

The Virgin Islands Consortium

UVI Childcare Lab and Diagnostic Center Provides Virtual Childcare Services

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Dr. Karen Brown By. UVI

Educators at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) Inclusive Childcare Lab and Diagnostic Center are using technology to keep their preschool students connected while the center is temporarily closed due to COVID-19. In the morning, students and their parents log on to Zoom for virtual circle time with teachers to listen to stories, play games, practice counting and learn the alphabet, the institution of higher learning announced Tuesday.

“We wanted to maintain face-to-face contact with the children while the center was physically closed,” explained Sherryl Tonge-George the center’s director. “The children are excited to keep in touch with teachers and see their friends. It’s important for them to continue learning and for their social development,” she said. The online group classes take place on weekdays for an hour, split into two 30-minute sessions. Individual sessions are also scheduled for students who may need one-on-one support.

“An advantage to the virtual program has been that parents are able to participate in activities and be a part of the learning environment,” said Tonge-George. Recently, parents helped children make puppets for a virtual puppet show and were involved in a Father’s Day project. Kyle Thomas, UVI alumnus and parent, said he enjoys participating in the virtual sessions and his overall experience with the program has been exceptional. “My two-year old son began the program in January, and in just six weeks was able to meet important developmental milestones and develop more confidence in that environment,” he said.

UVI School of Education Dean, Dr. Karen Brown, who oversees the center, explained the virtual program came about after staff members began holding administrative meetings on Zoom. “We branched out to scheduling meetings with families, then to offering live activities,” she said. The Zoom sessions started in April and will continue until the center is scheduled to reopen later this month.

The center first opened its doors in June 2019 with the initial aim of providing afterschool and childcare services to UVI students and staff, as well as members of the St. Thomas community. A second center is under

construction on the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix. The centers are funded by a Title III federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

In addition to childcare services, the center serves as a training lab for UVI students in the School of Education. This spring, UVI student Lenesha Rabsatt gained practical experience there as an intern in her final semester before graduating in May with an associate’s degree in inclusive early childhood education. As part of her internship, she shadowed teachers, interacted with children, and prepared and executed lessons under the supervision of the teachers and her professor. “The teachers at the center were supportive and guided me throughout – it was a good experience,” said Rabsatt. The classroom can accommodate up to two UVI interns per semester.

Another important function of the center is to provide screening services for developmental delays and disabilities. “Early intervention is key,” explained Dr. Brown, who is also a trained speech and language pathologist. “Teachers can be taught to do screens that will increase earlier identification of children with developmental delays and disabilities and get them referred sooner to Infant and Toddler Services for help,” she said referring to the program within the V.I. Department of Human Services. “Once student needs are identified, teachers can respond with strategies in the classroom to help support that individual’s needs,” added Tonge-George, an experienced special educator.

For more information, contact the UVI Public Relations Office at (340) 693-1057 or email pr@uvi.edu.

