

### Overview

The pre-kindergarten curriculum is carefully designed to support and enhance the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of young children through active learning and collaborative problem solving. There is so much to learn in this first important year of DCD and there are several factors that come together to make the pre-kindergarten program an exceptional learning environment for four- and five-year-olds.

Structure and routine are key ingredients for success in pre-kindergarten, and our children thrive on having both a sense of control as well as independence in their learning environment. The pre-kindergarten program is well organized, and expectations are clear so that our students gain self-confidence as they navigate their way through the day. As a result, the classroom is calm, the children are happier, and the learning environment is productive. Our students feel great pride in being self-sufficient, independent problem solvers in their classroom.

In every pre-kindergarten school day, there is plenty of time for free play, as well as time for more guided activities. As the children navigate the social landscape during Choice Time, they are building their repertoire of social skills; sharing, taking turns, compromising, being tolerant, having patience, and learning the give-and-take of being a member of a group. The children are also refining their decision-making and time-management skills. The variety of play spaces appeals to all types of children and lends itself to skill and concept development. For example, symmetry and balance can be discovered in the block-building area, magnetism can be investigated at the Science Center, role-playing can be practiced in Dramatic Play area, and color mixing can be explored at the Art Center.

In the pre-kindergarten program, there is an integration of content areas, along with a multi-layering of skills. Reading, math, language development, art, social studies, and science are often intertwined in any given activity or innovative game. Concepts are not taught in isolation; rather they are woven into the program through a larger theme. Although themes may vary from year to year depending on class interests, the following have been time-tested favorites: Color Collection, Alphabet Collection, Multicultural People Puppets, Insects, Plants, and Seasons.

### Language Arts

Reading Readiness: In pre-kindergarten, the students develop a strong foundation of early reading skills through many different sources. First, the classroom is thoroughly labeled with names, schedules, news, and charts, so that students begin to recognize patterns in the print they see in their everyday lives. At the beginning of the year, students find their names all around the classroom, and learn to recognize words and pictures on the schedule board.

Learning to recognize both upper- and lowercase letters is an important component of reading readiness, and this is accomplished through a variety of age-appropriate interactive games, songs, and projects.

We also focus heavily on activities that reinforce the concept of rhyming, as this is an important indicator of a reading readiness.

The classroom library has a wide range of picture books, chapter books, books on CD, and “big books,” which the students are free to peruse during Choice Time. The teachers read theme-related books at story time, and generate questions and discussion based on the content. Listening to chapter books at snack time develops the ability to process the content without relying on pictures.

Expressive Language: The pre-kindergarten program is rich in language experiences. Through a variety of means, the children practice speaking in front of their classmates in both formal and informal situations. Each morning at circle time, there is an expressive language component when children are asked to reflect, comment, and make observations. Monday morning circle time begins with each child reporting his/her “weekend news,” which is documented on the large chart paper. This documentation teaches the children that there is a connection between the written and spoken word. Additionally, students are asked to participate in discussions relevant to a particular subject or theme. Several units of study in the pre-kindergarten program focus on the investigation of collections of items (Color Collection unit, Alphabet Collection unit). Objects brought from home serve as the foundation for important expressive language activities. The students are expected to: introduce their items using full sentences, describe their items using three or more descriptive terms, compare their items, and define the common attribute amongst a group of items. The teachers ask open-ended questions, such as, “Does anyone have an observation to make about this collection?”; “What do these things have in common?”; “Can you give us some clues about an object?” All of these activities enhance and reinforce vocabulary, sentence structure, and sequential thinking. We also understand that at this young age some children are naturally more vocal than others. To ensure that the quiet voices are heard as often as the stronger ones, we use “name cards” and the “talking stick” for taking turns.

The “treasure key” is also an expressive language tool. One child per day shares a show-and-tell item in front of the class. The child must articulate three important facts about his or her item and then respond to classmates’ questions and comments. Class mascots, such as Toot and Puddle, also provide expressive language experiences. In the spring, one student takes home a class mascot and returns the next day ready to share a few of the adventures from the overnight. Even the most hesitant students begin to feel confident speaking in front of the class as the year progresses.

Receptive Language: In the pre-kindergarten year, there are many new directions and routines. The students learn to listen to directions and act upon them. The children also build receptive language skills through many hours of listening to and processing stories. In the classroom, we

read many picture books, as well as some chapter books. From time to time, we will read chapter books during snack as a way to relax together. The children enjoy creating their own images in their minds. This strengthens their language processing skills and imagination. Each day the children enjoy recounting what event happened in the book on the previous day and are eager to hear the next chapter.

Writing: At the age of four and five, children are at many different levels in terms of their abilities to write letters and make representational drawings. For some, writing words is fun and exciting, while for others it holds no interest. There is space for both types of learners in the pre-kindergarten classroom. We first focus on the development of “power fingers” with activities that strengthen the fingers needed to hold writing utensils with improved strength. These exercises may involve such activities as molding with clay, ripping paper, and crumpling tissue. During daily Project Time, the students also engage in theme-related fine-motor development activities such as drawing, painting, and cutting with scissors. For eager writers, there are additional opportunities during daily Choice Time to trace letters, write letters, draw illustrations for stories, and write words to accompany the story.

### **Math**

Math skills are being built upon each day through hands-on teacher-directed activities and child-directed exploration.

Math Exploration: pre-kindergarten students have open-ended time for free exploration with math manipulatives and activities. Counting out loud to 20 and counting with one-to-one correspondence to 10 or higher is developed through use of colorful “counters,” number mats, and number/numeral matching tiles. Spatial relationships are developed through use of geoboards, puzzles, pegboards, parquet designs, and shape blocks.

Teacher Guided: Math concepts are a large part of circle time routines. We use counting to take attendance, check the daily schedule, and count the number of “smile cubes” earned. Collections of tangible objects brought from home (Color Collection, Alphabet Collection) allow for sorting, classifying, and categorizing the students’ items in meaningful ways. Items are placed on a representational floor graph, so the children can make observations and comparisons. Other math concepts reinforced throughout each theme include more/less, size, sequencing, shapes, and patterns.

Cooking: Every Friday, during “Friday Chefs” the students measure, sift, pour, and stir to concoct a new food item. The children must count and measure accurately. As with most pre-kindergarten activities, there is a layering of skills. For example, when making French fries, the students have to wash the potatoes (self-help), learn to use a peeler (motor planning), and cut the potatoes with a knife (fine motor).

### Science

Science Experiments: Weekly science experiments involve hands-on investigation often focusing on chemistry and the concept of change (think vinegar and baking soda!). Science experiments are often connected to the seasons or the weather. For example, in the winter time, students leave jars of different liquids out in the freezing weather to see what liquids will or will not freeze overnight. A rainy-day experiment focuses on what materials are porous and will let rain soak through versus which ones that are not porous. At the outset of each experiment, ingredients and supplies are introduced, and an essential question is posed. The students learn to suggest a hypothesis—a guess about what might happen. Once the experiment is complete, which may take a minute, an hour, or several days, the children reconvene and discuss what happened and how the hypotheses tested out. Making observations, articulating observations, and suggesting an explanation for what happened are all goals of this component of the science curriculum.

Explorations: Weekly Explorations are a highlight for the pre-kindergarten scientist, and the varied campus habitats are fodder for such lively adventures as catching frogs in the swamp, blowing cattail seeds in the marsh, tromping over and under downed trees in the woods, and hiking up the rocky ledge to the pine grove. Some explorations begin with an essential question, such as, “What will happen when I let go of my balloon on this windy day?”; “What will happen if it rains on my chalk drawing as compared to my marker drawing?”; “What will happen if I leave my colored paper in the sun for a few days?”

Nature Play: Nature Play is our outdoor “small world” space where children play with sticks, stones, bark, moss, leaves, and logs. A variety of activities take place here, ranging from designing little fairy houses, to making log roadways, and balancing timbers to make tall buildings. The pre-kindergarten students are able to combine science, math, language, and dramatic play all at once in this intimate backyard play space.

Science Themes: Several units of study are science-based, including Insects, Plants, Apples & Pumpkins. In the springtime, one of the pre-kindergarten classrooms is transformed into a butterfly pavilion with large gauze canopy holding over 40 butterflies. The classroom Science Center is also available for free investigation with the following supplies: magnets, snap circuits, rocks, crystals, shells, magnifying glasses, light board and color wands, sand trays and tools. Lastly, our classroom pets (a guinea pig, two fire-bellied toads, and two parakeets) are an essential part of our pre-kindergarten family and teach the children about caring for living things.

### Social Studies

The pre-kindergarten social studies curriculum helps students understand themselves, appreciate their connection with others, and view situations from another person's perspective. Throughout the year, activities that foster friendship, cooperation, compassion, and kindness are at the core of the program. Circle-time games revolve around working together and appreciating friends for their unique qualities.

A “Celebration of Children” theme focuses on projects that visually display our many colors, as well as literature that reflects different cultural traditions. The children begin a long-term project of creating life-sized “People Puppets.” Using materials gathered from the recycling center, each child designs and brings to life a multicultural puppet, deciding on the country that his or her imaginary puppet friend comes from as well as the kind of activities it enjoys. Over time, the dolls become personalized with costumes and other adornments. While collaborating on this project, the students and teachers may discuss the particular customs of the foreign country or go online to gather facts and images.

The most meaningful social studies activities are often initiated by pre-kindergarten families who are excited to share their cultural traditions. A study of Chinese New Year, prompted by a Cantonese student, involved learning about Chinese customs and giving students the opportunity to learn new songs, dances, art, and recipes. In another class, a German family shared their special Christmas celebrations. Every year, the specific backgrounds of the pre-kindergarten families shape the social studies curriculum.

### **Art**

There are artistic encounters every day in the pre-kindergarten classroom, as a part of both Choice Time and Project Time.

Project Time: Each pre-kindergarten student develops a Portrait Portfolio that begins with a “first day of school” portrait and ends with a “last day of school portrait.” Self-portraits are made using pencil and pen, crayons, watercolors, oil pastels, clay, wood, and items from nature. Students also learn about famous artists and draw self-portraits using their unique styles. Portraits are also drawn to mark special school days, such as holiday assemblies and class plays, etc.

Art projects vary from being teacher-directed step-by-step activities, to being more open-ended explorations, such as painting with watercolors, cutting and gluing paper sculptures, and creating with recycled materials. Through these activities, pre-kindergarten students learn about the concepts of line, shape, and color.

The Art Center: During free play time, the children have many opportunities to expand their creative repertoire. The paint easels, art center (which is stocked with paper, markers, crayons, glue, scissors, and recycled materials) and clay bins are always available.

### **Physical Education**

The primary focus of pre-kindergarten PE class is movement education and skill development. Students’ varied skill levels are built upon through noncompetitive activities that stress cooperation and creativity. The students perform tasks that involve different degrees of

eye-hand and eye-foot coordination. The skills and challenges that are presented to students increase in difficulty as the year progresses. Manipulative skills include throwing, catching, kicking, collecting, striking, punting, dribbling, and volleying. Gymnastic and rhythmic activities include balancing, tumbling, vaulting, creative movement, and swinging on ropes. Fitness activities include jumping, running, push-ups, sit ups, and stretching. Students are also exposed to fitness components of the muscles, bones, heart and circulatory system.

### **Music**

Through music education, pre-kindergarten students become fluent in the language of music as artistic, intellectual, and cultural expression. Performing, creating, and responding to music provide the means for development and growth. A thematic approach to singing, movement, musical games, and songs forms the core of the primary school music program. The essential elements of music (beat, contrast of sound—silence, loud-soft, fast-slow, long-short— and various instrumental and vocal timbres) are taught regularly, and specific forms of music, such as folk, popular, ballads, art songs, and nursery songs and rhymes, are all explored within the program. Performing in front of an audience is a major part of the vocal music program here at DCD, and the primary school children participate in the Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Holiday Assemblies as well as in their Class Play during the spring term.

### **Woodworking**

The pre-kindergarten year in the woodshop is one that is full of exploration, fun collaborations among students and teacher, and the beginning steps of what is known as “hand-craft.” One objective is for the students to become comfortable and skilled at utilizing the coping saw. This basic tool is a cornerstone tool within the program and one that a student will use throughout their entire DCD woodshop career. Additional goals and objectives are to gradually learn how to sustain focus and effort, establish an ongoing sense of curiosity for woodworking, and start to develop a sense of ownership for one’s project. Students learn how to work in a slow, methodical approach while at the benches. Working in a safe and thoughtful manner is stressed throughout the year as well as being kind, supportive, and thoughtful toward classmates. Projects are simple in design with the emphasis placed on discovering and learning about both the wonderment of wood as a material and the basic skills needed to manipulate wood to achieve the desired form. Several projects, such as Peppy the Penguin, Bogie the Bear, and seasonal shapes, are made during the course of the school year.

### **Drama**

The pre-kindergarten class presents an original play during the spring term. The drama teacher writes the play especially for that particular group of students. Attention is given to every child, and they all have equal speaking roles. The class teachers assist the students on stage as narrators or extra characters. The children are involved in every step of putting on a play, from painting scenery, to designing the programs, to learning their lines and songs. The children

learn to speak their lines clearly and develop confidence to perform on stage in front of an audience.

Students are asked the question, “How do I become an actor?” They learn four lines from memory with a focus on speaking loudly and clearly and also learn two or three stage positions. They develop confidence to face the audience when delivering lines and listen to the narrator’s cue lines in order to deliver their own lines at the appropriate time. The Class Play focuses on process as well as final product. Students rehearse in the performance space for fifteen days before performing the play for their parents and the whole school community. By rehearsing on the stage for fifteen days, students are given the opportunity to feel comfortable in their surroundings and are able to develop spatial awareness by moving around the stage. The goal of the class play is for the students to develop confidence speaking in public and to learn team-building skills by working with their classmates.

### **Library**

The children visit the library for one half-hour period per six-day cycle. To enhance reading readiness, they are exposed to a variety of books. The story time and other activities are designed around themes. Each child chooses a book to take home and share. As the year progresses, longer and more detailed books are shared with the children. This is to help them build a longer attention span and better memory retention. A goal is to instill a life-long love of reading and books. To quote Caroline Feller Bauer in *This Way to Books* (1983), “While the primary objective of these programs is to introduce a group to literature, each program also offers an opportunity to improve listening skills, art experiences, or subject awareness.”