

# Shaping Bright Futures

## Empowering Educators to Strengthen Childcare Access

Working families in the Monadnock Region often struggle to find affordable, high-quality childcare due to long waitlists and staffing shortages. Monadnock United Way (MUW) and Keene State College (KSC) are tackling this challenge through the federally funded Child Care Expansion (CCE) project.\* By supporting initiatives like **Early Childhood Education Certification** programs, the project strengthens the childcare system and creates better opportunities for children, staff, and families. This article is part of a series highlighting the efforts and initiatives driving positive change in local childcare through the CCE project.

Deb Hunter, Child Care Director at the Children's Learning Center at Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene, is an educator in the ECE certificate program offered by River Valley Community College.

This program offers professionals an introduction to early childhood development and certifies them as associate teachers, empowering them to teach independently. It's more than just a credential—it's a steppingstone to an associate degree and a gateway to professional growth.

"The ECE gives everyone a solid foundation in childcare. But the real value is in having qualified staff. We had great people before, but now they're excellent and eager to learn more. This benefits the children, who have teachers who truly understand them and provide intentional, nurturing care," Hunter explains.

One shining example of the program's impact is Ashley Tracy, a staff member who became a credentialed associate teacher through the ECE program. "The class was interactive—group work, games, and hands-on projects like game and toy-building. It made it easy to share ideas," Tracy says.

Not only did she gain valuable skills, but she was also motivated by learning about her peers' career paths. "What I thought would be stressful ended up being fun and fast. Now I have my own classroom, a stronger connection with the kids, and trust from my co-workers."



Ashley Tracy and Deb Hunter



Ashley Tracy on a pinecone hunt with some of her students.



Scan this code for more information about the Child Care Expansion project.  
[www.muw.org/cce](http://www.muw.org/cce).



\*Funded through the US Department of Education Congressionally Funded-Community Projects Program in partnership with Keene State College and Monadnock United Way.