

# Educating Children Through Play at the Adele and Dale Young Child Development Lab

03/06/2024



Kelli Barker, director of the Child Development Lab, and Dr. Shelley Lindauer, former director of the lab and emeritus faculty of HDFS

The Adele and Dale Young Child Development Laboratory in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services is arguably among the most coveted early childhood programs for Cache Valley families. Since it began in the 1940s, the lab has educated over 10,000 local children. Today, the lab is directed by faculty of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS). Approximately 100 children are enrolled in one of the four labs every semester. The labs are organized by age and serve children in both morning and afternoon sessions. Children between the ages of two and five attend four days a week and an infant-toddler group attends three days a week.

The lab was originally established at Utah State University as part of the College of Family Life at Utah Agricultural College and was later integrated into the then College of Education. In the 1990s, through a generous donation from local philanthropists Adele and Dale Young, a portion of the basement of the historic Family Life Building was remodeled, and the lab thrives in that location to this day.

For some families, the lab is a shared experience of multiple generations. Julie Needham, a long-time Cache Valley resident, learned about the lab after her first child, Sylvan, was born. Julie's husband attended the lab in the 1980s, and his mother recommended it to Julie when Sylvan was born. The family never looked back. "Once my oldest attended the lab, I had to have every one of my

kids in there," recalls Needham. In the ensuing years, from 1997-2015, all nine of the Needham children attended the lab.

Since it began more than 80 years ago, the lab's undergirding philosophy has always been an emphasis on play. "By providing opportunities for open-ended, child-directed play, the program creates a rich learning environment where children can flourish and reach their full potential," explains Co-Director Kelli Barker.

"There's so much learning that children do through play," says Janette Peterson, former head teacher of the three-year-old class (as well as a former lab student, and both a mother and grandmother of children who have attended the lab). "Some children want to spend the whole semester in the dramatic play area or using the blocks as they develop their large motor skills. And some want to paint or color or work with playdough. Children need all these sensory experiences before they can learn how to read, or write, or do basic mathematics."

A simple activity of melting colored ice cubes at the sensory table will engage children in their senses, allow them to observe texture and color, and show them that blending primary colors naturally leads to secondary colors. "We are intentional teachers," explains Barker. "Everything we do is intentional. Even with an activity as simple as melting ice cubes, children learn many, many things."



Children thrive in the lab by participating in open-ended, child-directed play.

"My children were encouraged to explore whatever they were interested in," Needham recalls. "The teachers would let them go outside, no matter the weather, and they had fun activities that were always appropriate. I remember they loved to spray the snow with dye in the winter."

"Children are just shorter than we are with less experience," says Barker. "We shouldn't take experiences away from them. So, at the lab, we just stand back, guide children as needed, and watch the magic happen. You'd be amazed by what they can do."

Even in the little kitchens where snacks are served, fostering independence is the rule, not the exception. “Children are capable of pouring their own juice and counting out their own crackers or apple slices,” says Shelley Lindauer, recently retired 40-year director of the lab and emeritus faculty of HDFFS. “They are very independent, and our goal is to help them to continue to develop that independence.”

The lab is also a hands-on teaching laboratory for future early childhood educators. Depending on their year in school, students majoring in early childhood education or human development and family studies with an emphasis in child development can enroll in a practicum or participate part-time as a student teacher. “It’s phenomenal to see the growth of sophomores as practicum students and then as seniors doing student teaching,” says Barker.

Student teachers are paired with a head teacher who work together throughout the semester developing lesson plans and teaching their preschool class. “In order for teachers to become accomplished and effective, they are going to need to depend on other people and support other people, so that is what we foster in the lab,” says Lindauer.

The lab has observation booths in each room where head teachers can sit behind glass windows to observe how the student teachers engage with the children. Barker also requires students enrolled in her university classes to observe the children to get a better “life” experience. Parents, researchers, and other visitors also benefit from the observation windows, which are available for their use any time. “Sometimes I would just stay and observe,” recalls Needham. “It was always really rewarding to watch my children and see what they were interested in and how they interacted with the other children and their teachers.”

Visit the website of the [Child Development Laboratory](#) to learn more and to enroll your child.