



Each and Every Child

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Turning the teaching tables

Program focuses on teaching parents to be educators

The instructors walk into the house of Nash Quandt's Des Moines home, ready to give another lesson in building skills for the 2-year-old who will be

entering preschool in less than a year. But instead of turning to Nash, the team turns to his mother, Dallas.

"Tell us about the signs he is using now." "Can you show us how he gets around the house?" Other questions follow.



"And you said you were trying to get him to sign 'please' and 'thank you?'" asks occupational therapist Sue Huber. "Why?"

"We want to make sure he learns manners," Quandt said.

"At this point in his education, he knows that this means 'I am going to get something,' but he's not communicating what he wants," said another member of the Des Moines Public Schools team, special education teacher Peg Smith. "Keep manners on the backburner, though, when he's ready."



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Every day is a learning day for 2-year-old Nash Quandt.

Lesson No. 1 – for Quandt – is acknowledged. And it's this very approach – teaching the parent to be

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the primary educator – that is the centerpiece of the state’s Early ACCESS program aimed at children 0 to 3 years of age. The goal? To have children reach their full potential. In some cases, it helps a child bypass special education altogether.

This approach is a departure from past practices, where instructors would spend most of their time with the child.

“What makes more sense: Have a teacher come in twice a month to work with the child, or work with the parent who can instill lessons every single day of the month?” said Angie Constable, a special education administrator for the Des Moines Public

Schools. “It is about coaching the parents. We know that with this model, the child is getting service on a more consistent basis.”

Coaching comes from a complement of instructors, from special education teachers to speech pathologists to occupational therapists – anything required to help the child along. The coaching ranges from the not-so-obvious, such as how a child should be holding himself by a certain age, to the seemingly obvious.

“A lot of it is talking with your kids at this age through her daily care,” Constable said. “When they go on a walk, they talk about what they see. When you are giving them a bath, you can talk about the toys in the bath such as ‘let’s count how many ducks you have in the tub,’ or ‘now the toy is under the water, now it is on top.’ Sometimes parents think it is good parenting, but not necessarily teaching. Make no mistake – it is teaching.”

Transitioning from child’s teacher to parents’ coach wasn’t easy, though.

“There were

some challenges,” Smith said. “I think it was easier when we were in control: We developed a checklist based on the testing. It was easier. Now the situation is so much more fluid. It is less in our control and more in the control

– teaching the parent to be the primary educator –

of parents. It makes sense to do it this way, that is for sure. The parents should be doing the teaching because we’re here only every other week.”

Huber agreed.

“There’s much more parent involvement,” she said. “The parents are doing the work. It’s much more cooperative and it’s parent driven.”

But a successful program won’t add work to an otherwise already busy family such as the Quandts, in which both parents work outside the home. The instructors work to make the setting as organic as possible.

“We try to join in their routine where they are at,” Smith said. “It could be time to play outside or it could be a trip to the grocery store or grandma’s house.”



Angie Constable (top), Nash, Peg Smith (bottom, right) and Sue Huber, (bottom, left)

Lessons also can be focused on problem areas.

"If someone is having trouble getting their child to take a nap, we will go over there during nap time," Huber added.

"We ask the parents what parts of their lives are not going smoothly and we work on that rather than focusing on our agenda," Smith said.

The program is thoroughly embraced at the Quandt household.

"There are some parents who don't understand what's best for the child," Quandt said. "If they are instructed in layman's terms, they understand what's best to be prepped for pre-school. This helps when they say he needs to sit this way, or use his pointer finger instead of his whole palm – that way he can point to an object or pick things up with the index and the thumb."

One of the chief objectives for Nash is getting him to communicate. For him, that is a mixture of sign language, pictures and spoken words.

"He's just beginning to use some sim-

ple words," Smith said. "But the key is to teach him how to communicate so that he doesn't get frustrated. Some kids pick up on pictures easier, but Nash is picking up sign quicker."

It's now time for puzzles, where Nash works to put pieces into the proper spots. He's having a bit of a problem, and Quandt gently helps him.

"Nice move," Huber said. "That way, he doesn't get frustrated."

One piece of the puzzle is a duck.

"Quack, quack, quack," Quandt says.

Nash responds, "quack, quack, quack."



Dallas Quandt works with her son, Nash.

"You are giving Nash excellent prompts," Smith said to Quandt. "You see, you can do so much with every activity."

Onto another puzzle, but Nash's interest wanes. Instead, he signs that he wants milk, and he heads off to the kitchen.

"Nash is far less frustrated," Huber notes. "He used to scream a lot. Now when he wants something to drink, he asks for it."

The one-hour session is drawing to a close, but rest assured, it will be re-



The formal lesson plan has wrapped up for the day, but Nash will receive plenty of instruction before the team meets again.

peated daily over the next two weeks. Usually, Quandt's husband, Brian, also participates, but a work conflict got in the way. And the couple's two other children, 7-year-old Carter and 6-year-old Blake, participate in the lessons frequently, as well.

"His brothers will be, perhaps, the closest influence on Nash," Smith said. "So it only makes sense that they participate, as well."

In the meantime, Nash is playing with his mom's smart phone, attempting to take selfies of himself while making funny faces.

"Oh, yeah," he says.



Making summer fun *-and* educational

Summer is a time of fun. But it's also a time where students can lose as much as one month of the previous school year's lessons. Called the education slide, there are ways to prevent it. Try these suggestions:

- Encourage reading. Studies show reading six books will maintain the child's literacy level; more will actually increase the child's literacy skills. Make sure the child is reading at his or her skill level, and that the books match the child's interests.
- Make math a game. Measure things in the yard. Add and subtract while shopping or

driving. Do fractions while cooking.

- Make learning an adventure. Every outing, from parks to museums, can be places that stimulate critical thinking.
- On a family trip? You can teach math with menus, geography with the route and spelling with names of places along the way.
- Have the child keep a journal. Writing will help keep a child's language skills sharp.

Have a great summer. And keep the slide exclusively on the playground.