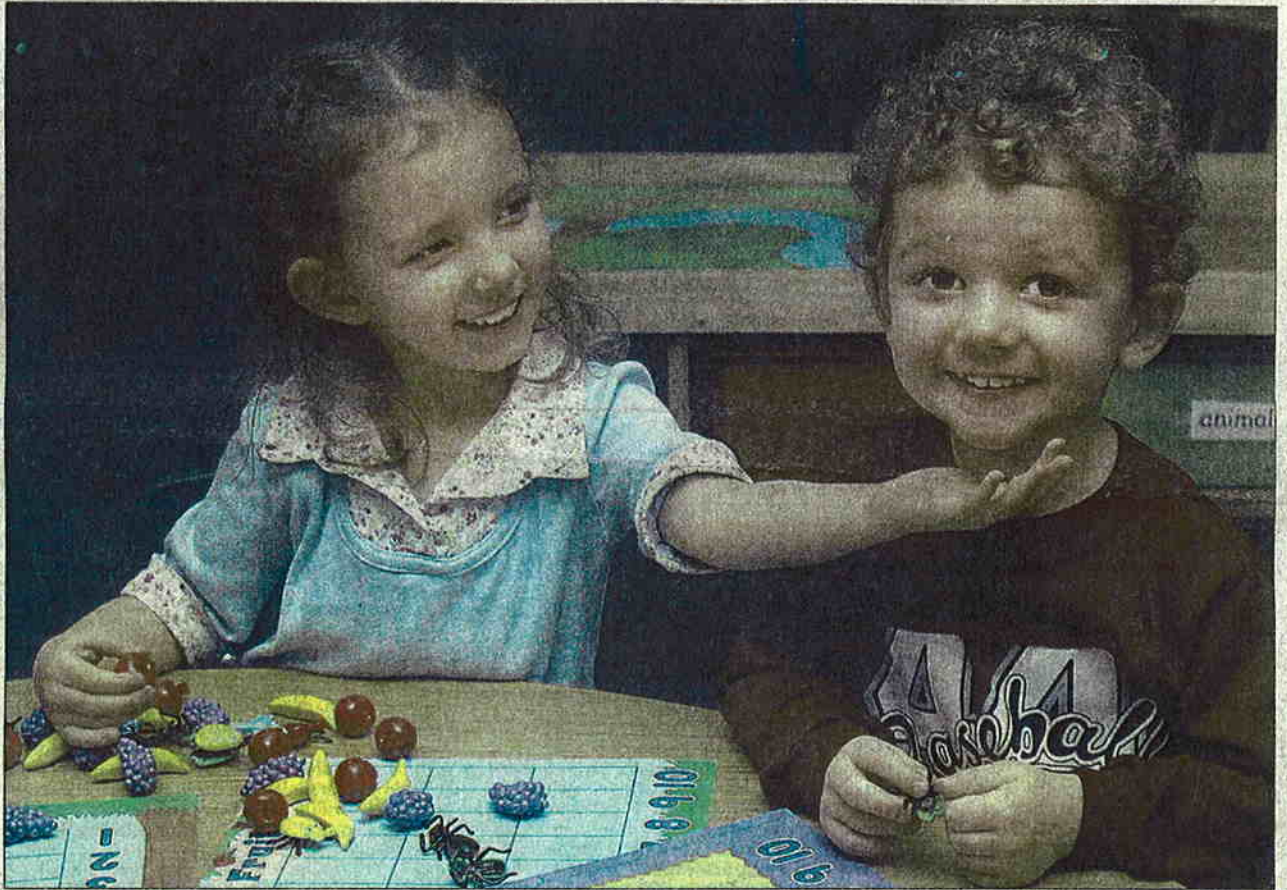


Study sheds light on early gender disparities



Meghan Graham, 4, and her younger brother Nolan, 2, attend the Ontario Early Years Centre at the Walker Family YMCA in St. Catharines Monday. The centre encourages parents to explore their child's interests and help them learn through play. STAFF PHOTO BY DENIS CAHILL

Girls more prepared to start school

By **MONIQUE BEECH**
Standard Staff

It's something many Niagara educators and parents likely know instinctively: Girls learn differently than boys.

A Statistics Canada study released Monday sheds more light on gender disparities and suggests five-year-old girls are more prepared than boys to start school.

The study found girls outperformed boys in several areas, including communication skills, attention and behaviour, and independence in dressing. Out of 11 measures, boys scored higher only in curiosity.

The news isn't surprising to Grimsby kindergarten teacher Kara Baranoski who consistently sees the differences be-

tween boys and girls when they first arrive in her class.

Girls are more likely to have developed motor skills and better attention spans than boys, she said.

"The girls are much more prepared to sit and listen," said Baranoski, who teaches at Smith School. "They have, absolutely, the behaviour. They're ready to be part of a group. They're much less egocentric than the boys are still."

Gender differences were also found in a 2006 survey of 3,000 Niagara kindergartners.

Girls scored higher on measures of physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication and general knowledge.

Glory Ressler, one of the



Kara Baranoski, a kindergarten teacher at Smith School in Grimsby, goes over some math skills exercises with five-year-old Claire Yoder in August before the start of the school year. Baranoski says girls are "much more prepared to sit and listen."

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study's authors, said the differences weren't huge between the sexes, "but enough

to be interesting."

"Generally, girls seem more on track when it comes to for-

mal education than boys," said Ressler, co-ordinator of the local Understanding the Early Years, a federally funded project run through the Early Childhood Community Development Centre.

But at least one researcher was a little uncomfortable with the Statistics Canada study.

"Ready to learn — it's a really misleading term because young children learn from birth," said Martha Friendly, a senior research associate in Early Childhood Education at the University of Toronto.

The differences between boys and girls at this age vary widely, and when girls score higher on various skills, it's really a question of maturity, she said.

Please see Learning page A8

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

"It doesn't mean that boys are not going to do as well in school, but it might mean that boys are less good at sitting down and doing seatwork," Friendly said.

"Differences are not necessarily bad.... I don't know when it levels off, but at some point boys catch up to girls."

Gender wasn't the only factor to influence how ready kids are for school.

The Statistics Canada survey, which collected data from 3,000 children from across the country in 2002-03, also found family income and home environment were major roles in children's readiness to learn.

Children from lower-income families were less ready to learn than their peers from affluent homes who scored better on vocabulary, communication, knowledge of numbers, attention and co-operative play.

The home environment — everything from interaction with parents to physical activity — affected the way children scored.

Ressler also found other factors influenced school readiness.

Children who attended preschool, day care and junior kindergarten were much better prepared for kindergarten and scored higher in the Niagara survey.

That comes as no surprise to Kim Mikus, co-ordinator of Ontario Early Years centres in St. Catharines.

Mikus is reluctant to point to any differences between the sexes, and says school readiness depends on how ready parents are to get involved with their child.

The centre encourages parents to explore their child's interests and help them learn through play.

"We don't generalize every child (based on gender)," said Mikus, who works out of the centre's Walker Family YMCA location.

"We emphasize that every child learns differently and give parents different techniques to help their child."

Baranoski is working to bridge gender differences by starting a program arming parents with tools to foster a love of learning — and of books in particular — in their children.

She hopes the pilot project, which began in September, benefits all children, and better equips parents to reinforce classroom lessons at home.

Response to four parent information sessions held in October on early reading has been "overwhelming" and Baranoski has already noted improvement in her students — regardless of gender.

"I find the children are more interested in learning because their parents are," Baranoski said.

Information compiled by Ressler — including such measures as gender differences and socio-economic factors — will be used to produce early development influence booklets for all of Niagara.

The books will map out each municipality and where the most need exists.

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