

COMPUTER COLLEGE SPURS NEEDED SKILLS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

To help children and families who may be at risk of falling on the "left out" side of the digital divide, Casey Family Services launched its first "Computer College" at the University of Connecticut's main campus in Storrs. Eleven families from Bridgeport's Family Connections program participated in the two-day session offered earlier this year.

The college weekend included an array of practical sessions – computer set-up and maintenance, an introduction to Windows software and computer graphic design and lessons on Internet safety. Breaks from the curriculum included team building and family bonding activities such as sports, games, arts and crafts, movies and even a tour of the university's working dairy farm. All participants received a certificate at the end of the weekend, following the college graduation model.

"We want to help parents and children achieve basic skill levels so they can continue to develop them on their own," says Juliette LeCornec, Casey's family technology support liaison, who was instrumental in coordinating the program. "For parents, completing the course could be helpful with jobs and job searches where basic computer skills are required. And for kids, increased skills should help them improve academic performance, self-expression and research capabilities."

To be eligible for the Computer College, parents were required to attend four orientation classes that covered computer basics, Internet awareness, parental involvement and educational technology. UConn was chosen, LeCornec says, because the rural campus would be an interesting change for the city-based families and "maybe some of the kids, by living on a real campus, would realize that college can be a realistic goal for them."

"I didn't know anything about computers, so the training was great," says Gwen Washington. "I learned the basics, and now I can use programs and get information for my boys and me. I'll be able to create a resume and hopefully use my computer skills in a future job. "The graduation ceremony was also nice," she adds. "It let me know that I accomplished something."

Iris Matias knew she needed the help the program offered. "My kids were way too advanced with computers," she explains. "I needed to catch up, but I was intimidated by it. "The program was interesting and not too hard," she adds. "Now I'm comfortable with the computer and can help my kids with their educational needs. I'm hoping to look for a job where I can use the computer. I'm putting what I learned into practice."

After the program, Casey delivered computers to each family, so they can continue to develop their skills and explore new opportunities at home. LeCornec will conduct case reviews to provide help if needed and to make sure participants are achieving their goals. For those families who are, Casey will also help them gain Internet access.

"We will study the progress of each family for the next two years," LeCornec explains. "We want to be sure the program succeeds in helping to bridge the digital divide and find out if we need to make adjustments to assure success in the future."

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