

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

July 2024

Mary Waters

2024 DIEEC Early Childhood Educator of the Year Family Child Care

Meet Mary Waters, winner of the 2024 DIEEC Early Childhood Educator of the Year award in the family child care category! Her program, known as Ms. Mary's Nature Preschool, is located in Hartly DE. Read on to learn more about how Mary finds inspiration, builds connections with families, and meets challenges on a daily basis in her program.



Image provided by Mary Waters

What excites you about your role each day?

“My preschoolers are anxious to get started when they arrive each morning because each day there are different table-top activities set out. We know children are inquisitive, proven by the many “why?” questions! And I love my job of sparking their interest by setting up materials and activities that are developmentally appropriate, inviting, and engaging. I pick some of the themes that occur at certain times of the year such as seasonal or holiday specific, but I also ask them what they would like to know and learn about for future themes. One recent idea was trucks so we dove into all things transportation! Books and our sensory bin are rotated monthly to go along with the current season and/or a holiday celebrated that month. For the month of February our sensory bin held red, pink, & white soft pom-poms, rough glittery hearts, smooth wooden hearts, heart shakers, scoops, and small tin pails; the sensory bin is always a huge hit with the children!”

How do you enhance the potential and development of each child in your classroom?

“Each day, I engage in conversations with my preschoolers about how their evening was or what they did over the weekend, etc. My interest in their life and their feelings builds trust, security, and respect. Throughout the day, I make sure to touch base or connect with each child individually. Getting to know them offers me the chance to connect with them on a deeper level but I am also able to use that knowledge to inform my lesson plans. This ensures I am considering all my preschoolers when planning activities. I use specific praise (not just “good job”) with each child. Specific praise shows that I see them... I see when they are helping their friend, I see when they are sharing, I see when they are drawing circles.”

How do you keep families connected and informed?

“I include families mostly through a Facebook Private Group page where I post pictures and a summary of our day daily. Parents often “like” pictures and share comments; this helps them to feel connected and a part of their child’s day. Parents have told me how much they appreciate the posts I share; a couple parents love to sit down with their child in the evening and go through the pictures or use the pictures as a conversation starter with their child. In addition, I use the Brightwheel app to update parents throughout the day of meals, toileting, or other incidents that happen.”

How do you meet the challenges that each day brings?

“The most challenging part of my day is that not any day is the same. As a family child care provider, all the responsibilities lie solely on myself. Meal planning, grocery shopping, prepping meals, prepping lesson plans, purchasing supplies, changing out materials, cleaning, and the list goes on. Not only am I doing all of those things but, on top of that, each child comes in the door different than the day before. Because preschoolers’ emotions change so quickly, you never know at what point in the day you’re going to have to handle a melt-down. I handle it by trying to be as prepared ahead of time as possible while anticipating certain children’s emotions/reactions. I also make sure that I take care of myself during off hours; I enjoy doing yoga, getting massages every now and then, and I seek out support from fellow providers whom I am blessed to call friends.”

How does your program incorporate the principles of diversity, equity, and/or inclusion?

“My goal is to make sure that each child and each family feels welcomed in my program.

I strive to provide an environment where my preschoolers feel loved and that they belong to our classroom community. I encourage families to share holidays that they may celebrate or share their special or cultural traditions with the class.”

Ways that diversity, equity, and inclusion are supported in Mary’s program include:

- Reading books that include different cultures, ethnicities, genders, and people of different ages.
- Dress-up clothes that represent a variety of ethnicities
- Cultural foods in the kitchen area
- Dolls of different ethnicities
- Dolls that represent differing abilities

Professional growth

In terms of professional development, Mary has embraced a variety of opportunities for growth and development throughout her career. Early on, she earned a bachelor’s degree with the support of a TEACH grant, along with an Early Childhood Administrator certification.

She has also taken advantage of several opportunities through DIEEC. Here’s what Mary had to say about the impact of these experiences:

Let’s Go Outside

“[The] training inspired me to create my own outdoor classroom and focus more on incorporating nature into our daily routine. I love that in addition to our more “traditional” preschool activities, we also get to have unstructured time to enjoy nature. Oftentimes, you will find us reading books, drawing, painting, moving logs, making food in the mud kitchen, or lounging in hammocks while in our outdoor classroom.”



First State Family Child Care Conference

“In October 2023, I attended the Family Child Care Conference and was excited to network, support, and encourage other family child care providers at the conference. The speaker there was inspiring and helped me find the courage to make some necessary changes to the service I provide.”

Family Child Care Network Meetings

“These meetings are great opportunities to network and support other providers and stay up to date on all things happening in Delaware’s early childhood education field.”

Congratulations again, Mary, on your well-deserved recognition!

