

Preschool: Not Just for Kids.

I remember the day when I realized my first born child's strongest personality characteristic was timidity. It was a cold winter day and we were hanging out indoors. She was about 3 months old and just starting to push herself up with her arms when she was on her tummy. I decided to take out some of the toys that were now age appropriate. One of them was a sort of spinning top that when pushed down twirled around and three balls inside would spin too. It wasn't fancy. It had no bells and whistles. I put it down in front of her and set it whirling. She cried and cried. I stopped the toy and she stopped crying. I started it again and she started crying again. It was clear to me: my baby was afraid of baby toys. It scared her so intensely that every time she looked at it from then on she burst out into tears. Let's see, what else was she afraid of...guitars, saxophones, the sounds of snoring, new people, new places, and the list goes on.

Okay, maybe you're thinking I've got a child here who needs some intervention and you're right. I thought the same thing, especially since I knew she would be starting school at the tender age of 3 ½. Being an elementary school teacher I know how important it is for a young child to be exposed to social situations so that their social skills can start developing before formal school starts. With her personality and an early start in kindergarten I could feel the strikes against her. I needed to build up this kid's resilience. I sent her to the Co-operative Nursery School of Almonte and it was the best thing I could have done for her.

There are several reasons why I am so pleased with having chosen preschool as the first step for her education as well as having done so in a co-operative setting. First and foremost is the chance for a child to interact and socialize with other children. In Chlöe's case this meant developing relationships without me around. Also, preschool aged children are in such a state of mental readiness and a preschool environment capitalizes on this quality of children aged 2 ½ to 5 years.

In the pre-Preschool days Chlöe would run away from other children she didn't know. She would do the 'mommy leg grab' sometimes concealing her face in inappropriate places. The very first day of preschool was both exciting and nerve wracking. I dropped Chlöe off and of course, she cried. I attribute my not crying to the reassuring looks and tender but steady manner in which the teachers, Mary and Lucie, held Chlöe's hand and brought her into the classroom. They searched for an activity she liked and distracted her enough that I could leave the classroom. I was a bit hesitant I must admit but was entirely surprised when Chlöe's crying subsided after about 5 minutes (yes, I waited outside and listened!). Looking back it is almost hard to believe that Chlöe cried at all at preschool. She has become more outgoing. People often say they can't believe the change that has taken place in her. My response is always, "Thank God for preschool!".

Not only has she become more outgoing but I have been witness to her ability to share so kindly with others (although for some reason not with her younger sister). When at play she suggests ways of problem solving. When others are sometimes stuck and ready to use their outdoor voices, Chlöe will sometimes say, "Why don't we take turns?" (still

nominating herself to go first). Another favourite is “When you’re finished can I play with that?”. Preschool has taught her important social skills like turn taking and sharing. It is not only in Chlöe that I see this progress but in other students too. These skills will help prepare her and her peers for kindergarten by giving them the ability to develop healthy relationships quickly.

Not only does preschool improve socialization but it also refines other important skills such as early math development and provides the foundation for literacy. Through games using matching, building with blocks, recognizing numbers, and sorting and grouping objects, you can almost see the neurons firing and the pathway for a love of math being paved in the preschoolers’ brains. Early literacy is taught through rhyming, patterning, exposure to poetry and songs. A portion of every day is spent in circle time where these activities are the focus.

Along with all the above mentioned benefits of preschool, sending your child to a co-operative preschool adds another dimension to the experience for both parent and child. These include parent helper days, involvement in your child’s education and a chance to be a member of a team and community.

Parent helper days are always highlighted on our calendar and adorned with stickers. This is the time about once every 2 months, that I take my turn helping in the class and doing the little things that help the day run smooth. Chlöe looks forward to the special time spent together and I’m pretty sure she will have fond memories of these times when she is older. She benefits from knowing that I am involved in her education and I benefit from observing the way experts interact with the children and handle situations that I fumble through. Secretly though, I think Chlöe’s favourite part is being able to choose the snack for that day.

Not only are you involved in the little things that help the school run smoothly but you can also choose to be a part of the committee that helps make larger scale decisions about the school. This year I have volunteered to be on the Executive Committee that does just that. I have only attended a few meetings thus far but know that I will thoroughly enjoy the experience. Being a stay at home mom it helps keep my mind active and it also provides the sense that I am helping create the ideal learning environment for all the children. There is also evidence that shows parent involvement in a child’s education is a precursor for future academic success.

A preschool also benefits from having a co-operative philosophy. This type of setting allows the classroom to be fortified with the perspective of many different people. Many parents have something to offer the children. Parents that are involved in this type of preschool feel as though they are part of a team and part of the community. These new ideas and offerings create a unique learning environment for the children.

I am happy to report that Chlöe will attend the Afternoon program this fall, which is a great alternative to Kindergarten. This program follows the Junior Kindergarten curriculum and is tailored to individual skills and abilities. I am looking forward to

seeing the change in her as the months go by. I am also happy to say that my second child will soon begin her education in the Core program at the Co-operative Nursery School of Almonte as well. Although not as timid, I know that she will benefit just as much from the experience as her sister did. I can't wait to see her social skills develop and her love of math and reading expand. Preschool has been fun and exciting. The kids benefit, the parents benefit, and the school benefits.

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For more information on the school and its programs please visit www.almontenurseryschool.ca or call 613-256-0286 to register your child for the 2008/2009 school year.