

THE LITERACY PROJECT ... to help improve reading skills in Glynn County
by Anna Ferguson Hall

Children get sound start to literacy

Towering above the small preschool tables dotting her classroom, instructor Leigh Ferguson guides her 3- and 4-year-old students through a round of daily learning exercises.

It's only a few weeks into the school year, and already Ferguson has developed a strong bond with her eight students at Christian Montessori School on St. Simons Island. It's a relationship she will hold for the next three years as she guides these first-time students through the early stages of learning.

Holding up a little purple sack, Ferguson points to the block letter inside: N. She then points to a small wooden nest that's also inside the bag.

"Nnn, nnn, nnn," she says, phonetically sounding out the letter. "N is for nest."

These tactics of letter-by-letter and object association learning are central teaching strategies at the nontraditional school, especially for students just starting out on the literacy learning path, said Sidneye Henderson, director of the school.

As a former middle and high school English teacher, Henderson is well aware of the best practices for helping students learn and further develop reading skills. Over the course of her career, she has discovered that phonetic and contextual methods for teaching literacy



Bobby Haven/The Brunswick News

at Lord of Life Christian Montessori School primary grades teacher Leigh Ferguson looks on as 3 year-old Anna Kavanaugh works with wood cylinders, designed to help develop sensory skills and manual dexterity.

at an early age lead to the most successful readers.

Giving youngsters private, one-on-one attention as they begin learning also is beneficial, bringing about improvements at a quicker pace, Henderson said.

"Individualized instruction is the most efficient method of helping children understand the connection between letters and words, words and sentences, and putting it all together in a comprehensive structure," Henderson said.

That instruction, though, does not have to be limited to the walls of a classroom. Taking reading development into the home is key for literacy success,

Henderson said.

When working with new readers at home, parents can follow a set of actions to help ensure students are absorbing the lesson. First, Henderson said, start with the letters most commonly spoken and written: T, M, B, F, A. Having students get a good feel for those letters – both on the tongue and on the hand, with tools such as letters shaped out of sandpaper – creates a connection between speaking, writing, listening and reading.

"Every time you go over a word and they get it right, celebrate that," Henderson said. "Positive re-enforcement goes

a long way to keeping both you and the child from being frustrated."

A 3-year-old already has a vocabulary, though limited. Cashing in on that is also useful for learning, Henderson said.

"They know tooth, Tommy, truck," Henderson said. "Now, get them to know what a T looks like, what it sounds like, and how that connects to what they know."

Learning to read can even be made into a household game. Having young readers hear a letter and then pointing to an object that starts with the letter is another tool parents can use.

"Tell your child, today's letter is C," she said. "Then point out the candy in the pantry, the candle on the table. Those little things go a long way in early learning stages."

The first three years a student is learning to read are critical for the acquisition of skills later in life, both Henderson and instructor Ferguson said.

"Teaching small children to read doesn't need to be a struggle," Ferguson said. "Use all the senses, get creative and it can be fun."

• Call reporter Anna Ferguson Hall at 265-8320 or e-mail her at ahall@thebrunswicknews.com to suggest literacy programs or community needs for The Literacy Project.