

Dr. Dana Keller Bush serves as the Chair and Professor of the Department of Applied Human Sciences. Dr. Bush is an active researcher in both early childhood curriculum and leadership. She has presented her findings at numerous national and international conferences.

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Department of Applied Human Sciences



Part 1 of 2

Can you just tell us a little bit about the Child and Family Studies program offered through EKU Online?

The Child and Family Studies program is a program that affords students with many opportunities. We have students that work in community-based services, like with adoption agencies, foster care, YMCA, 4-H, and after-school programs. Those that want to do more of an education piece work with family life education, community education. Those that want to look at early childhood or have more of an early childhood focus work in preschools as a preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, or first steps which is working with children from birth to three that has some identified special needs. There are opportunities to work with faith-based organizations, health care, and we could go on, and on, and on. The program gives you a really broad look at how to work with children and families in many different ways. Many of our students will go on to receive master's degrees and provide family therapy, art therapy, and child life special services.

One of your courses is called Program Planning for Preschool Curriculum. It looks like a cross between the disciplines of psychology and education.

CDF406. I love that class, because it explores how a child develops. It focuses on levels of communication. As teachers of young children, we know that understanding developmental stages is essential. Our curriculum focuses on children's needs at each stage. Children are like the nucleus of a circle, and they're affected by different things surrounding the circle. So, for most children, the closest person or the closest people to that inner circle is their family. So, we know that they're going to have the biggest impact, but not all children have strong families. They could be in need of a foster family or other support systems. This is where the elements of psychology and sociology apply.

It's really unfortunate that some of society views early childhood educators as babysitters or daycare workers, which we don't like to use that term either because we're caring for children. We know that development is so important in those first few years of life. The brain is developing at a very fast rate that will never develop like that in the future. So, it's really important that we have nurturing caregivers with them that understand their development. Consider the child who bites. Some caregivers may not understand this is part of their development. That child could be punished for something that is not a punishable offense. They are simply progressing along this developmental line. So, it's important for us to know those things.

What should parents look for in a good childcare provider?

The number one indicator of quality is teacher preparation. Does your provider have a professional workforce? Do they have degrees? Do the teachers in this center have higher education in child development, curriculum planning, and understanding environments? When teachers have professional degrees, you will see that they will provide a curriculum that's developmentally appropriate. So that means that it's going to be appropriate for that child's age but also appropriate for that child where they're at developmentally. Teacher-child ratio is also really important. We know that when there are fewer children with one or two teachers, you're going to see more interaction than you would if there were more children to that one teacher. The childcare center should also be about family engagement. There should be plenty of family engagement activities, lots of check-ins with parents, parents coming in for parent-teacher conferences, or different types of family nights.

You also want a center that's very inclusive and welcoming to all children and all families. Finally, look for a center where they're always improving. If they're an accredited center, they have to do a portfolio every so often to show that they're meeting certain standards. This shows a standard of quality, and that they're serious, that they're willing to go the extra mile to meet these standards.

What advice do you have for parents with preschoolers and young children, and the challenges they're facing now?

Take time to be active with your child. Young children do have shorter attention spans but there are things that we can do. We can set things up for them, to keep them mentally engaged. Be creative, give them things to do. Let them make a mess, children need to make a mess anyway. Really watch the screen time. I mean we've got four-year-olds who are doing zoom calls, now. So, they need a break from that. But the number one thing that parents need to do, and families need to do right now, is take times for themselves. Parents, the adults, are sometimes the last people to get any me time. So, find little ways to get that adult time, whether it's just going on a walk by yourself, or with a friend, or finding some time for yourself.

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Part 2 of 2

What would you say to a prospective student who asks, “why should I get a child development degree from ECU and why should I get it online?”

We're about changing lives, we're kind of ground zero for supplying basic needs. Maslow is a theorist who posited the hierarchy of needs pyramid theory. We all want to reach the top of the pyramid and achieve self-actualization. But to get there, even to get to step two, we have to develop the foundational knowledge at the bottom of the pyramid where our basic needs are met and grow from there. Clothing, food, housing, love, family, are all important elements of our growth. That's what our program is providing, helping students build foundational success so we can strive upward toward all that life has to offer. We're change agents, we improve lives. So, if someone is interested in working with children and families, if they're interested in nurturing others, then you're at home with ECU, we're your family.

With regards to the online environment, it gives students so much more flexibility. They can work, if they choose, if they don't that's fine too. But there's a lot more flexibility in online learning, and you can travel, and do things. So, for our students who need to do so many different field hours, they're not set to one place, they could go you a couple hours away and do some observations. So, I think it gives a lot more flexibility in what the students can achieve.

What do you enjoy about teaching online?

I really enjoy getting to meet a diversity of students that we might not otherwise have. I have students that are in my online classes that have experience working in the field and can share that with the class. They come with richer perspectives. Now I'm not saying that a 19-year-old, 20-year-old, doesn't have a perspective, absolutely. But the perspective of a 30-year-old, that's been working in early childhood is going to be a little different, a little richer, so that's something I've really enjoyed. I've really liked meeting students in different geographical areas. We've got students in Florida, in Georgia, in California, we had a student that was in Japan a couple of years ago. She was a military spouse and they were stationed in Japan, so she completed her degree there and was going into early childhood centers in Japan. So, she was able to bring that perspective to the class, which was really, really cool. So, I've loved the student aspect, and it's made me look differently at my teaching and my preparation.

What kind of impact has offering online programs had on your program growth?

Moving online has challenged our faculty to become more intentional. It has become more individualized for the student. Being able to reach those students who live outside Richmond who cannot come to campus has been highly impactful for them. Many of our students have been working in childcare or in head start but haven't been able to receive that next promotion or that next level of care for young children, because they lack a degree. So that has really opened up opportunities for students that live in outlying areas.