

# Roosevelt Island Day Nursery

The Roosevelt Island Day Nursery provides preschool programs for the children of Roosevelt Island. The school was planned as a part of the new urban community on Roosevelt Island and the school's population reflects the rich ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity of the community. The Day Nursery was established by a group of Island parents in 1975 and incorporated as a not-for-profit educational corporation in 1979.

## OUR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

The aim of the school is to help children grow emotionally, socially, and intellectually in a warm and supportive environment. Preschool is the child's first experience in a long educational process. Growth will be a product of positive feelings about school and experiences that lead to a sense of accomplishment and success.

Growth depends on learning to master a task. If the child is to succeed, the task must be tailored to the child's level of development and to his/her individual needs.

There are predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in all areas of development (physical, emotional, social, and cognitive/intellectual) in the first years of life. Although all children follow a pattern, the timing of the growth and change will be different for each individual child. Since we know that there is a sequence to the learning process and that the child must master one task at a time in a reasonable progression, the child must have mastered the previous task in order to be ready to move on.

In planning programs that will promote this growth, we are guided by our knowledge of child development. The study of child development provides the basis for teachers to know what the child is ready to learn and what materials and experiences are appropriate to accomplish the task.

In the following sections, we will discuss what we mean by emotional, social and cognitive development. It is important to understand the components of these areas of development because they are fundamental in determining the framework and content of our programs.

### EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Separation — Children and parents must deal with the issue of separation. Parents must recognize, for their child and for themselves, the importance of helping the child move away from home for some portion of time. Children must feel supported and encouraged in their developing ability to stand alone.

The task for the child is learning to deal with the anxiety of saying goodbye to the parent. Of course, at the same time, the child is eager to enter this exciting

new world. The child must learn to deal with the ambivalent feelings of wanting to stay with Mommy and Daddy as well as wanting to be at school and then make the decision to say goodbye and allow them to leave.

The teacher is an understanding and caring adult but does not function as a substitute parent. The teacher is one of the first adults outside the family that a child relates to as an independent person, and that relationship can be very special and important.

Independence — It is in the preschool that young children first function as independent human beings. They learn to define wants and needs without depending on parents to intercede for them. They learn to see themselves as separate individuals.

The first task for children in school may be as simple as deciding what to do. “Do I want to paint or play with blocks?” The child must learn to make the decision, for example, to paint and to follow through by proceeding to the easel, getting a smock, selecting colors, deciding what patterns to put on the paper. This is a complicated set of learning for a young child!

Autonomy — the business of “growing up” is to grow in one’s ability to cope with the world. The growth of autonomy, of self-control and control over one’s environment, is one of the goals of the preschool years. Children cannot suddenly be “grown up,” however, and it is most important to know what the child is developmentally ready to learn without failing at the task.

Children usually show us what they are ready to learn if we are perceptive enough in our watching. Children will also show in their frustration what they are not ready to learn.

As young children struggle to put on their coats, for example, we can be ready to suggest an easier way to accomplish the job. But we still might not ask the children to tie their shoes without help. As toilet training is understood, we encourage the children to go to the bathroom as needed. But we still remind them to go to the bathroom before we go out because they are not necessarily old enough yet to anticipate their needs.

Self-Esteem — Children develop self-esteem as they have positive experiences which help them feel capable and successful. This positive sense of self also grows as children see themselves as members of a family and a cultural group and feel proud of their backgrounds.

The preschool classroom is filled with opportunities for children to demonstrate their increasing mastery of their world. Each time a child completes a puzzle, builds a block building with a friend, or helps clean up the room, the child feels a sense of accomplishment and pride. The school’s curriculum also supports this growth of self-esteem by providing the opportunity for children to do studies about themselves, their families, their different languages, their backgrounds and cultures, their foods, their holidays, and their community.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Peer Group Relationships — Social growth takes place in school. Children enter into a social community when they enter preschool. The child steps beyond the family unit and begins to live with other adults and children. The business of the preschool program is to help children develop productive relationships with their peers.

The task for the child, for example, is to learn to share the toys and materials with the other children, to take turns and to give up a toy to another child. “Sharing” does not come altogether naturally and takes time to learn. The teacher recognizes how difficult this can be for young children and reassures them, letting them know that their turn will come again. They will then develop trust and have confidence that they will not be cheated and will be able to learn to share. As they get older, they begin to ask each other if they can have the next turn without needing the teacher to intervene.

Feelings and the Meaning of Behavior — The preschool environment provides opportunities for the emotional understanding that leads to social growth. This includes learning to understand and respect individual differences and the needs of other through social interactions. A child reaches out in a gesture of friendship and it is returned. Aggressive gestures are returned too.

Children learn to respect the rights and feelings of others when they are treated with respect and understanding. Children must always be accepted regardless of their behavior. But beyond acceptance, the teacher helps children understand their feelings in order to facilitate better social interaction. If children can learn to understand the meaning of their actions, they can use that understanding to change their behavior.

The task for children is to learn to deal with personal feelings in a social situation. For example, one child knocks down another’s block building. Our goal is for the child to understand that while it is legitimate to feel angry with the other child, it is important to find an acceptable way to deal with the anger. The child will learn to express anger in words and not to hit or hurt the other child.

From Parallel to Interactive Play — During the preschool years children are making the transition from parallel to interactive play. Social growth comes with a growing ability to interact productively with others.

Children will learn, for example, that three or four children working together can create a “family” for dramatic play and that if they work cooperatively with others in a group, they can build a bigger block building. By the time children are three, four and five years old, they have begun to learn the social skills necessary to make friends and to live in a social community.

## COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Play: Discovery and Exploration — The job of the school is to promote cognitive development. In the preschool we understand that children learn by actively doing. Their method is play. Play provides opportunities for discovery and exploration. As children play, they experiment and test new ideas and skills. They grow in competence and in the ability to apply their learning to new situations. They learn to be creative and inventive problem solvers.

The school must supply stimulating materials for children to explore in order to promote the child's intellectual curiosity and growth. Through real experiences with a wide variety of materials, children develop new ideas and concepts.

Children need firsthand experiences to prepare them for abstract understanding. They must work and play with real materials in order to discover answers for themselves. For example, as children experiment at the water table, they discover the properties of fluids. As children cut an apple into halves and quarters, they begin to understand the concept of fractions.

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum — Curriculum must be appropriate for the age of the children in the group and must respond to the different needs, interests, and developmental levels of individual children.

Children can only learn what has meaning for them. That is why we surround children with real objects and talk about experiences that are closely related to them. Through a wide range of concrete, hands-on experiences, children expand their knowledge of the physical and social world. They are gradually able to grasp more complex concepts and ideas.

During the first few weeks of the school year, teachers observe the children as they explore their new room in order to assess their interests and developmental levels. If, for example, a few children are very good at puzzles, the teacher selects more complex puzzles to add to the shelf. As children begin to notice the different boats on the river, the teacher brings in books about boats and adds boats to the water table and block area.

## **THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

What kind of environment will promote the emotional, social, and cognitive development that we encourage in the preschool?

We know that the classroom must provide a wealth of materials to promote learning. But, beyond this, the structure of the classroom must be designed to support and encourage growth.

## ORDER AND FREEDOM

There is a crucial balance necessary in the structure of the classroom between order and freedom. Children need order which is supportive but not inhibiting, and freedom to explore within reasonable limits. It is this balance which contributes to the opportunities for growth.

A safe environment promotes freedom to explore. — The classroom is safe, calm, and clearly organized. Order provides security. The child who trusts the environment can move freely within it.

The task for children is to explore the possibilities available in the room. They are encouraged to sample the activities in all the areas: to do puzzles, to work with blocks, to draw and paint, to read books, etc. When children feel safe and comfortable, they will enter into new experiences and discover the potential in themselves.

An orderly environment promotes freedom of choice. — The classroom is a well-structured and orderly environment. Everything has a place and children know where to find what they want. The children are responsible for returning the room to order so that they help to maintain the structure themselves.

Freedom means understanding that one has control over one's environment. If children know where everything can be found, then the materials are truly available to them. They can be autonomous in the classroom and not dependent on the teacher to make their choices for them.

The task for children is to learn how to make productive choices. If the room is structured so that it provides clear-cut possibilities, children will be able to decide what they want to do. Children can decide, for example, to build a zoo with blocks. They will need to choose which size blocks they want to use and which animals to select to inhabit the zoo, and, later, to return the blocks to the correct shelves so that the blocks will be ready for other experiences.

Setting limits promotes freedom to grow socially and emotionally.— The setting of limits is an essential part of helping children learn self-control. Children initially rely on adults to help them keep their world orderly and safe. Within comfortable limits children feel free to explore and interact with others.

The teachers are clear about acceptable behavior. Rules are developed with the children as they are needed. Explanations are provided so that the rules are not seen as arbitrary. Rules that grow out of the children's experiences will be more readily understood and accepted. Rebellion grows out of arbitrary or unreasonable restrictions imposed by adults.

The task for young children is to learn to live in a social community with peers and with adults outside their family group. Children are motivated to learn how to "make friends" and this means learning the rules of social interaction.

Children learn to give as well as to take. Since children are not yet always able to share, there will be conflicts to deal with as they learn.

The limits and rules of the classroom provide the mechanism for dealing with conflicts. Teachers usually limit the number of children using an area so that children can interact productively and not become overwhelmed. Children learn to live by simple and understandable rules, for example, that they may not hurt themselves or each other or the materials in the room.

### **THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

The teacher's role is to respond to the needs and interests of the children. Teachers carefully observe and assess each child's level of development and areas of interest in order to set realistic goals and to provide experiences that will stimulate learning and growth. Teachers set appropriate tasks for the children and provide appropriate materials. The teacher's role is to guide, to encourage, and to support the learning process.

In the classroom, teachers treat children the way they expect them to treat others. The teacher becomes the model for the children's behavior. They are caring, respectful, honest and direct. They are excited about learning, responsive to the children's interests, enthusiastic and energetic. The teachers encourage active learning by asking questions, building on the children's experiences, and helping the children discover the means to find answers and solve problems for themselves.

### **THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The classroom environment is designed to promote active, productive learning. Classrooms are equipped with carefully selected educational materials that will promote the exploration and discovery necessary for learning at the preschool level. Room arrangements include clearly defined areas for blocks, dramatic play, manipulative materials, puzzles and table toys, art, sand and water tables, and books. More active areas designed for blocks and dramatic play are separated from quieter areas designed for book reading, story writing, or art. A carpeted area provides space for meetings as well as music and movement. Materials are readily available to be selected by the children and shelves are clearly marked so that children can readily clean up their room.

## DAILY ORGANIZATION

The day is divided into active and quiet times, individual and group times, indoor and outdoor times.

Work periods provide time for children to explore the materials in the room and to interact with their peers. The aim of the work period is to help children learn to make choices and to follow through to successful completion of the task they have selected. Children decide what they want to do, when they want to do it, and who they want to be with. Children move from one area of the room to another on their own. During work periods, children work individually or in small groups, either directly interacting with teachers or under their watchful eyes.

Each day, the entire class comes together as a group for meetings and stories. This helps children learn to live in a social community. At group times, children learn to communicate and cooperate as they listen and respond to each other and work together.

Transitions between activities are important times for emotional and social growth also. Children are given adequate time to clean up the room, attend to toileting routines, and to dress themselves to play outside. As children take responsibility for themselves and their room, they become increasingly autonomous, independent and cooperative.

## THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum stresses the development of the concepts and skills that will be needed for formal learning. Specific curriculum is developed in each classroom in response to the needs, interests, and developmental levels of the children. Each child's needs are assessed in order to set appropriate goals and to provide the necessary tasks and materials to stimulate learning.

Curriculum is integrated in two ways: (1) All areas of the classroom promote multiple learning possibilities. In the block area, for example, children expand language, math, science, and social studies concepts. Literacy is promoted as children make signs and labels for their constructions. Mathematical learning happens as children sort blocks by shape and size. Social studies concepts develop as children construct replicas of the world around them with blocks and block accessories. And, of course, children develop social skills as they work cooperatively building and playing together. (2) Any activity or project also provides opportunities for learning in more than one curriculum area. For example, a science activity such as cooking also provides opportunities for language development as children read and write recipes, and math development as children measure ingredients and graph their likes and dislikes.

The following is a brief description of the preschool curriculum.

### LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

The goal of the language and literacy curriculum in the preschool is to help children develop the readiness they will need to learn to read, write and to speak effectively. Language development is a continuous process and preschool children are growing in their ability to use language to think, to question, and to express their ideas about the world.

The program is based on the understanding that emergent literacy involves children's growing understanding that print communicates meaning. Children's emerging literacy is promoted by living in an environment full of talk and words and books. In school the children are surrounded by letters and words on signs and charts. They interact verbally with their teachers and peers, see and recognize names all over the room, participate in group discussions, read morning messages at meeting, dictate class experience charts and write individual stories and books. Children have journals for drawing and writing about their own personal experiences. They read good children's literature.

In the preschool classroom children have many opportunities to develop verbal skills as they work together with teachers and other children. They learn to share their thoughts and feelings and to find the words to express their needs and to reach out to others and solve social problems. As children work individually or in groups, they learn the words to communicate ideas, to try out new concepts, to ask questions and seek information.

We do not begin the reading and writing process by teaching the alphabet or the sounds of the letters. The learning starts as the child begins to understand that the symbols on the page have meaning — that their words can be written down and read back to them. Children are motivated to experiment with reading and writing when they are engaged in activities that are meaningful to them. They want to write their names on their work to show it is theirs. They want to write signs for the block buildings to identify what they've constructed and stories and books to convey their ideas. Children begin writing with their own invented spelling. They become eager to read and write when their experience provides them with opportunities for self-expression.

### MATHEMATICS

The goal of the mathematics curriculum in the preschool is to help children develop the basic mathematical concepts that form the foundation of more abstract work in the areas of number, geometry, patterning and measurement. Mathematics involves more than the mastery of counting. It includes the ability to think and reason logically, to understand patterns and relationships, and to solve problems. Mathematical concepts explored during the preschool years include sorting, classifying, comparing, patterning, graphing, measuring, estimating and predicting.

Young children need many real experiences in order to prepare them for abstract mathematical operations. Activities that teach math are incorporated into

everyday experiences. As the children play, they observe and discover the mathematical relationships that construct their world. Children develop the understanding of quantity, one-to-one correspondence, and relationship as they, for example, count the number of children present in class, apportion the snack, measure ingredients for cooking, create graphs, and find equivalences in blocks.

In the preschool classroom there are a wide variety of manipulative materials to promote the exploration of mathematical concepts including Unifix cubes, geoboards, attribute blocks, Cuisenaire rods, pattern blocks, sorting materials, counting blocks, pegboards, balance scales, and math games.

## SCIENCE

The goal of the science curriculum in the preschool is to help children understand the nature of the world they live in. Children explore and discover where things come from, how things work, why things happen. They begin to understand the scientific method as they question, hypothesize, set up experiments, record the results, and draw conclusions.

The source of the curriculum is the children's curiosity as they observe and interact in their world. They study the changing seasons. They plant bulbs and seeds, provide what plants need to grow, and observe and graph the growing plants. They care for animals and watch their behavior. Cooking provides the opportunity to understand chemistry as the children observe the changes that come about through heating and freezing the foods they prepare.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

The goal of the social studies curriculum in the preschool is to help children understand the social community in which they live. The curriculum starts with the children themselves and a growing understanding of their families and roles each family member plays. The children move on to explore the wider community outside their homes and school.

A multicultural curriculum develops naturally as the ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity of the Roosevelt Island community is incorporated into classroom activities. We observe that our families come from many places and speak many languages. The children learn, for example, how to say good morning in the many languages spoken in our homes, and how our different families celebrate the holidays and how to cook and eat the foods of the many different nationalities represented in the school.

Roosevelt Island is the perfect setting in which to explore what services a community needs. Trips provide opportunities to learn first hand about community resources. Children visit the supermarket, the library, the post office. They speak to the policeman, the bus driver, the librarian to find out what they do.

## ART

The goal of art activities in the preschool is to encourage the expression of ideas, creativity and feelings. Preschool age children, who cannot yet write words, express their ideas and feelings by drawing, painting, and using clay and other art materials. Art

experiences also provide opportunities for the development of the fine motor skills needed for writing as children use crayons, markers and scissors.

In the preschool classroom, art is an open-ended experience and children are exposed to and invited to experiment with a wide variety of media: paints of different sorts, crayons and markers, chalk and pastels, scissors and glue, different textures of paper and materials, playdough and clay, papier maché and plaster of Paris. Children use these materials to create pictures, stories and books and make murals for their classrooms.

### MUSIC

The goal of music in the preschool is to encourage creative expression and to develop an appreciation for the sounds and rhythm in music. The child's instinctive response to music and natural body movement become the basis for the music curriculum.

In the preschool classroom children have many opportunities to sing, to move to music, to listen to recorded music, and to create music on rhythm instruments and with their voices. Music brings the children together for productive group activity and also is used to help with transitions and to calm and soothe.

### MOVEMENT AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The goal of movement and physical education in the preschool is to help children use their bodies competently and confidently. Children need to develop gross motor and fine motor coordination as they work with large building materials such as blocks, hammer with wood, work with clay, move their bodies to music and creative movement, and so on. Outdoor activities include running, jumping, climbing, tumbling, balancing, riding bikes, throwing balls.