WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL?

The University of Montana’s Learning and Belonging (LAB) Preschool has a rich history in providing early care and education for Missoula area children while simultaneously serving as a best practice clinical field-experience site for UM students. The program began its operation as a nursery school affiliated with the former Home Economics department back in 1938!

Preschool operations were transitioned to the College of Education in 1988. In 2009, the program moved from McGill Hall to its current location in the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education building. A recent 2019 addition includes two more classrooms with accompanying observation rooms as well as a second seminar room. Today, just as in 1936, the LAB continues to meet the needs of young children, their families and future early childhood professionals.

WHAT ARE THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL'S MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY?

Mission:
The Learning and Belonging (LAB) Preschool is a model early childhood program supported by the Phyllis J. Washington College of Education. The LAB works in partnership with the Department of Teaching and Learning to provide University of Montana students an opportunity to enhance their understanding of young children and the teaching/learning process. The LAB Preschool provides academic course support, resources, mentoring and key practicum learning experiences for students studying early childhood and elementary education as well as other human service degree programs at the University of Montana. The LAB’s multi-age early childhood program invites children of all abilities and their families to participate in a caring community designed to promote lifelong learning (L) and (A) belonging (B) in terms of self-acceptance and as a member of a group.
Philosophy:
At the Learning and Belonging Preschool, we maintain a small group size in each session in order to support our goal of meeting the individual strengths, interests, and needs of every child in the program. The classroom environment and expectations are created with respect for child development and the individuality of children. In order to achieve our goal, we:

- Welcome and value the uniqueness of each child.
- Support each child’s active participation in real, meaningful projects designed to allow success and challenge at individual developmental levels.
- Introduce activities and materials that foster development of the whole child in multiple areas including creative arts, language and literacy, mathematics and numeracy, physical development and health, science, social and emotional development, and social studies.
- Offer multiple opportunities for self-selected exploration, social interaction, and problem solving to enhance children’s natural motivation to learn.
- Use positive child guidance techniques that teach skills and support children’s emerging self-control.
- Understand that parents/guardians are the child’s most important teacher(s). We respect families’ expertise regarding their individual cultural beliefs and practices and welcome all to the LAB Preschool community.

WHAT CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT APPROACHES ARE USED?
We value the significance of early learning for children and understand how important quality education is to parents. The LAB Preschool relies on knowledge of child growth and development, current early childhood education research, recommendations of professional organizations and the Montana Early Learning Standards in all our programming. We observe and document children’s progress utilizing formal and informal assessment tools and strategies in order to guide our teaching practices. Our team of informed and highly educated teachers offer preschool children a stimulating learning environment that supports the development of knowledge, skills, and a love for learning that will prepare for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Core Practices:
While there is not a single curriculum that has been identified as “the best” for meeting the early care and education needs of children, the following practices are linked with positive learning outcomes and form the foundation of our curriculum. The LAB Preschool is committed to:

- Providing a rich, engaging verbal environment.
- Blending play, authentic learning experiences, and direct instruction so children have multiple opportunities for learning in key areas.
- Arranging a schedule and routines that are consistent but not overly structured or regimented.
- Developing respectful and reciprocal relationships with children and their families

Meaningful Interest Based Learning:
In addition, we recognize the importance of creating meaningful learning experiences for young children based upon their interests. Teachers introduce projects that provide
children hands-on opportunities to use skills they are learning to explore the real objects, events and places that they are currently curious about. In this way children become highly engaged in the learning process enhancing the likelihood developing skills will be mastered and sustained.

Curriculum Content:
The content of the LAB Preschool curriculum has been developed in response to what children ages three to five need to know, understand, and be able to do as established by the Montana Early Learning Standards (MELS). These standards were developed through the collaborative work of early childhood professionals, public school teachers and principals, and parents. MELS are organized into seven curriculum areas: Creative Arts, Language and Literacy, Mathematics and Numeracy, Physical Development and Health, Science, Social Emotional Development AND Social Studies.

Teachers have access to multiple assessment tools that are in alignment with the MELS such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaire for screening and Teaching Strategies GOLD for monitoring developmental growth. Equal in value to these more formal tools, is a teacher’s ongoing informal observational assessment. The LAB teachers document child growth and development using multiple informal methods (i.e., notes, work samples, photos, video) daily. All assessment results, formal and informal, guide and support curriculum planning. In this way, an emergent curriculum develops and no two school years look the same.

WHEN IS THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL OPEN?

Operating Schedule:
The Learning and Belonging Preschool is in operation during the University of Montana’s academic school year, September through mid May. The program follows UM’s calendar and observes all UM holidays. This calendar is typically quite similar to the calendars established by Missoula’s local school districts.

Preschool Classes:
Three preschool classes are offered at the LAB:

- Three-Hour Class 9:00 am – 12:00 pm
- Five-Hour Class 8:45 am – 1:45 pm
- Extended Preschool 8:30 pm – 5:15 pm

All classes include a mixed age group and are in session Mondays through Thursdays. Fridays are reserved for UM student seminars, teacher reflection and program planning.

HOW ARE CHILDREN ENROLLED IN THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL?

Enrollment in each class is limited to 16 children. We are committed to developing a connected community for young children supported by the small group size. In addition, all children are enrolled for the full four-day session. This means that you and your child can anticipate interacting with the same group of teachers, children and their families consistently throughout the school year.
**Age Requirements and Eligibility:**
All three, four and five-year-old children of the greater Missoula community are eligible for enrollment. Affiliation with the University of Montana is NOT a requirement.

**Enrollment Process:**
A waiting list is maintained on an ongoing basis at the LAB Preschool. Families can request to be added to the waiting list at anytime by contacting the director. Enrollment for the upcoming preschool year takes place in four phases:
1. Near the beginning of spring semester, enrollment for the next year is opened to children who are currently enrolled, as well as their age eligible siblings.
2. The next enrollment phase is open to siblings of children who were enrolled at the LAB in previous years.
3. Children qualifying with “high needs” per Montana’s STARS to Quality program are offered enrollment during the third phase. As a participant in the STARS program the LAB is required to reserve 20% of our slots for children with high needs according to Montana’s STARS to Quality program.
4. The final phase invites all remaining families. Vacant slots are offered in order of intake date on the waiting list until all three class lists are filled.

**WHAT ABOUT TUITION? WHEN AND HOW DO I PAY?**
Tuition is charged on an annual basis. An annual tuition based approach is important to the LAB’s sustainability allowing us to meet daily and monthly expenses, which remain consistent even when your child is absent.

For your convenience, the annual tuition amount is divided into 10 equal payments. The first of the 10 payments serves as a non-refundable deposit and is collected upon enrollment. This first payment secures your child’s slot.

The nine remaining tuition payments are due by the 15th of every month, September – May. Payment (in form of check or cash) can be dropped in the orange locked box located near your child’s classroom door. It is also possible to line up direct billing payments through your financial institution. Simply instruct your bank or credit union to issue a monthly payment to:

Learning and Belonging Preschool
32 Campus Drive
Missoula, Mt 59812

<table>
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<th>Class</th>
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<td>Extended Preschool</td>
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WHAT WILL MY CHILD’S PRESCHOOL DAY BE LIKE?

The classroom environment:
Our classrooms are large, open light filled spaces. Each has an exterior door that leads to a patio or playground in order to extend the learning environment outdoors. Materials and furnishings have a natural aesthetic. Centers within each classroom invite small groups of children to engage in play-based learning. Learning centers include block play, art, reading and writing, science and math, dramatic play, and sensory exploration. Each classroom has a bathroom with preschool-sized sinks and toilets. Every child has an individual cubby to store personal belongings.

Typical Daily Schedule:
The day is guided by a routine developed to meet the needs of children in the preschool years. Through careful planning, each day offers a balance of large and small group experiences, child and teacher-directed time, and active and quiet activities. While the schedule remains flexible to meet the daily interests and needs of the group, a typical day includes:

- **GATHERING:** Children engage with manipulative toys, writing materials, books and one another while waiting for everyone to arrive. The teacher then gathers the group to describe the day’s center choices and activities.
- **LEARNING CENTERS:** Children choose from a range of play areas presenting opportunities for social interaction, project work, and learning. A nutritious daily snack is offered during center time and gives children an energy boost for a busy day.
- **CIRCLE:** A large group meeting time used to build community through sharing, songs, and stories. Project topics and investigations are often introduced through books, discussions, and presentations from visiting experts.
- **SMALL GROUP:** Children gather in small groups to complete a teacher-planned activity that often relates to the project topic and introduces social, science, math, and/or literacy concepts using age-appropriate materials and methods.
- **OUTDOOR PLAY:** Opportunities to run, jump, and climb are provided on the playground daily.

The Five-Hour and Extended Day classes also have:
- **LUNCH:** Children gather together with their classmates and teachers to enjoy a lunch brought from home.

The Extended Day includes:
- **REST:** A time for resting or napping is scheduled for 1 hour. Every child has an individual napping mat. It is not required that children sleep, but lights are dimmed and opportunities for quite activities are made available.

Field Trips:
Learning within the campus environment is supported by many opportunities to move beyond the walls of the classroom. Children enjoy a spacious playground as well as opportunities to use campus facilities. All of our field trips are within walking distance. Parents sign a field trip permission slip at the beginning of the school year. When an event is planned, you receive notice of the date, location, and times of the excursion. There are times when we choose to take advantage of spontaneous events, interest or perhaps a glimpse of good weather. In this case, teachers will do their best to keep you fully informed of where on campus the group is adventuring outside the classroom.
WHAT DOES MY CHILD NEED TO BRING TO SCHOOL?

Every child will need:
- A labeled ziplock bag containing of **one change of clothes**: shirt, plants, socks and underwear. This bag will be stored in the bathroom throughout the school year. If an item is used, the soiled piece of clothing will be placed in your child’s cubby. Montana Child Care Licensing policy requires soiled clothing be wrapped in plastic and set home for laundering. Simply bring a replacement of the clothing item back to school the next day to replenish the supply in the ziplock bag.
- **Shoes or sturdy slippers** are required inside the classroom. During inclement weather it is helpful to keep a pair of house shoes/slippers at school to change into in order to keep the floors clean and safe to play on.
- Weather-appropriate **outdoor clothing** is essential. Please pay attention to seasonal and daily temperatures. We go outside everyday unless in case of the following extremes:
  - Wind chill at or below 0° Fahrenheit
  - Heat index at or above 95° Fahrenheit
  - For air pollution/smoke levels the LAB follows the Department of Environmental Quality’s “Today’s Air” website and keeps children indoors when the air quality is deemed Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups, orange zone.

Five-Hour and Extended Preschool classes also require:
- A **lunch** from home. We suggest a healthy and balanced variety of foods that do not require refrigeration or reheating. Filtered water is provided so there is no need to bring a drink.

Extended Preschool will need:
- A **fitted crib sheet and child-sized blanket** for napping. Each child will have a cot on which the sheet and blanket will be used and stored for the week. Every Thursday, the sheet and blanket will be sent home for laundering. Please bring a fresh set the following Monday.

WHAT WILL PARENT INVOLVEMENT BE LIKE FOR ME?

Parent/Preschool Partnerships:
As your child’s first and most significant teacher, you are invited to:
- Share your goals, hopes, and dreams for your child. The LAB teaching staff is committed to hearing from and partnering with you.
- Complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire screening tool with your child twice annually.
- Know, understand, and discuss with us the program’s mission, philosophy and goals.
- Stop in any time! Our observation rooms are the perfect place to be able to watch your child in our classroom without disrupting the natural flow of the day. Of course, you are also always welcome to join in the classroom.
- Provide feedback and suggestions to teachers and the director via face-to-face communication, phone, email, annual surveys or the confidential suggestion box.
The director has an “open door policy”. Feel free to stop by anytime.

- Work with your child’s classroom teachers to plan special activities or events based on your family traditions, celebrations, talents, and interests.
- Be involved in the parent planning committee or the LAB advisory committee.
- Participate in conferences with your child’s teacher (fall and spring) to discuss your child’s progress in the program.
- Contact your child’s teacher to schedule a meeting at any time to share your celebrations and/or concerns about your child.

**Arrival and Departure Routines:**
Please plan to allow transition time for your child and to visit with your child’s teacher.

- Sign your child in and out each day on the posted attendance sheet. This is an important Montana Child Care Licensing requirement that ensures your child is accounted for.
- Please be certain to **always say goodbye** to your child and assure them that you will return.
- Complete and sign an authorized release permission slip if anyone other than the parent/guardian will be picking the child up from the LAB. We cannot allow a child to leave with anyone other than the parent/guardian unless we have signed consent. Inform those picking up that we ask for picture identification.
- It is important to arrive on time at the end of the day (12:00, 1:30 or 5:15 dependent upon the class your child is enrolled). Teachers are expected to be engaged in processing meetings with field-experience students immediately following the preschool session limiting their availability to provide quality child contact time after school hours.

**HOW DO YOU GUIDE CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOR?**

**Guidance Philosophy:**
A positive guidance approach is used in our classrooms to support emerging social skills and help children understand limits. Appropriate guidance allows children to value themselves while cultivating respect for one another within a classroom setting.

**Guidance Strategies:**
Our guidance approach begins even before children arrive. Through thoughtful planning of an appropriate schedule, classroom environment including ample materials within the classroom we prevent potential problems from occurring. When working with children, our approach to guidance includes the following:

- A focus on developing a positive relationship with each child and family
- Use of teaching strategies that support the development of a positive classroom community characterized by joy and respect for diversity
- Clear, consistent boundaries which are supported with encouragement, practice, and ongoing teaching
- Encouragement of internal self-discipline
- Modeling, as well as teaching, positive behaviors
- Facilitating positive self-esteem by accepting children’s feelings
- Modeling a multi-step problem-solving technique:
  - **1st** Identify the problem
- 2nd Brainstorm 2-3 solutions
- 3rd Pick a solution
- 4th Try it out
- 5th Check back in to reflect on effectiveness

**A Positive Approach:**
We believe that providing encouragement, offering choices, redirection, limit setting, and joint problem solving are the most effective tools of discipline. The teachers within the classroom assess and decide the most appropriate form of guidance to use with each child in each situation. We do not equate guidance or discipline with punishment. Additionally, isolated time-out practices are not utilized in the LAB Preschool program. Physical punishment is never used in our program.

**Parent Involvement Classroom Guidance:**
In some circumstances, teachers may need to partner with you to problem solve and jointly develop a behavior plan for your child. This will include discussion with you about your child’s successes and challenges in the program. We hope to learn from you how you deal with the child’s behavior at home. The teacher will strive to incorporate your successful and appropriate guidance strategies into the classroom approach. Likewise, you are encouraged to ask for information from the teachers to try out at home.

**WHAT DO YOU DO TO KEEP CHILDREN HEALTHY AND SAFE?**

**Routine Health and Safety Practices:**
Prevention is the focus of our health and safety practices. Children are supervised at all times. Effective hand washing is used by teachers and repeatedly taught to both UM students and children to reduce the spread of illness in the program. A telephone is available in each classroom in case of emergency and family contact information is kept with the phone as well as the number to the poison control center. Stocked first-aid kits are kept in the classrooms and on the playground. A portable first-aid kit is taken along on field trips.

**Meeting Children’s Nutritional Needs:**
The curriculum includes learning experiences for the children regarding healthy foods. Parents are encouraged to share diet restrictions with the teachers. It is essential that information about food allergies is expressed and recorded on the program intake form. Daily snacks, provided by the LAB Preschool, represent a range of food groups across the week and provide a natural opportunity for discussion of healthy food choices. Snack is offered as a center time choice so that children are able to self-monitor their hunger needs. A rotating three-week menu is provided to all families and is posted on the family bulletin board.

**Children who attend the Five-Hour and the Extended Preschool classes will need to bring a lunch from home.** We suggest a healthy and balanced variety of foods that do not require refrigeration or reheating. Filtered water is provided so there is no need to bring a drink.

**When Children Are Ill:**
For your child’s wellbeing and the health of other members of our community, children
cannot attend preschool when they are ill, as noted below. If teachers notice indications of illness at arrival time, the parent will be asked to keep their child at home for the day. In accordance with Montana Child Care Licensing regulations, the following health conditions require special attention:

- Children must be without fever of 101F or greater for 24 hours before they return to the child care facility, except that children with immunization-related fevers need not be excluded if they are able to participate in the routine of the child care facility.
- Children must be without vomiting and diarrhea for 24 hours before they return to the childcare facility. Vomiting includes 2 or more episodes in the previous 24 hours. Diarrhea is defined as an increased number of stools, increased water in the stool, and/or decreased form to the stool that cannot be contained by a diaper or clothing.
- Children with any of the bacterial infections listed below must be treated with antibiotics for 24 hours before they return to the childcare center:
  - Strep throat
  - Scarlet fever
  - Impetigo
  - Bacterial conjunctivitis (pinkeye)
  - Skin infections such as a draining burn, infected wound, or infected hangnail
- Generalized rashes, including those covering multiple parts of the body, must be evaluated by a healthcare provider to determine their cause before the child can return to the childcare facility.
- Children with chickenpox may not be admitted to the childcare facility until their sores dry up, which usually takes 5 to 7 days.
- Children who are jaundiced must be excluded until a health care provider evaluates the cause and authorizes the child to return to the childcare facility.
- Children with symptoms of severe illness, such as uncontrolled coughing, breathing difficulty or wheezing, stiff neck, irritability, poor food or fluid intake, or a seizure, must be evaluated by a health care provider before they may return to the child care facility.

When Children Become Ill at Preschool:
If a child becomes ill at preschool, the program will follow licensing guidelines by:

- Contacting the parent immediately. The child must be picked up within 30 minutes of the phone call. If you are unable to pick the child up within 30 minutes, the parent is responsible for contacting another family member or friend who can meet this timeline.
- Allowing the child to be supervised while resting away from other children.
- Reporting each case of suspected communicable disease the same day by telephone to the local health authority, or as soon as possible thereafter if no contact can be made the same day.

Montana Child Care Licensing requirements mandate that teachers monitor the health status of every child upon arrival, throughout the day, and upon re-entry into the classroom following an absence due to illness. As professionals, they are required to make decisions that will protect the health of the overall group of children. Parents will be contacted and required to come immediately if a child in our care shows any (even one occurrence) of the following symptoms:

- Fever of 101 or higher
• Vomiting
• Diarrhea
• Generalized rashes
• Uncontrolled coughing
• Unusual level of irritability or sleepiness that appears to be related to poor health

Teachers are required to follow licensing guidelines and will use professional judgment in deciding when a parent will be contacted to take their child home. As a member of our community, please understand how important it is for every family to take an active role in protecting the health of all children in the group.

Emergency Procedures:
The LAB Preschool teachers maintain current CPR and first-aid training certifications. In the event of any emergency, 911 will be called immediately. Emergency services will be used to transport the child, if necessary. Whenever indicated, the teacher will also call the poison control number (1-800-222-1222).

Relocation sites are identified annually in the unlikely event that the LAB must be evacuated. Emergency relocation information and permission paperwork are included in the enrollment paperwork.

DOES MY CHILD NEED TO BE TOILET TRAINED? ARE THERE PROCEDURES FOR USING THE BATHROOM DURING THE SCHOOL DAY?

Toileting independence is not a requirement at the LAB Preschool. If your child is still gaining independence please visit with the teachers to ensure a supportive plan is in place that meets the developmental needs of your child and feels comfortable for your family.

Children are free to use the bathroom at anytime throughout the school day. Bathrooms are located inside each classroom and have been designed so that children have some privacy within stalls while at the same time teachers are able to visually supervise for safety and good hygiene practices.

WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL STAFF?

LAB Preschool Staff:
Each LAB Preschool classroom is co-taught by an Early Childhood Clinical Specialist (ECCS) and an Early Childhood Specialist (ECS). This co-teaching team insures mastery level early childhood teaching practices. At a minimum, both positions require a four-year degree in Early Childhood Education, Child Development, Elementary Education or related field. In addition, teachers must be registered on the Montana Early Childhood Practitioner’s Registry at a Level 6 Certification. The ECCS and ECS positions differ only in that the ECCS is also responsible for UM student supervision, reflection and course work implementation.

A small staff of student employees supports the LAB co-teaching teams. Student employees are primarily responsible for prep-work, cleaning and clerical support. They are able to participate fully in student orientation and training seminars and are often
long-term employees throughout all four years of college.

The LAB’s director is responsible for program administration in operations as well as family, community and campus/faculty outreach. This position requires a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood Education, or related field.

University Student Supervision:
Preschool operations and teacher schedules have been carefully orchestrated to support the development of a strong teaching team with the student interns. A thorough orientation is completed prior to involvement in the LAB and students can attend a weekly instructional seminar to enhance their developing knowledge and teaching skills. In addition, teachers meet with the UM students on a daily basis before and after each preschool session to provide ongoing instruction and support. UM students are always supervised in their work with the children.

Building Campus Partnerships:
Strong campus partnerships have emerged over time bringing a range of experiences to the children. Collaboration examples in the past have included art lessons in collaboration with the Art Department faculty and students, weekly music classes provided by Music Education students, creative dance with students in the School of Fine Arts, and PE classes with students from the Department of Health and Human Performance. While these experiences will vary from one year to the next, the teachers work hard to maintain a range of collaborative partnerships with UM programs that can enhance the preschool experience.

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE LEARNING AND BELONGING PRESCHOOL POLICIES?

The LAB Preschool Policy Handbook is available to families at all times and is located in the Family Room. Digital copies are available upon request by emailing the director.

CONTACT INFORMATION

LAB telephone number: (406) 243-4262
Director email: kristin.horejsi@umontana.edu