



IN THE GYM, Demi Murray, Darbi Rouse and Jillian Peters (above) learned a little more about their extended learning family last Wednesday. Hannah Vick (below left), Judy Elwood, Sadie Rieken and Brittany Urban ate lunch with their "family."



Students learn in family groups

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**

Kids sprawled on their tummies on the Oberlin Elementary School gym floor, colored pencils and crayons in hand, as they decorated what looked like giant puzzle pieces.

Other students sat up as a teacher, the leader of their extended learning "family," asked questions.

One teacher said, "This person has three sisters and two brothers in her 'family.'" The kids looked around the circle of their new friends of all ages, trying to figure out who the teacher was talking about.

At the grade school last Wednesday, the teachers and students were in the second month of this extended learning "families."

Principal Duane Dorshorst said a teacher heads each family, compris-

ing one to three students from each grade, or 10 to 11 kids of all ages.

The idea, he said, is to allow the students and teachers to build a relationship. It also works like a mentoring program, he said, with the older students helping the younger ones.

Carol Wasson, a third grade teacher, said she really likes the program and is glad the older and younger students are getting the chance to know one another. It helps build the school community, she said.

The school has 14 families, Mr. Dorshorst said, and each one will do a learning activity every month. The families have lunch together once a month, he said.

The program, he said, doesn't fo-

cus so much on academic learning, but social learning and skills.

The students and staff started the program on Monday, Jan. 29. Each member of the family built a Plains Indian-style storage container out of paper for Kansas Day, the principal said, and the families had lunch together.

The older kids helped the younger students with things they didn't know how to do, he said.

While the first half of the families were in the lunch room eating, he added, the other half were in the gym working on their projects.

Mr. Dorshorst said he learned about the concept at a principals' conference and thought it was a good idea. All of the students are included in the program, including special-needs students, which allows the others to learn a little more about their needs and how they can help.

Originally, he said, the school planned to start the program in December, but the snow storms interfered.

The first day went well, said Mr. Dorshorst, adding that the families did find that a lot of the older and younger students didn't know each other. In February, he said, they did a "getting to know each other" activity.

Steve Cullen, a fourth grade teacher said, the "family" program gets kids helping each other out. So far, he said, he has enjoyed his two sessions with his group, named the "Nachos." He added that also he likes eating lunch with the kids.

Other schools have found the students carry their family relationships over into junior high and high school, said Mr. Dorshorst, remaining friends with their school "families" for years.



A CRAYON IN HER HAND, Caitlin Shields (left) colored a giant puzzle piece with facts about herself. Sammy Meitl (above left) and Trevor Bruhn ate lunch together in their extended learning family.