



PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH

is faced with a situation that he must process information about,” Lemerise said. “He must decide ‘why did that person push me out of the way, and what am I going to do about it?’ The goal of my research is to try to account for the emotional processes in such situations.”

When an opportunity to work with preschool and elementary school children in the Bowling Green and Warren County school systems surfaced, Dr. Lemerise leapt at the chance. Soon after arriving in Bowling Green, Lemerise noticed the mixed-age settings in the Bowling Green and Warren County elementary classrooms that had recently been established by the Kentucky Education Reform Act. In a system known as the ungraded primary,

# *emotional response in children*

BY SARAH DAVASHER

**WHEN ENTERING DR. ELIZABETH LEMERISE’S OFFICE, THE COLLAGE OF ARTWORK DISPLAYED ON THE DOOR IS IMMEDIATELY EVIDENT. COLLECTED FROM THE LARGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN SHE HAS WORKED WITH THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, THE ARTWORK UNDOUBTEDLY SYMBOLIZES THE DEDICATION SHE HAS TOWARD HER YOUNG RESEARCH SUBJECTS.**

Dr. Lemerise has researched children for ten years at Western Kentucky University. As associate professor of psychology and founder of the Social Development Laboratory, her research centers on the emotional processes of children and how they reason when they are in difficult situations with their peers.

“When someone takes a toy without asking, or pushes a child out of the way so he can get to the swing, the child

older students and younger students were often placed in the same classroom, a fact that soon became a research interest of Lemerise.

“It was unusual compared to what I had encountered in the past, and I saw this as an opportunity to examine peer relationships in the mixed-age classroom setting,” Lemerise said.

The results of the first studies conducted by Lemerise and her students illustrated that members of the younger age group within the ungraded primary classrooms were more often rejected by their peers, had fewer friendships, and were less liked overall. The importance of children’s peer relationships at school were demonstrated by another study which showed that peer acceptance and having at least one friend were positively related to higher achievement test scores in ungraded primary classrooms.



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In these early studies, Lemerise and her students noted that not all younger children fared poorly with their peers, so the researchers became interested in understanding these individual differences. After receiving a grant from the Kentucky Academy of Science to pursue this research, Lemerise conducted a two-year research project on a large sample of elementary age students and their teachers within the Bowling Green area. Each year, teachers filled out questionnaires on their students' social competence and problem behaviors at school, and each year students were interviewed twice.

The first interview included questions related to the ungraded primary students' social standing in the classroom, which allowed Lemerise to examine the relationship between social standing and friendships/peer relationships among ungraded primary children.

During the second interview, interviewers asked the students to make judgements about certain situations presented on videotape. For example, in one situation, a child spills water on another child's painting. In different versions of this videotaped story, the "spiller" appears to be in either an angry, happy, or sad mood. Children were asked

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about the motivation of the "spiller" and about what they would do to solve the problem in the story. In this interview, how children used this emotion information and how they solved problems were of interest.

The results from the first year of this study were similar to those Dr. Lemerise and her students had found before. Children who were younger than their ungraded primary classmates were less well-liked and had fewer friends. When the second year results were examined, it was found that children who increased in age relative to their ungraded primary classmates improved in their peer relationships compared to those who decreased in age relative to their classmates. Also, children who suggested friendlier solutions to the videotaped problem situations in the first year of the study were judged by teachers a year later to be more socially competent and have fewer behavior problems.

Dr. Lemerise also works with older students as well. As chair of the Human Subjects Review Board since July 2000, and director of the Social Development Laboratory since 1992, Lemerise comes into contact with many WKU students.



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Since she founded the Social Development Laboratory, she has worked with graduate and undergraduate students, several of whom have been recognized for best paper at WKU's Sigma Xi Student Research Conference.

"Probably the thing that makes me the proudest of my students is how well they have done in presenting papers, publishing, and their involvement in graduate studies," she said. "It is a real source of satisfaction."

Despite the research she has already conducted with the younger generation, she is still fascinated by the minds and emotions of young people. She and her students are currently collecting data in order to examine how children understand possible emotional reactions of victimizers and victims. Although the research seems different from examining what children would do if someone spilled water on their painting, she said it really isn't.

"The expectations children have about situations like that may be important in explaining their behavior," she said.

"Generally speaking, the role of emotion in psychological functioning is something that is becoming more prominent in the field. I feel lucky to be involved in the area. It is interesting and dynamic," Lemerise said.

Dr. Lemerise's work has been recognized by her peers. She and a colleague, Dr. Bill Arsenio of Yeshiva University, had their theoretical paper on emotion and social information processing published in a special issue of the prestigious professional journal, *Child Development*. This special issue is entitled "New Directions for Child Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Recently, Dr. Lemerise received the 2000/2001 Western Kentucky University Faculty Award for Research/Creativity.