

Contra Costa preschoolers get array of First 5 aid

By Rick Radin
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When preschoolers at Kids First Child Care in Pittsburg gather every weekday, First 5 California's influence weaves through the experience.

Three kids in the class of 14 have First 5 scholarships and Kids First operator Kristine Carrillo and her mother Amelita Guevara have received First 5 scholarships for early childhood education training. First 5 pays the tuition for a master's degree program Guevara is about to complete at Cal State East Bay.

For 12 years, First 5 has been providing medical and dental care, parent training, preschool tuition, preschool teacher training, speech therapy and other services for low-income children.

Carrillo and Guevara use a teaching method advocated by First 5 childhood education advisers. They say that young children learn mostly through play, so they try to incorporate teaching into play activities, Carrillo said.

"The other day we were playing outside and one of the children found an insect," Carrillo said. "We took the opportunity to talk about how insects live, their life cycle. They get interested in something in the moment and it sticks in their minds."

The preschoolers experience arts and crafts, music and movement, free play and story time, all with the object of preparing them for kindergarten, Carrillo said. They learn to sit in a circle for stories and discussion as they will be expected to do in elementary school.

First 5 leaders think preschool is crucial to later school success, so the program sponsors children whose parents can't afford to pay for it, said Sean Casey, executive director of First 5 Contra Costa.

"Having kids arrive at the same level as their peers at kindergarten can be a huge boost for school success," he said.

Pittsburg resident Marcella Ornano's three children are receiving First 5 scholarships to Kids First. Ornano said her 5-year-old son has learned to write his first and last name, read the alphabet out loud and play computer games.

"They're getting him well prepared for school," she said.

Ornano's 3-year-old twins, Alicia and Sofia, are also in a separate speech therapy program paid for by First 5. The girls have a learning disability because they were born prematurely, Ornano said.

"They would talk too fast and now they are starting to slow down," she said. "Before they would get very frustrated and walk away when you didn't understand, and now they will repeat themselves until they are understood."