

By Walter Brooks

OUTREACH

Head starts

AT MUNROE-MEYER INSTITUTE

Mike Slatten watches his two preschoolers in the Head Start classroom at the Munroe-Meyer Institute for Rehabilitation and Genetics and says to no one in particular, "It just doesn't get any better than this."

Not only does the quality of education provided at Head Start appeal to Slatten, but he values the nurturing the children receive. "I like the learning methods teachers use and their flexibility," he said.

Mark Shriver, Ph.D., director of Research and Training for the Head Start project, said, "Educational daycare, especially high quality

early care, improves both academic achievement and social behavior in later life.

"Our partnership with Head Start is a showcase opportunity for early intervention and diversity — a model of support for Nebraska's children," he said.

Dr. Shriver, an MMI child psychologist and assistant professor in the UNMC Department of Pediatrics, said 55 percent of children, age 3 to 5, are in some form of preschool in the United States.

Government spending on pre-kindergarten has more than doubled from \$700 million in 1991 to \$1.7 billion in 1998. More than 2,000 Head Start programs in the country serve more than 800,000 children. In Douglas County 59 Head Start classrooms serve more than 900 children.

The Head Start program is grounded in the belief that parents are the best teachers, and that classroom teachers and assistants help identify the individual child's specific learning needs.

"It is important to remember that our goal is for Head Start children to acquire social competence," said Sandy Bjerck, Education Coordinator, Child and Family Development Corporation, the governing body for Omaha's Head Start programs.

"Munroe-Meyer's excellent facilities are designed to insure that children are free to be themselves. MMI specialists help our teachers and parents manage specific child issues."

The MMI Head Start class began Sept. 7 with 60 children divided equally into two morning and two afternoon classes. Children are eligible based on age, family income and the family's social needs.

Dr. Shriver notes the difficulty of resolving a single issue for one child, let alone, 15 children at a time. He and MMI staff consultants value their opportunities to work with Head Start teachers on specific child development issues.

A child who doesn't talk, for example, could indicate a non-English speaking language barrier, Dr. Shriver said. It could also indicate a hearing problem, or a cognitive issue.

"Our challenge is to recommend ways to engage this child," he said. "We offer our learning concepts to children from diverse social realities. Some of our ideas are knocked down, but that is all part of developing more effective learning tools for the changing world of America's children." d



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Dr. Mark Shriver, far right, enjoys a Head Start reading lesson with Royce Slatten, left, Zane Slatten, teacher Kleopatra Archie, Mal Yat, Cain Robles, Daisy Robledo and Angel Valentine.