- Heather Kirkorian, Assistant Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies
- Chris Lalande, Software Development Team Lead, DoIT Academic Technology
- Elizabeth Larson, Associate Professor, Department of Kinesiology, Occupational Therapy Program
- Jill Riley, Preschool Administrator, Preschool Lab
- Terri Strother, Administrative Specialist, Preschool Lab