

## Parents-in-training Experts use babies to teach empathy and compassion to kids

By Kathy Lauer-Williams  
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Janelle Hahn stood her 9-month-old daughter Evonna on a pink blanket spread on the floor in the middle of a ring of attentive kindergarten students.

The beaming infant stood upright for a couple of heartbeats and looked around with curiosity before abruptly plopping down on her bottom.

"She can stand!" whispered kindergartner Lilly Keegan excitedly.

"She's bigger," added classmate Breanna Hoppes.

"Yes, she can stand," affirmed proud mom Janelle Hahn of Walnutport. "She sits down because she doesn't like her shoes."

The 19 children at Peters Elementary School in Slatington leaned forward to watch Evonna and see how much the baby had grown. The students get a visit from Evonna and her mom once a month through a new program called "Learning To Care," designed to teach students to have empathy and be more compassionate.

The program, now in its second year, is an initiative of Project Child, an agency of Valley Youth House in Bethlehem.

"Project Child's mission is the prevention of child abuse," says Project Child coordinator Rochelle Freedman. "The biggest predictor of child abuse is parents' lack of knowledge of a baby's developmental stages. In this class, we really talk about how babies change."



Kindergartner Elizabeth Eckert watches 9-month-old Evonna Hahn at Peter's Elementary School in Slatington. The kindergarteners are learning empathy for babies through the visits.



THROUGH the program, school students are learning how to treat babies. Kindergarteners William Muthard (left) and Lindsey Moser give a book to 9-month-old Evonna Hahn.



A measurement is taken of 9-month-old Evonna Hahn's foot to see how much she's grown since her last visit to the kindergarten class at Peter's Elementary School in [Slatington](#).

Freedman says the program, the first of its kind in the Lehigh Valley, is part of a national trend to teach children in elementary and middle school the value of good parenting. She says it's important to start young because by high school, many students' attitudes and values are already set.

"Learning to Care" is in kindergarten, first and fourth grades in Northern Lehigh School District, Bangor Area School District and at Sayre Child Care Center in Bethlehem.

Freedman says the program hopes to shape behaviors that will become second nature.

"If they learn 'Never shake a baby' from a very young age, they internalize it and it becomes a kind of mantra like the very effective 'Stop, Drop and Roll'" campaign," she says. "It's much bigger than it appears."

In weekly sessions throughout the school year, a facilitator discusses how babies develop, what an infant needs and how to be more aware of other people's emotions.

Once a month, the class gets a visit from an infant and its caretaker.



*Kindergartener Trinity Packard gives a rattle to 9-month-old Evonna Hahn at Peter's Elementary School. Watching behind her is Lilly Keegan.*

Before each visit the children talk about how they think the baby will have changed and make predictions about the baby's size, weight and activities.

In kindergarten class, the students had prepared a number of simple experiments to learn how Evonna had changed in a month.

Two boys -- Walker Fretti and Bryce George -- each held an end of a measuring tape to measure her and Kaitlyn Torres discovered Evonna's squirming foot was 3 inches long.

Breanna and Lilly each handed the baby a book and Evonna wiggled and gurgled with delight as she grabbed the book and turned the pages. One by one, other children handed Evonna balls and a rattle and watched with fascination as she tried to hold everything at once.

"She's just starting to show affection," Hahn told the children. "I've been showing her what a hug is."

Angela Ramautar, the facilitator for the Peters Elementary classroom, says she sees a "huge change" in the children.

"They are very curious and interested in how a baby learns," she says. "They smile a lot and the volume of their voices is dramatically lower. It's amazing how gentle they are with the baby."

Freedman says teachers report the children are kinder to each other after a baby visit.

"It's absolutely amazing the impact," she says. "It is so transformative to the classroom. Kids who have trouble focusing, become really focused and kids who can't articulate their feelings started expressing more refined emotions."

As the baby visit started to wrap up at Peters Elementary, the children peppered Hahn with questions that demonstrated their growing empathy. "Does she like to watch 'Sesame Street'?" "Does she have teeth?" "Can she say mommy or daddy?" "Can she roll a ball?" "Can she scribble?"

"It's a wonderful program," their teacher Debbie Geiger says. "The children are getting to see so many new things about her and learning all about how babies grow."

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