

LEARNING IN THE EARLY YEARS

Junior Kindergarten 2017/2018

The overall aim of the Junior Kindergarten program is to foster the development of all aspects of the child – social, emotional, cognitive, artistic, and physical – in a community of learners who bring a diversity of cultures, experiences, preferences, and points of view to the classroom. An important goal of the year is to help children learn to play and learn together as a group while continuing to express their individuality and pursue their own purposes.

Play

The early-years curriculum is founded upon the belief that focused and productive play provides the most natural, effective and engaging vehicle for young children's learning. As they absorb themselves with purpose and commitment in a wide range of carefully designed play opportunities, children work hard to make sense of their world as they develop the social, emotional, and cognitive strengths that will underlie all subsequent academic learning. As the year proceeds, we see dramatic development in the complexity and intentional organization of all the children's play.

In the JK classroom, informal play and explicit instruction inform and enrich each other. The skills and concepts implicitly explored and developed through experience and play are explicitly articulated and reflected upon in instructional settings, and the skills and concepts acquired through instruction are practiced and extended in play.

Countless studies have identified a multitude of benefits that directly result from play, including enriched

- Language skills
- Numerical and spatial skills
- Motor skills
- Creativity and problem-solving
- Persistence
- Self-regulation and control
- Imagination
- Abstract thought and reasoning
- Self-esteem
- Curiosity and motivation to learn
- Flexibility
- Social Reasoning: Ability to recognize and accommodate other perspectives (theory of mind)
- Metacognition: Ability to reflect upon one's own thinking

We set up developmentally appropriate and challenging materials and ensure sufficient time and space for children to formulate plans and pursue them in a sustained, focused, and organized way. A key role of adults is to enable, extend, and support the play of children as they gain knowledge and skill through direct experience. Through their play, children develop the

initiative, persistence, attention, and cognitive flexibility that are essential to learning of all kinds, coupled with a strong sense of self in a joyful atmosphere.

Play opportunities include

- Puzzles and other structured problem solving (math, language, logical reasoning)
- Imaginative play settings: role play, puppetry, play with small figures, blocks
- Games with rules
- Music
- Building on large and small scales
- Patterning, sorting, sequencing materials
- Spatial reasoning materials
- Storytelling and acting out stories
- Art
- Science explorations, classification, close observation of the natural world
- Reading and writing
- Outdoor play

In all classroom endeavours, the learning that takes place during the creation of a piece of art, a building structure, or printed words on a page takes precedence over the look of the finished product.

We strongly stress respect for individual differences in culture, family, development, interests, and temperament and regard differences as enriching the classroom experience for everyone.

Social Skills/Learning Skills

While many preschoolers are highly empathetic, it can be challenging for them to fully grasp that others may think and feel differently than they do. Through conversation with peers in a range of settings, mediated by explicit coaching from adults, they gradually come to recognize other perspectives. They gain the ability to independently negotiate differences and incorporate the ideas of others in their own thinking. This direct experience is supported and enhanced through imaginative role play and the opportunity to enter vicariously into the thoughts and feelings of story characters.

Self-regulation has been identified as the most significant predictor of academic (and life) success. As they experience the rewards of sustained social play, children become increasingly motivated to curb their own immediate impulses and exercise self-control in order to maintain satisfying interactions with peers. They become increasingly able to delay gratification, modulate their emotions and responses, and accommodate other needs. As self-regulatory skills develop, children show growing ability to plan, organize, and independently manage many aspects of their lives. The resulting sense of confidence and control has a strong impact on experience of school.

In Junior Kindergarten, there is a real leap in children's awareness of the thoughts and feelings of others. Their interest in peers may begin at times to surpass their need for adult approval. Issues of friendship become compelling as close relationships with other children gain importance, sometimes at the cost of general inclusiveness. We work with the children to acknowledge the

pleasure and power of these relationships while stressing that everyone needs to feel included and respected in the classroom community. Helping children take other perspectives is key to this process.

In these early years of schooling, children are gaining independence and a growing sense of autonomy as they learn to satisfy their own needs. There is a strong focus on both managing basic needs and contributing consistently to the upkeep of the classroom. Students are encouraged to independently access materials and put them away when they are done. The resulting control over their environment empowers them to try new things, take risks, and experiment in a calm, safe, and reasonably predictable setting.

Each school day exposes children to many different social and learning structures. They attend to instruction in large and small group situations as well as in one-on-one interactions with adults. In less structured play settings, they are encouraged to partake in a variety of flexible social groupings, moving from cooperative group play to more focused activities with one or two others, as well as engrossing themselves in solitary projects. There is a balance between teacher-led learning and more child-driven exploration. They are acquiring the ability to flexibly shift among different kinds of learning structures, from more open-ended opportunities that demand autonomy and decision-making to more clearly defined, adult-directed tasks that may be, at times, non-negotiable.

Motor Skills

Young children's sense of confidence and control are closely tied to their sense of physical mastery. Daily opportunities are provided for active physical play, both through structured games in the gym and freer play outside. As well, they gain control over their bodies in the Drama and Music classes with Sarah and Suzanne.

As they refine their fine-motor skills, children are delighted by their new competence in attending to their own needs. These skills also support increasingly complex play and are essential to many developing academic skills, including writing and math. Examples of ongoing classroom activities that foster fine-motor development include

- Cutting and pasting
- Work with modeling materials
- Painting
- Drawing and writing on large and small scales
- Work with beads and pegboards,
- Work with puzzles
- Building and patterning with large and small materials
- Handwriting practice

Language and Literacy

Language skills develop both through explicit instruction and in more informal play, in an ongoing cycle of teaching and learning.

Three areas that we work on in Junior Kindergarten that later strongly predict reading and writing success in Grade 1 are:

- Well-developed **oral language** (especially vocabulary)
- **Phonemic awareness** (attentiveness to the sounds in words, and the ability to manipulate sounds in words)
- **Awareness of print** conventions

While these are distinct areas of development, there is considerable overlap as activities and instruction supporting language development often serve multiple purposes.

Oral Language

An emphasis on oral language pervades all aspects of classroom life, including

- Daily listening to high quality stories/poetry/information books
- Dictating stories and other texts to a scribe
- Supported conversation and discussion (large group, small groups, one-on-one) in all curriculum areas
- Play with language: word games, singing, rhyming, etc.
- Imaginative and dramatic role play

In Junior Kindergarten, the children become able to listen in a group to stories of growing length and complexity. Stories are very carefully selected for their use of rich language and the developing complexity of social reasoning needed to make sense of them. There is a stress on traditional tales as they appear around the world. Through encountering similar plots in very different cultural contexts, children begin to appreciate both the commonalities and differences among cultures. They become familiar with narrative structure through hearing and comparing stories with strongly defined structures, and become adept at interpreting, predicting, and questioning what they hear. Once they begin to note and question the meanings of unfamiliar words, their vocabulary expands rapidly as a result of the stories they hear. These stories also take on a life of their own with repeated and spontaneous re-tellings and re-enactments as the children play out the themes and language they have heard in other classroom contexts.

The use of poetry uniquely links music and language as children delightedly become attuned to words, their sounds, and the way they work.

We also begin to read more episodic novels, in which both character and story line develop over time. Visualization becomes important as illustrations wane, and the children begin to eagerly anticipate the next chapter as they enthusiastically revisit what has already passed.

Over the year, there is an increased focus on the group reading of non-fiction material as children become ready to access information as part of a group as well as individually.

Phonemic Awareness

Daily classroom activities foster children's natural interest in wordplay and the sounds of language, as we encourage play with words and sounds through rhyming, singing, poetry, classifying initial and final sounds in words, clapping syllables, and so on.

Research has shown a direct relation between preschoolers' ability to discriminate complex rhythms and their reading ability at the end of Grade 1. We work regularly with rhythm, as the children echo and extend rhythmic patterns of growing complexity.

In Junior Kindergarten, there is a systematic and explicit introduction to letters and their sounds. As the year proceeds, children are encouraged to use their growing phonetic knowledge to sound out the spelling of words to the best of their ability.

Awareness of Print

As there is a considerable range of interest and knowledge in this area, much instruction takes place in very small groups or individually as children work with letters and print at a level appropriate for them.

Regular activities that explicitly focus attention on letters and print include:

- Looking at and retelling story books
- Alphabet games, puzzles, and other structured literacy tasks
- Reading and writing of their own names and simple words
- Group reading/singing of enlarged text
- Dictating stories/text to a scribe
- Individual or small-group work on features of print appropriate to the child's level of skill and interest
- Informal play materials that encourage spontaneous writing of messages, lists, maps, stories, menus, signs, etc.
- Individual reading of short, patterned texts
- Individual reading and writing of more complex texts (when appropriate)

In Junior Kindergarten, all children receive direct instruction in handwriting through the "Handwriting Without Tears" program that is used throughout the grades. Letter practice is closely tied to phonics instruction.

Mathematics

Children learn through direct math instruction (in half groups or smaller) as well as more intuitively as they explore and apply math concepts in all areas of play (e.g., puzzles, building, board games, art) or in other applied settings, such as cooking or science.

In Junior Kindergarten, the math program develops numeric and spatial reasoning through instruction, activities and games focused on

- Numeracy

- Counting (rote and objects), stressing one-to-one correspondence to match objects with numbers
- Numeral recognition
- Composing and decomposing numbers
- Adding and subtracting in everyday and story contexts
- Adding and subtracting on paper
- Problem-solving: applying math concepts across both real-world and imaginary situations
- Spatial Reasoning
 - Manipulation of shapes (2- and 3-D) in space
 - Visualizing/ mental rotation
 - Classification of shapes
 - Composition and decomposition of shapes into component units
- Measuring
 - Quantifying, comparing and ordering
 - Using quantitative vocabulary
 - Using standard and non-standard units
- Patterning
 - Identify, describe and extend simple patterns
 - Creating patterns
 - Identifying patterns in the world
 - Identifying number patterns
 - Working with symmetry
- Classifying
 - Classifying natural objects
 - Sorting by a variety of attributes
 - Graphing

The math program aims to foster flexibility of thinking and the ability to apply understanding across many contexts. It also encourages children to experience the pure joy of playing with mathematical ideas, apart from practical implications. They gain skill in articulating their reasoning behind a solution, become intrigued by the different strategies used by others, and develop strategies (empirical or logical) to arbitrate differences in thinking.

Learning about the World: Science and Social Studies

We respond to children's keen curiosity about the world in all areas, encouraging them to ask questions, experiment with materials, predict outcomes and suggest possible explanations for phenomena. Beginning with very close observation of the natural environment, many opportunities are provided for children to freely explore and speculate as they develop a vocabulary to describe their thoughts and observations. Classification skills are honed as they begin to more thoughtfully and purposefully organize their observations.

As well as learning through direct experience, children have access to a wide stock of information books in many areas and are helped to access information through books and other sources.

In Junior Kindergarten, a number of topics in science and social studies are explored over the year as the children gain the maturity to learn together as a group. Topics are selected to be wide-ranging enough to accommodate a range of interests and learning styles and engaging enough to provide a common focus. As they acquire the social understanding to grasp different viewpoints discussion with small groups of peers enable children to deepen their own thinking and they incorporate other perspectives.

In children of this age we often see an engaging blend of magical thinking and fact-based reasoning as they work to make sense of their world.

Music

Both in classroom singing and in Suzanne's more formal music classes, there is a focus on pitch, rhythm, and pattern as children acquire both singing and listening skills.

They delight in playing with the sounds of the language as they compose rhyming verses to old songs and invent rhythmic chants.

Through reading the printed words of familiar songs, children begin to expand their vocabulary of recognized sight words.

Art

Art provides children with a unique opportunity for non-verbal expression. Experimenting with different media – including paint, clay, dye, collage, and drawing materials – children have daily and sustained opportunities to engage in art in the classroom. The exploratory process of creation is stressed over the final product as children gain control and learn the possibilities and constraints afforded by different media.

Junior Kindergarten children also work on projects with Tara in the Art Room once a week. This specialized space allows for a different kind of focus and ensures that all the children will regularly engage with art materials.

Expression through art allows children to explore the world of symbols and representation alongside more abstract patterning, shape, colour and texture. While a wealth of interesting vocabulary and imaginative storytelling often accompany art production, even more valuable is the chance to think in images rather than words.