



Shira Ackerman, Director of
Domino Project Preschool

Northwest Autism Center

By Shira Ackerman



If you hear the unmistakable sounds of preschoolers as you walk to class in EWU's Martin Hall, it's not because our freshmen are getting younger every year. Instead, you've passed Room 138, home of Domino Project Preschool, Northwest Autism Center's year-round, inclusive early intervention program for newly diagnosed children. The first of its kind in Eastern Washington, Domino was launched in the fall of 2005 in collaboration with Eastern Washington University.

With its colorful walls, pint-size tables and bins filled with educational toys and materials, Domino is not your typical university classroom, nor is it an ordinary preschool environment. EWU has generously equipped Domino with a state-of-the-art video recording system used to evaluate programs, instruct staff and families and train educators. The university has also provided full use of an adjacent observation/training room in which Domino parents regularly gather to watch their children learn. Inside the classroom, trained autism specialists and staff work side-by-side with Eastern Washington University students, implementing individualized programs especially designed for six young children on the autism spectrum and six typically developing peers. All twelve students work and play within a learning-rich environment to acquire the essential developmental milestones necessary for entrance into kindergarten. For those students with autism, the task is a challenging one.

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder present from birth or early in development. A spectrum disorder, its effects range from mild to severe, impacting essential human behaviors such as the communication of ideas and feelings, imagination, self awareness and regulation, and the ability to engage in relationships. Currently, the causes of autism are unclear, and there is no known cure. One thing is clear: for children affected with autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and PPD-NOS, evidence-based early intervention programs like Domino can make all the difference. Domino students are learning to speak and to meaningfully interact with peers. They are acquiring skills to help them overcome the obstacles of autism in their lives.

Domino Project is committed to the development of replicable early intervention services to affected children and their families living in the Inland Northwest. An essential component of that commitment involves offering community-based autism training to area educators. This summer, Northwest Autism Center offered its **Summer Autism Intensive: Effective Practices for Preschool Aged Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders**. These weeklong trainings, hosted and accredited by Eastern Washington University, drew educators from local and rural school districts as well as from children's service centers such as Vanessa Behan Crisis Center, St. Anne's Children's Center and the EWU Children's Center. Participants learned effective techniques and best practices for working with affected children, and used the observation room daily to see these strategies implemented in the classroom. Throughout the year, many participants will receive monthly follow-up visits from Domino preschool director, Shira Ackerman, helping them bridge the gap between lecture and implementation. An *Autism Speaks* grant awarded to Northwest Autism Center in support of this follow-up component of the training series will further increase its impact in the community.

Domino Project is a ground-breaking collaboration between EWU and Northwest Autism Center, and not only because it provides direct benefits to children, families and educators who face the unique challenges of autism. It also models a community-centered approach to service and support. In this work, a mission goal of community service for both EWU and NAC is fulfilled. And, for the children of Room 138 in Martin Hall, the future is a brighter place.

Northwest Autism Center (NAC) is a non-profit organization located in Spokane, Washington. Its mission is to support, facilitate and build comprehensive, community-based approaches to serving the growing number of children and adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in Spokane and the Inland Northwest. For more information please visit the NAC website at www.nwautism.org.