

Coaching parents and nurturing kids

Parents as Teachers program helps both reach their potential

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[Editor's note: This is the first of three articles on the Parents as Teachers program in Sullivan County. Today's story details a visit by parent educator Paige Jarvis to a local family. Succeeding stories will further describe the P.A.T. approach and profile P.A.T.'s director, Jana Gillespie.]

It's only an hour on the living room rug with a bunch of blocks, a few books, twin 2-year-olds, and their mother. It's also some of the most important learning the mother and her children will ever experience.

Parent Educator Paige Jarvis makes hourlong monthly visits to 39 households in Sullivan County and the Fall Mountain School District sharing the "Born to Learn" curriculum for Parents as Teachers, a free, voluntary service for families in the area.

"I love my job," said Jarvis. "I love bringing people developmental informa-



CHUCK BINGAMAN PHOTO

Parents as Teachers Parent Educator Paige Jarvis of Claremont reads to Brynn and Riley Murphy during her Parents as Teachers home visit earlier this month.

tion about their children. I could do 10 visits in a week, and each would be completely different."

Parents as Teachers and "Born to Learn" equip parents — their children's first and most important teachers — to help their children achieve their highest

potential. P.A.T. sees a child's first five years as the most important learning time of the child's life, and their parents as the ones who can make that period incredibly valuable for children and enjoyable for themselves as parents.

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Earlier this month, this reporter had an opportunity to join one of P.A.T.'s Parent Educators, Paige Jarvis, on a home visit with Jessica Murphy and her 31-month-old twins, Brynn and Riley, in rural Unity.

Welcomed by Jessica and her daughters as a trusted friend and playmate, Jarvis arrived with a Santa-sized bag of goodies — actually big cardboard blocks and several books — for her monthly visit. To the unschooled observer, what followed appeared as little more than an hour of fun and games with two toddlers and their mother. In fact, it was a nuanced performance by a trained educator plying her profession with skill and sensitivity to her clients.

"Sometimes I am one of the few adults outside the home that some mothers, and sometimes fathers, see," Jarvis said. "So they are delighted to have the interaction and to discuss their children's development."

Jarvis' December visit to the Murphys ran the gamut of observations on the children's social, emotional and intellectual development, their growing fine motor skills, what they had learned to do with their hands, and their growing language skills. It all played out with blocks, casual conversation with the children and their mother, and Jarvis reading several age-appropriate books to the children.

Through it all, Jarvis was also modeling how to observe and communicate effectively with 2-year-olds and passing along information about what their parents could be expecting from them at this stage of growth — such as new levels of speaking and grammar usage and how to guide their development.

"It just reinforces that playing is learning for children, and we try to give parents the understanding they need to appreciate their children and relate to them in positive ways that encourage growth," Jarvis said.

"It gives you a sense of security," said Jessica Murphy, the girls' mother. "As a first-time mother, I wanted to know when they should be crawling, or taking their first steps, or starting to use words. Also, Paige gives us ideas for projects or ways of playing we can do together that are perfect for their level of development."

Jarvis, a Claremont native, has a certificate in early childhood development from Claremont Technical College, a degree in psychology from Keene State College, and, equally important for credibility with young parents, 3- and 6-year-old boys of her own. She also has four years of elementary education

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Jessica Murphy

parent

credits at Keene State, and her mother has taught for many years in the Claremont school system.

"I've definitely learned patience from our visits and the written materials that Paige leaves at each visit," said Murphy. "It helps you to step back and understand exactly what the kids are supposed to be doing at their current age level. We also get very practical advice on good parenting."

Would Murphy recommend the P.A.T. program to others?

"Oh definitely," she says. "And I have."

Editor's note: Tomorrow's article explains more about the research behind P.A.T.'s program and the other activities it offers for parents and their children.