



Kindergarten teacher Diana Keister (from left) helps Ariana Knowles, 5, and Alyssa DiJulio, 5, fill boxes for the needy at the Lindenhurst Early Childhood Development Center Dec. 15. (Photo By Rob Dicker/Staff Photographer)

## Center teaches 'Gift of Giving'

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When Santa Claus visited the Lindenhurst Early Childhood Center on Dec. 15, he wasn't there to ask children what they want for Christmas.

Instead, Santa had a message: You're doing a great job.

The children at Lindenhurst Early Childhood Center completed a number of giving-related projects between Nov. 25 and Dec. 21. On Dec. 15, with their center set up like a food pantry, the children filled hand-decorated boxes with 5,000 food items, along with various toiletries, that had been donated by parents or purchased with financial donations.

Frank Davis, director of the center, said the boxes contained full meals, including spaghetti, vegetables and fruit.

"It was actually a pretty well thought-out thing," said Davis.

The food box project was just one of four projects the children completed through the 18th annual "Gift of Giving Program." The center also collected both new and used toys, and offered

an "Adopt an Angel" tree during the nearly month-long program.

About 500 new toys were collected and will be donated to local hospitals.

The new toy collection, Davis said, was part of a larger toy drive offered through the 100 Percent Foundation.

Gently used toys and clothing will be donated to places like A Safe Place, Allendale, Kids Hope United, Open Arms Mission, the Lake Villa and Avon Township Food Pantries, and the Lake County Housing Authority.

The "Adopt an Angel" tree, Davis said, gives people a fourth option for giving.

"There's something for people who want to do a little bit more for someone who's in foster care, for example," said Davis. "Those kids can sometimes be forgotten. (This provides) just a sense of hope and that somebody cares about them.

"The tree represents the 'Gift of Giving' more than anything else," he added.

Despite the tough economy, Davis said this year's program "has been the best year ever," largely because the economy

"made people truly appreciate their family, truly appreciate their homes and truly appreciate the things that they need.

"I've noticed it pull families closer together and make people more willing to give. If they have two of something, they give one away," said Davis. "We're developing more of a thankfulness for what we have rather than asking for more."

That's the message the Lindenhurst Early Childhood Center is trying to send to children.

"It's not about what you get over the holidays. It's what you give," said Davis. He said giving is a tradition at the center. "What's important for kids to learn in the giving process is tradition. If they do it each year, it sticks with them."

Children may start out at 3-years-old not really understanding what they're doing, but by age 5, "they get it and can tell you why they're doing it.

"That's what makes this process so important. They understand this is something they need to make part of their life," said Davis.

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