

THE LAB SCHOOL NURSERY

Curriculum & Program Statement



A tree, as a symbol for the curriculum, reminds us that it is a living thing, adapting and growing in response to the children's own growth and development. We can name each branch of the program, while remembering that all the branches are connected; each area of a child's growth - physical, social, emotional, cognitive or academic - is connected to all the other areas. In play and in community a child's learning comes together in a whole experience.

All we can do is to speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can; all we can do is to look into each other's eyes and urge each other on to new beginnings. Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility.

- Maxine Greene

Goals for the Nursery Year

For all the children to...

~ Establish Themselves in this Community:

- having an experience of belonging in this community
- feeling secure at school
- developing trusting relationships with teachers
- making connections with peers and developing skills to work with them

~ Develop Self-Regulation Skills:

- developing the capacity for flexible adaptation resulting in positive self-esteem
- with teachers as resources
- with peers as partners in regulation
- balancing autonomy and support while gaining independence

~ Cultivate Curiosity and a Love of Learning

- with recognition of their unique interests and perspectives
- experiencing new things in a range of areas
- developing deep engagement with materials and ideas

“Self-regulation is the ability of [a child] to manage his own reactions to feelings within his body or to events around him.”

*- Williamson & Anzalone quoted in Endless Opportunities for Infant and Toddler Curriculum
by Sandra H. Peterson & Donna S. Wittmer*

Elements of the Nursery Program

Play

The early years curriculum is based in the belief that the most natural, effective and engaging vehicle for young children's learning is focused and productive play. As they absorb themselves with full commitment in a variety of carefully designed play activities, children make sense of their world and develop social, emotional and cognitive strengths which will be essential to later academic success. Among the multitude of benefits identified by researchers as directly resulting from children's play, we find enriched:

- language skills
- numerical and spatial skills
- motor skills
- creativity and problem-solving
- development of the imagination
- development of abstract thought and reasoning
- self-esteem, curiosity, and motivation to learn
- flexibility
- ability to recognize and accommodate other points of view

Developmentally appropriate and challenging materials combined with sufficient time and space allow children to formulate plans and pursue them in a sustained and purposeful way. A key role of adults is to enable, extend and support the play of children in the classroom as they gain knowledge and skill through direct experience. As children play, we aim to develop the persistence, focus and flexibility which will be essential to later academic functioning. The learning which takes place during the creation of a piece of art, a building structure or printed letters on a page takes precedence over the look of the finished product.

“Preschoolers use language, cognition, social, emotional and motor skills in dramatic play. These systems work together in play and self-regulation.”

- Marie Goulet, George Brown College

Emotional and Social Growth

By the time they reach their nursery year, young children have already gained many skills to regulate their expression of emotion, to maintain concentration and to heighten or lower their own energy as needed. In the classroom community they have multiple opportunities to practice and hone these skills. Teachers observe children carefully to balance their growing autonomy with their need for support.

While many preschoolers are highly empathetic, it is sometimes difficult for them to accommodate other perspectives. Through conversation with peers, mediated by explicit coaching from adults, they gradually develop this understanding and gain the ability to negotiate differences and incorporate the ideas of others into their own thinking. As they learn the rewards of sustained social play, they become increasingly motivated to curb their immediate impulses and to regulate their emotions and behaviour in the interests of maintaining interaction with peers. This learning about perspectives is supported and enhanced through imaginative role play and the opportunity to enter vicariously into the thoughts and feelings of story characters.

As the year proceeds, issues of friendship often gain importance for children. Close relationships among individual peers may develop, sometimes at the cost of general inclusiveness. Teachers work with children to both acknowledge the power and pleasure of these relationships while stressing that excluding others is unacceptable in a classroom community.

The program is designed to foster respect for individual differences in culture, development, interests and personality.

Learning Skills

In the early years of schooling, children are gaining independence and a sense of control as they learn to satisfy their own needs. Children are encouraged to take on tasks that they can manage independently, to make decisions, to ask for help when they need it and to work with others to solve problems. Gaining more control over their environment empowers them to try new things, take risks and experiment.

During the day, children attend to instruction in large and small group situations as well as in one-to-one interactions with adults. In less structured play settings, they have opportunities to be part of a variety of social groupings, moving from cooperative group play to more focused activities with one or two others, as well as engrossing themselves in solitary projects. They are acquiring the ability to flexibly shift among different kinds of learning structures, from open-ended activities which demand autonomy and decision-making to more structured, adult-directed tasks.

Language and Literacy

Language skills develop through both explicit instruction and in more informal play activities. Researchers have identified early skills in three areas which strongly predict reading and writing success in Grade One:

- ~ well developed **oral language** (especially vocabulary)
- ~ **phonemic awareness** (attentiveness to the sounds in words)
- ~ **awareness of print** conventions

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

Opportunities to develop these areas include:

- daily listening to stories/poetry/information books
- opportunities to re-tell or act out stories
- dictating stories to a scribe
- supported conversation and discussion
- play with language/word games/rhymes/singing
- imaginative/dramatic play
- alphabet games and puzzles
- talk about letter sounds and shapes
- use of text in the room (i.e. daily schedule)
- opportunities for “writing” of child-created messages, letters, signs, maps, etc.
- opportunities for children to see their names written in numerous contexts and, as they begin to show interest, to write their own names and other words

Children enjoy many stories, as well as non-fiction books, read to them from a teacher’s lap or in a group “circle time” on the carpet. In addition to this, nursery children spend time in the library with **Krista , our librarian**, once a week. Krista shares a wide variety of books with the children and, during their library time, each child chooses a book to sign-out and bring back to the classroom. Children also have the opportunity to hear stories in the library read aloud by parent volunteers each week.

Early Mathematics & Scientific Thinking

Children develop mathematical understanding through direct instruction, as well as more implicitly as they explore and apply math concepts in play (e.g. puzzles, peg boards, building) or in other applied settings (such as cooking). Scientific thinking develops as we capitalize on children's keen curiosity about the world in all areas, encouraging them to ask questions, predict outcomes and suggest possible reasons for phenomena.

Opportunities to develop mathematical and scientific thinking include:

- counting: rote counting and counting actual objects focusing on one-to-one correspondence (matching numbers to each object), numeral recognition
- sorting, classifying and comparing, patterning, measuring
- building, puzzles and other opportunities to explore spatial relationships
- sensory play with a wide variety of materials (water, sand, magnets, etc.); opportunities to encounter different tastes, textures, scents and sounds
- cooking and playdough-making
- encounters with the natural world
- discussion and accessing information through books

“Young children learn by doing, talking, and reflecting on their actions. They construct their own knowledge of mathematics using concrete materials and natural situations. When students have opportunities to solve problems through doing, they develop multiple sensing pathways in the brain.”

- from *Early Math Strategy: The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Math in Ontario*

Physical Development

Young children's sense of confidence and self-control are closely tied to their sense of physical mastery. Daily opportunities are provided for active physical play in the playground. Other opportunities for **gross motor development** include structured instruction in creative movement, drama and music classes. **Phys. Ed.** classes take place once a week with **Mike, our Phys. Ed. teacher.**

Fine motor development is rapidly developing in young children; as they acquire greater fine-motor control, children are delighted by their new abilities to attend to their own needs. These skills also support increasingly complex play and will be essential for academic skills such as writing.

Ongoing classroom activities which foster **fine-motor development** include:

Work with play-dough and other modeling materials, painting, drawing and "writing", beading, lacing, using scissors, glueing, work with puzzles, building with large and small materials.

Creative Arts

Children have a range of opportunities for creative expression and artistic skill development, working in the classroom and in structured classes offered by specialty teachers. 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. Expression through art allows children to explore both the world of symbols and representation and that of more abstract visual patterning, shape, colour and texture. Body control, dramatic expression and imagination are all fostered in pretend-play scenarios, as well as in Creative Movement, Music, and Drama lessons. Children have daily opportunities to sing.

Creative arts opportunities in the classroom include: painting, drawing, finger paint, play-dough and other modeling materials, collage, sketching, acting out stories, imaginary play settings ("house", etc.), singing, musical games. **Tara, our Art teacher**, visits our classroom two mornings a week to offer a guided art activity.

Creative arts opportunities outside the classroom include: weekly **Music** classes with **Suzanne** and **Drama** classes with **Sarah** (every other week). Also, **Creative Movement** with nursery teachers.

Diversity

“We partner with families to help children broaden their view of themselves and others by ensuring that they encounter mirrors of their own background and experience, as well as windows of difference.” - from the Lab School’s statement on diversity

In the Nursery we are aware that children are actively shaping their ideas about the world and of what is “normal”. In the classroom we work to create an environment where multiple voices can be heard and celebrated. We challenge stereotypes when they arise in the children’s thinking and play and we are constantly working to make our language more inclusive so that differences in gender, family configuration and cultural heritage (among others) are made visible. The work of understanding and making space for diversity cannot be done by any one person alone; we are aware, as teachers, that to do this better we need mentors, colleagues, and parents to share their knowledge and experiences. However, we don't expect young children to be spokespersons for the traditions, culture and family identities that they are in the process of learning. **If there is an aspect of your child's life – the words they use, the family they are part of, or the traditions they are learning and experiencing - that you think we may not know about at school, please don't hesitate to tell us about them.** As adults, together, we can help one another understand the rich and varied worlds that our children live in and we can support the children by providing links between their home and school experiences.

How Does Learning Happen?

Since the 1920's, the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, at the University of Toronto, has been a research and education centre focused on the understanding, education and care of young children. The school began with Nursery age children and, while expanding into an elementary school, has maintained its Nursery program for 90 years. In recent years, the Institute has had a direct relationship with the Ministry of Education, acting in a consulting role on such topics as full day kindergarten and play-based learning. Today, the Nursery continues to work with the Ministry, as we are licensed under the *Child Care and Early Years Act*. This act was put into place to ensure health, safety and quality experiences for children in care. The Ministry of Education has created a document to guide the programming and pedagogy of child care centres across the province. It is a pleasure to read this comprehensive document, entitled, *How Does Learning Happen?* and to see that, like the many decades of work at the lab school, it is based on current research and best practice from around the world. *How Does Learning Happen?* is a resource used by Nursery teachers to continue to refine and strengthen our practice.

<https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/HowLearningHappens.pdf>

“The focus [of early years curriculum] is not on teaching a body of knowledge or a predetermined set of topics. Nor is it centred on children’s achievement of a specific skill set. In the early years, programs are most effective when the content of learning is focused on supporting the development of strategies, dispositions, and skills for lifelong learning through play and inquiry. Through play and inquiry, young children practise ways of learning and interacting with the world around them that they will apply throughout their lives. Problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration, creativity and imagination, initiative and citizenship are all capacities vital for success throughout school and beyond.”

- from *How Does Learning Happen?* Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years