

Donna Gregory, who completed graduate studies at Western in 1999, has had an interest in children's social interaction. She found the graduate program in applied experimental psychology to be a perfect fit with her interest in young children.

Friends

BY TOMMY NEWTON

Child Psychology and Social Development

Gregory, who grew up in Owenton, majored in psychology at Georgetown College. As an undergraduate, she completed an independent study and became interested in research.



PHOTO BY SHERYL A. HAGAN

"I was interested in working with children," she said. She also was interested in seeing how children's peer relationships were being affected by the mixed-age primary classrooms that were part of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). "My mother is a retired teacher so I'd heard a lot about KERA," Gregory said.

Her search for a graduate program brought her to Western where she met Dr. Elizabeth Lemerise, associate professor of psychology and director of the Social Development Laboratory.

Dr. Lemerise's enthusiasm for children's social interaction was contagious, Gregory said. "Working with her was the reason I chose Western" and the Applied Experimental Psychology Program.

Dr. Lemerise has been doing research, funded by internal and external grants, about peer acceptance and friendship in children and how younger and older children interact in KERA's ungraded primary, which mixes children from different grades (e.g., first and second graders) in a classroom.

"One of the things she had found was that younger children in these classrooms were less well liked overall

and had fewer friendships than did older children," Gregory said. Also, in a project with other master's students, Dr. Lemerise found that how well children were liked by classmates and whether they had a friend in the classroom were both related to children's school performance. Well-liked children and children with at least one friend had better achievement test scores.

Gregory's two-year master's research project with Dr. Lemerise took the idea a step further and looked at how having friends was related to children's social and emotional development. The research showed that younger children in the individual classroom mixes benefited the most by having at least one friend as evidenced by teacher ratings of social competence and problem behaviors.

"That's significant because children's friends have an impact on their school performance and their attitudes about school," she said.

The project included 1,063 elementary students from five schools in Bowling Green and Warren County. The students were asked to list the three students in their classroom that they liked to play and work with best of all. Friendships among the children were determined by mutual nominations.

Teachers were asked to rate each child's social and emotional problems, areas of social competence, and learning problems in class.

Gregory found that the younger children in the class were less likely to have a friend, but that having a friend in the classroom was helpful. Teachers rated children with friends as having fewer problems and being more competent than friendless children. Even children who were not well liked by the peer group as a whole showed a benefit of having at least one friend.



"The Bowden Children", John Hoppner

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quality of research we're doing at Western," Gregory said.

The strength of WKU's Applied Experimental Psychology Program is found in the quality of the faculty, the involvement of students in research, the opportunity for national recognition and the potential to advance in the field, she said.

"While you are a student in the program, you focus on a single research project, but the skills you learn can be applied to many areas," said Gregory, who is using her research, computer, and data analysis skills directing research for the Division of Student Affairs at Western's Counseling and Testing Center. "That's really one of the strengths of the program."

Tommy Newton is a Communications Specialist in the WKU Division of Public Affairs.

The findings should be of interest to educators and parents, Gregory said.

The research conducted at Western Kentucky University and other universities has shown that young children need friends and a social support network to help them adjust to school and develop a good attitude toward school. Some teachers often are leery of putting friends together in small group activities "but it's important to have a friend there," she said. "KERA is still relatively new. Educators need to think about peer groups of children when arranging classes, especially for younger ones."

The next step is to have the research project published. Gregory already has presented her findings at the international meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development held in Albuquerque. "People know the