

HCC opens resource room to offer some assistance for student-parents

HOLYOKE — First there was the Itsy Bitsy Zoomcast, a pandemic-inspired series of videos produced by the faculty from the early childhood education department at Holyoke Community College that debuted online in 2020.

Next came the Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab, a suite of early education classrooms at HCC modeled after pre-school and kindergarten facilities. Then, in 2022, HCC opened the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, a free service center for student-parents in need of short-term child care while they attend classes.

Last month, the college debuted its latest offering in its Itsy Bitsy franchise: The Itsy Bitsy Closet.

During the fall semester, HCC students transformed a large storage room for surplus equipment into a family-friendly resource room stocked with donated children's clothes, jackets, shoes, books, and more.

All the items are now available for free to HCC students who have young children.

"It's open to all HCC student-parents," said Emily Webber, who, as director of the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, now also oversees the Itsy Bitsy Closet next door. "Student-parents can come and take whatever they need for their children — clothing, jackets, coats, shoes, and also books, to promote literacy at home."

The Itsy Bitsy Closet was Webber's idea. To bring it to life, however, she enlisted psychology professor Sheryl Civjan, whose Psychology of Women class took on the assignment as a service learning project. The students organized clothing and book drives and collected donations both on and off campus.

"Week after week, they sorted through the donated clothes, weeded out the rejects, then washed, folded, and organized everything to create the space," said Civjan.

Over the course of the semester, Civjan's students also conducted research on early childhood literacy and how it is impacted by child care. The result of that research is a Family Resource Guide that will be available in the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch center and the Itsy Bitsy Closet.

"The research focused on why child care is so important to working mothers, and to college student mothers," said Civjan. "We did a project last year that was focused specifically on child care. This is a little broader issue about early literacy."

Webber hosted a reception for Civjan's class on Nov. 28 to celebrate the opening. It wasn't long before nursing student Maddy Gray from Colrain wandered in after picking up her 3-year-old son Orion from the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch next door.

Gray grabbed some winter clothes; Orion picked out a book.

"We got some nice shirts and pants," she said. "And they're nice clothes, too. This makes a huge difference for us. With inflation and one income, I cannot express my gratitude enough to everyone involved, the director of Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, the students, and Professor Civjan. I'm so thankful. My boy will be nice and cozy, and this left us more money in the bank to get him something a little extra for Christmas."

Gray said she'll be checking back weekly and plans to donate Orion's clothes after he outgrows them.



Holyoke Community College Professor Sheryl Civjan and her students transformed a storage room full of surplus equipment into the Itsy Bitsy Closet. (SUBMITTED)