

# United Way's Ready Freddy program eases leap to kindergarten

by OUR YORK MEDIA

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United Way of York County

Tears streamed down young Jeffrey Jackson's face as he sobbed and shook and gasped for breath on the first day of preschool. His mother knelt next to him, her heart quietly breaking. The next day, it happened again. And again. And again.

It went on for more than two weeks, recalls Jen Jackson of York County, Jeffrey clinging to her leg crying while she struggled to fight back her own tears.

Kindergarten brings questions for everyone: for parents, who want to know if their child should be counting higher; for educators, curious if that child can keep her hands to herself or will instead require extra attention; and, of course, the kids taking a big step toward growing up.

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For the past 11 years, United Way of York County has helped better prepare children, parents, and teachers with its kindergarten transition program, Ready Freddy. Students across the county get a sneak peek at their school. Parents have a chance to meet teachers and ask questions.

By the end of six sessions, both are a little more comfortable with the hardest part — letting go.

A year after the preschool episode, with kindergarten on the horizon, Jeffrey's mom arrived for the first Ready Freddy session with a shy little boy and a world of worry. This time, though, things were different.

"Right away, it was just so helpful," Jen says. "They opened with a story and everyone was relaxed. It really helped him ease into the transition from that first moment."

Soon, she looked up, and little Jeffrey was gone, off talking with his teachers.



*Parents and children of Red Lion Area School District work together on activities during a Ready Freddy session.*



## Commitment to education

Years from now, a little girl walking wide-eyed into kindergarten might receive a United Way college scholarship to study early childhood education. Or, she might curl up with a good book at one of the organization's Ready Reading Corners. Maybe she'll stay on track through the truancy- prevention program.

It's all part of the United Way's long, strong commitment to education across York County.

But, in the beginning, the only thing that matters is making a sometimes frightening first day go as smoothly as possible for each child.

"We've heard, unequivocally, that schools can tell a difference in the classroom with children who have attended the Ready Freddy programs," says Sara Bradley, United Way of York County's Director of Education Initiatives. "When children enter the school year prepared, that benefits the overall success of the entire classroom."



## Helping parents, too

Look a little closer at the kitchen artwork at Kimmy Nickle's house, and one piece might jump out at you: a self-portrait by her son James. The tuft of hair; the too-big glasses; the wide grin. Even on a rough day, that will make a mother smile.

He drew it last summer at a Ready Freddy class by a bubbly boy so excited that he hit it off with his teachers from their first meeting. They gave him a book to take home; then, a few weeks later, on his first day of school, he practically ran into the classroom.

"I never cried at milestones before," she recalls, pausing. "But, that one was tough. He's suddenly jumping from being a little kid to a big kid."

Thanks to the Ready Freddy program, Kimmy says, the transition was smooth for everyone.

"I was a lot more comfortable, too," she says. "That was such a great idea that we plan on doing it every year. Because in the end, that's what matters most to me: having all these great memories to look back on."

## 'What it's all about'

This summer Josh Jackson is following in his big brother's footsteps, taking Ready Freddy classes, working with staff on some socialization issues and preparing for his first day at Kreutz Creek Elementary School.

For Jen Jackson, that day will be bittersweet. She'll watch a little boy who just yesterday was snuggled deep in her arms walk out the door and into the wide world, one of those moments that somehow always comes too soon.

But, she'll think, too, of Jeffrey's kindergarten success last year, and of their Ready Freddy preparation. She'll take heart that while moms will always worry, letting go isn't quite as hard when you have some help easing into it.

"I think I'll probably end up being more scared than he is," she said. "But if he can come home and tell me he had a good day, that's what it's all about."



*Freddy the Frog - the Ready Freddy mascot.*