

Cathy R. Rozenberg

Curriculum Notes – “Academics”

Excellence in early childhood curriculum begins in discussions of the individual needs of the children in the program and ways of developing emergent curriculum to meet their needs, spark their curiosity, and encourage growth and development in all areas.

Before a child is developmentally ready to read and write and understand mathematical concepts, there are certain kinds of experiences and learning that need to happen first. To hurry the process in inappropriate ways can cause harm to a child’s developing the learning and processing skills necessary later on.

Our goal is to foster critical thinking – through hands-on exploration of materials, as well as relationships with other children and teachers and parents. By offering the time and repetition needed for children to experience mastery, we provide the materials, environment and teachable moments that facilitate that process and growth.

Emergent curriculum results from interactions between teachers and children, with both providing ideas and developing them to create attractive and worthwhile themes, processes and topics. Because this is also a values-based program, we make kindness, mutual respect, patience, charity, spiritual development and caring a priority.

Children learn best through play. It is in the process of using materials and exploring the environment that the learning and ‘aha!’ moments occur. To take away purpose from the child by telling them what to create and how to create it is to do them a disservice and to deny them creative expression and problem-solving opportunities.

That said, what will we try to do with your children here at school? Why is it that we don’t send a “project” home with each child every day? What are our classroom goals and objectives and how are we working to meet them?

Each child has a unique personality, pattern and timing of growth, learning style and family background. We use what we know about how children develop and learn, as well as what we know about the individual children in our classrooms, to create experiences and fashion the environment, to promote each child’s learning, comfort and development.

Because of the small group size and teacher/child ratio, our mindfulness in setting up the environment to be the ‘third teacher,’ and our understanding of the sensory, emotional and behavioral needs of our children, our curriculum reflects an appropriate level of stimulation and calm. Our attention is focused on facilitating effective communication, self-control and the safe expression of feelings and ideas. Without problem-solving skills

in these areas, the obstacles to successful mainstream educational objectives are difficult if not insurmountable.

How do we promote the reading and small motor skills children need to move toward kindergarten and first grade? Children develop large motor skills before they can master small motor skills. Most use auditory processing before they develop visual memory. We know that some children rely on auditory processing, others are visual learners, still others use kinesthetic feedback, and many are motivated to learn by their relationships with others. We strive to provide experiences that touch on all these learning styles. Some concrete and specific examples:

Play dough with various props, and other tactile materials such as sand, salt, shaving cream, water, snow, bubbles, clay, ooblec – develop small muscles, provide opportunities for language development, learning about cause and effect, and are soothing.

Art Materials – a large variety – techniques without precut cookie-cutter art – to develop problem solving, experiment with media to allow the child to develop through the stages of expression and communication with each material – language, small motor, use of symbolic representation (a precursor to writing), develop feelings of creativity, self-worth and autonomy, work with spatial relationships, balance, negative space, and use two and three dimensional materials to exercise different parts of the brain.

Puzzles and manipulatives – spatial development, concept of part to whole, kinesthetic and visual memory skills, math skills including seriation, sequencing and one-to-one correspondence.

Dramatic play – the opportunity to take on different roles – develop life skills, language skills, practice interacting appropriately with others. Research shows that the time spent playing during childhood strengthens a person in all areas of human endeavor. Regardless of our age when we encounter new experiences in life, if we have the capacity to play, then we learn and grow.

Science and Nature – language, exploration of cause and effect, developing hypotheses, graphing and measuring and tallying, developing a sense of wonder, curiosity, inquiry and eagerness to pursue why and what. In every area of the school, Science is happening. It can be found where children play with natural materials such as shells and leaves, dig in the sand or garden, make things bubble over again and again, experience volume, light, color, shadow, motions and wetness. Sounds, animals and plants, cooking, melting snow in the water table or a melting snowman on the playground – endless opportunities to expand experience and allow exploration.

Books – to read one on one, in small groups, and as a large group. Written stories provide the opportunity to develop pre-reading skills, but more importantly a love of books and

learning. Books teach information, foster sympathy, caring, understanding and open-mindedness. They allow for visual and auditory memory. They expand our horizons and fuel our imaginations. They allow us to play with language and sound and emotion and to begin to frame our experiences in story-telling traditions. We increase our understanding and knowledge and widen our perspectives.

Dictated stories – to practice using written language and understand its function. (Children don't automatically know that every time someone reads c.a.t. – it always spells cat). To see that every time we re-read what they have dictated or written – the corresponding spoken words do not change. It is amazing how the written word has special power to the child. A sign on a block building which reads: "please do not touch" is often respected (or at least remembered) more easily than a verbal request alone.

Writing Centers- opportunity to explore different writing materials (and grips), letters, stamps, to 'play' with written language so that later the child is ready to move to producing and using more sophisticated written symbols and expressions.

Blocks – math, spatial relationships, language (written and verbal), three dimensional representation, science (balance, gravity), cause and effect, (build it up and knock it down), geometry, sequencing, sorting, patterning, grouping, building horizontally and vertically, imaginative and dramatic play, motor skills.

Large Motor – movement games and equipment (indoors and outdoors), obstacle courses, dance, yoga, brain gym – all of this not only enhances strengthening and control of large muscles but provide the preamble to reading and writing (and physical health and expression). If you can't cross the midline of your body and space, writing and reading will be more difficult. If you don't have the opportunity to practice directionality through space, letter reversal may remain more than just a stage that all children pass through. By practicing motor planning (such as catching a ball – something with a get ready, step one, step two, etc), balance and motor control and spatial awareness, we develop the corresponding cognitive skills. Without these experiences, the 'academic' learning is much more difficult. Children explore their environments first by moving – and need repeated experiences before they are prepared for other forms of exploration.

"ABCs" – reading, dictating stories and graphs and charts, letter puzzles, writing with markers, crayons, pencils, stamps, using sand and salt and shaving cream to trace letters, making letters with blocks, sticks, our bodies, playing matching games, guessing games – and a gazillion other activities every day.

Where does the 'Reggio' vision come in to all of this?

The schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy are considered to be the finest example of Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the world, with emergent curriculum part of the

overall philosophy. The child is viewed as competent and full of potential. There is a learning triad – teachers, child, family – and the child learns within the context of these relationships. The teacher has a resource role, asks questions, collaborates with children and documents work. Each media the child explores offers a process of learning, and is viewed as a form of communication. Art is considered inseparable from the whole cognitive/symbolic expression in the process of learning. The different art forms and media are referred to as the “100 languages of children.” The goals of an emergent curriculum include encouraging creativity and cognitive growth through investigations. Overall, the goal is to nurture creative, curious children who have a good sense of who they are and of the world around them.

The environment is seen as the ‘third teacher,’ and is set up in such a manner as to foster learning, exploration and creative expression. As a therapeutic classroom this ‘third teacher’ must remain consistent with supporting the individual child emotionally and spiritually, a safe and secure space where the child is freed to be in the moment and empowered to be his or her best and true self.