

# Professor to teach sibling care to pre-schoolers

Story: KAREN SUE HERMES

A 4-year-old boy, momentarily left alone with his younger sister, didn't

know quite what to do when she started to cry. After running in circles, he set his sister on the floor and sat on her head.

Preschoolers frequently find it frustrating caring for their younger siblings while mom's briefly away, but they can — and will — do it, says an Oakland University psychology professor.

The professor, Robert Stewart of Rochester, recently watched with a one-way mirror the actions of 54 preschoolers while alone with a younger brother or sister.

Fifty percent of them consoled their younger siblings by hugging or kissing them, patting them on the head, telling them their mother would be right back or playing with them.

"That's a large number considering their age," Stewart said. "What they were doing is interpreting cries, role playing and empathizing. These are complex behaviors — even for an adult."

Stewart, who has an infant son, said

he conducted the study so he could help preschoolers better care for their younger siblings.

He said he is considering a workshop in spring. The workshop would teach preschoolers how to care for babies and explain why they sometimes cry and what they can do to help.

STEWART SAID he doesn't want to make preschoolers "active caretakers" of their little brothers and sisters. "I'm not trying to create mother's little helpers. I want them to have the skills to be left with a crying sibling," he said.

While preschoolers aren't capable of caring for babies during extended periods, Stewart said they frequently are left in the same room with them while mom leaves to prepare lunch, put clothes in the dryer or make a bed.

Stewart studied the reactions of 54 preschoolers, all about age 4, toward their younger siblings, all about 2½ years younger.

The majority of the children were white, from upper-middle-class families. Many came from Rochester, Avon Township, Birmingham and Pontiac.

Two-thirds of the 4-year-olds had at-

tended preschool.

The children's parents were well-educated. Sixty percent of the fathers, who averaged 32, had bachelor's degrees. The mothers, who averaged 30, were slightly less educated than their husbands.

The study was conducted in a room resembling a doctor's waiting room. Mothers entered the room with their children then left momentarily under the pretense of visiting the doctor.

STEWART FOUND the 4-year-olds modeled their actions after the parent who is the same sex as them.

For every sign their younger siblings gave that they were discontent with their mother's absence, boys gave an average of one form of reassurance, be it a pat, a kiss or hug.

For every sign of discontent their younger siblings gave, girls gave an average of five forms of reassurance.

In earlier studies, men and women have reacted with the same ratio to their children's needs, Stewart said.

Stewart also detected a cross-sex pattern.

For every two signs of discontent demonstrated by younger brother, boys reacted with one form of reassurance.

But for every single sign of discontent demonstrated by younger sister, boys responded with four forms of reassurance.

For every one sign of discontent younger sisters demonstrated, girls reassured them in two ways. But for every single sign of discontent younger brothers showed, girls reassured them 16 times.

In addition, Stewart found the children who best responded to their younger siblings' distress were those who had attended preschool, which teaches interaction with others; were instructed by their mothers to "take care" of their younger siblings during the mother's absence; had mothers who demonstrated child-care skills in their preschoolers' presence.

## Carrier of the Month farmington



Marcia Ferrante

Marcia Ferrante, 13, is November's Carrier of the Month for the Farmington Observer.

She is the daughter of Anthony and Marianne Ferrante of Farmington. She has a sister, Linda, 12, and brother, Michael, 9.

Marcia is an eighth-grade student at O.E. Duncel Middle School where she maintains an A-minus to B-plus average.

Her favorite subject is mathematics and she enjoys playing the piano and clarinet.

Marcia is a member of the Farmington Y gymnastics team.

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## Senior care center opens

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