

What does Learning Look Like at Granby Nature Preschool and Kindergarten?

Letter to parents February 9, 2024

There has been some discussion recently about what learning looks like at Granby Nature Preschool and Kindergarten as well as interest in how our vision reflects our reality. The following may help to further understand what and how we support learning, and what we feel is developmentally appropriate (and essential) for young children.

To begin with we are using the CT Early Learning Development Standards as a framework. We have added some specific examples from our program to highlight how we meet those domains, oftentimes in ways that are not standard activities in more traditional environments.

Domains of growth and development for children from birth to 5

The CT ELDS refers to eight domains of growth and development:

- Cognition
- Social and emotional development
- Physical development and health
- Language and literacy
- Creative arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social studies

The italics sections below are taken directly from the CT ELDS website:

Social and emotional development

Learning to identify, express, and manage emotions helps children to develop healthy relationships. Early learning experiences should support children to:

Develop trusting, healthy attachments and relationships with primary caregivers and peers

Build their self-regulation, improving skills like focus and patience

Learn methods to express, recognize, and respond to emotions

Develop self-awareness

Foster healthy social relationships

At GNPnK we are intentional about developing a safe environment where children learn to recognize and express their feelings and those of others, and learn to be part of a learning community. Some of the ways we do this are

-Morning circle: Children are included as they are recognized by name, share greetings and learn about what the day will look like. They develop both a sense of belonging, sharing and autonomy as they are invited to share ideas and feelings, and listen to those of others. They learn to focus, take turns and share in the processes of democratic living.

-Feelings Board, Mindfulness and Gratitude Activities: In order for children to feel safe and to develop self-regulation (managing strong emotions, making safe choices, controlling impulses, self-calming, adapting to changes in routine, and focus)

clear expectations,

We help children recognize big feelings (practice mindfulness) through stories (sometimes seeing a familiar situation unfold through another child takes the burden off of a child in order to facilitate awareness), discussion, giving children “feeling” words to express their emotions, and giving them opportunities to show their feelings through their own charts. We also do mindfulness activities such as lying down, taking deep breaths and thinking positive thoughts (a happy place, a great person to be with). Over time the

repetition of these strategies helps children to recognize and practice them on their own. At this point helping a child with big feelings to calm themselves might only require asking them to take some deep breaths. We also believe that simple redirection and working with families to help children are important.

-Sharing toys, tools, sleds and helping one another to use and enjoy them. Building dams, fantasy communities, spaceships and snow tunnels develop negotiation skills, cooperation, planning, sequencing, decision making and symbolic thinking.

-We seek out teachers who help children model community living by inviting them to go beyond specific lessons to help in all aspects of running a program for young children. Our hope is that children learn from the compassion, caring and multiple duties the adults around them do to maintain a healthy and safe environment.

-Developing awareness of the environment, and developing a sense of responsibility to our earth. This includes many aspects of daily living, beginning with reuseable food containers for our snacks and lunch, recycling materials, and caring for animals as when we brought our holiday trees to the goats to eat or make bird feeders for our feathered friends in winter.

Physical development and health

Keeping young children active and healthy builds a strong foundation for learning and helps build healthy habits for life.

-In both indoor and outdoor activities we provide a balance of active and restful experiences to both release energy and find calm to self-regulate.

-Outdoor play, exploration and discovery in our forest, meadows and streams provides multilayered learning experiences. The fresh air, the many aspects of the weather and seasons and the variety of textures, scents, sizes and shapes of our environment enhance mood, promote multi-sensory engagement, and invite large motor engagement as well as promoting exploration and discovery. Risky play (under supervision, of course) is also important for confidence building, building trust and a sense of autonomy.

-Music and movement activities such as running, hopping and jumping activities and games all develop both large motor muscles and healthy living.

-Small motor muscle development (and we would add coordination) happens in many ways throughout each day - opening food containers, manipulating play doh, cutting, coloring, making bird feeders, zipping, and putting on socks and shoes. These activities are all pre-writing skills, as writing includes the physical act of using and coordinating small finger muscles.

-We encourage children to eat healthy, non-processed foods. Healthy eating is modeled by one another and becomes the norm at snack and lunch.

-Children build healthy routines within the structure of the day with healthy eating, bathroom procedures, hand washing, dressing properly, and mask wearing, if needed. These routines and habits are also important learning experiences for children.

Language and literacy

[Young children learn] *to understand and use language to communicate. Eventually, they begin to understand that pictures and words convey meaning. Key areas of development include:*

Understanding language

Using language to communicate

Appreciating books

Drawing and beginning to write

-Teachers at GNPnK realize that communication includes both receptive (receiving) and productive (expressing) thoughts. We also believe that communication in young children takes many forms:

-Receptive communication (listening skills) happen when we talk and read often to children. These are natural parts of our daily routines. We also realize that listening can occur with movement, visual cues, and finger manipulation. Some children listen while moving about; others many listen by holding a fidget toy; still others enjoy having a visual clue to help guide their comprehension. We try to honor those pathways to listening for our children.

-Productive communication occurs through speech, movement and gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, movement activities and art. When children talk we give them time to find the words to talk, explain and sequence their thoughts. This often takes a while, but patience while they learn to speak their thoughts is an important key for their development.

-We create word banks, explain the meanings of words, and repeat and clarify what children say to model vocabulary and grammar.

-In our inquiry-based lessons we give children opportunities to say what they know, wonder, think about a topic to engage them in active learning (instead of just listening to a lesson).

-We create an environment for other pathways of communication, as well. For example, we give children the opportunity to express their feelings through colors or pictures. Children describe their family and weekend activities with drawings. These are symbolic

representations of thoughts, and through them, children also develop the concept that sounds and written words are symbolic representations.

-We have a growing and impressive library of books that we read aloud or that are available for children to look at. These include information books about farms, nature, animals and the weather; rhyming books, how to books, and many others.

-We introduce beginning sounds at circle time and practice those sounds and their matching letters throughout the day.

-Unlike public kindergartens these days, we do not have learning to read as a standard goal. Reading through this document about what and how children learn at GNPnK is an indication of the many important areas, concepts and skills young children need to build a strong foundation for further learning, including reading. This is not to say that some children do learn to read at an early age, but we feel strongly that it is not for every child. Research indicates that when 8-year-olds who began reading early do no better on reading tests than do those who wait. We join many who believe that children are not yet developmentally ready for the sitting and visual focus required for reading. And, as stated above, there are many other areas of learning that are both more age-appropriate and essential for young children.

-Writing develops naturally, as well. We encourage children to understand the concept of symbol to paper through drawing, scribbling, using color and holding and using different writing, drawing and painting implements. Children “write” grocery lists, trace or color in letter shapes, and practice writing their names. They dictate thoughts like what/who they are grateful for and see their thoughts written on paper for them. They create their own books and stories with their own “writing” and drawings, and dictations.

Mathematics

The natural world around Holcomb Farm is a wonderful facilitator for emerging math skills. Using pine cones, leaves, rocks, twigs, grasses and trees we learn shapes and sizes, we compare them (more/less; bigger/smaller; taller/ shorter), we sort and classify, we count and sequence, we add and subtract. Children also learn and use position words like up/down; over/under; around/through; next to; and far/near.

-Inside children measure their bodies with objects like shoes, and compare and analyze with different sized shoes and heights of classmates. Using number words, prepositions and the other mathematical terms listed above are a part of everyday interactions.

-As part of our body investigations we also learn about insects and their bodies, and count and compare body parts. (The thinking routines that accompany these kinds of investigations are repeated throughout the learning process and deepen the thinking experience for children over time).

-Our daily morning circle routine includes talking about the date and the weather, and counting the number of days we have been in school, and practicing counting by ones and tens.

-Through pretend play such as with cardboard boxes, children learn shape and spatial concepts as they find ways to connect shapes together to create such things as submarines, space ships, animal hospitals, and grocery stores.

-Cooking activities require counting, measuring, sequencing, adding and subtracting.

-Sharing snacks such as cupcakes or markers for an activity requires children to match 1:1 - a developing concept.

Science

Children are born scientists. They begin to understand the world, other people, and themselves through active exploration and experimenting.

The world of exploration, experimenting and discovery is an essential, ongoing part of learning at Granby Nature Preschool and Kindergarten. We infuse children's natural curiosity with intentional (but organically occurring) thinking steps to guide learning about their world.

-Part of this process includes mindfulness activities where we guide children to look, listen, and feel slowly. This invites deeper learning and questions (the essence of scientific inquiry).

-Inquiry-based learning opens doors to student insights and understandings. As children explore mud, pine cones, changing leaf color, busy ants, emerging butterflies we use queries such as "What do you think is happening? Would happen if?" "Why do you think..." "What else do you see, hear, feel?" We often use the thinking process with KWLE (What do you KNOW, What do you WANT to know, What did you LEARN, What ELSE do you want to know?)

-We learn about the concept of change such as the weather, the seasons, physical properties of water, mud, life cycles. Children have a mud kitchen outside, puddles to jump in, mud to shape into highways, ice and snow to explore.

-We learn about sequences such as from seed to apple, from tree to syrup, from goat to cheese.

-We learn about interdependence such as with squirrels and oak trees, and apples and bees.

-We learn about our own bodies and compare them to animal bodies, and we compare our own communities to those of ants and bees.

Some of this learning is intentional - that is, we introduce concepts and provide opportunities for exploration and discovery; some of it comes organically/spontaneously, as when a butterfly emerges from its cocoon.

Social studies

The focus of social studies is learning a sense of self and the surrounding world. Through social studies, children begin to understand their community and their place within it.

-Learning about “self” is an essential component in preschool and kindergarten. At GNPnK children learn their name, age, birthday, and address; they make self portraits; learn about their senses through such activities as playing and experimenting with water and rice tables, mud, clay and play doh; doing feelings awareness activities and discussions about their family, and what families look like.

We read books about children, their identity and feelings; and books about families and what they look like, focusing on how we are all alike and how we are unique.

-Our school community and our roles and places within our school, and well as our town is also an essential component of early childhood learning. In school we discuss guidelines, and ways which we all have roles to support our learning environment. We provide one to two Immersion Excursions a month with parents so that children see that their parents are also part of their learning community. Parents model questioning, enthusiasm and information, as well. Our Holcomb Farm community of cleaners and Granby Public Works team, and our Granby community including the Granby Ambulance Association, and visits to an apple orchard, goat farm, maple syrup ‘farm’ and nature preserves helps children to see various ways people in our town community contribute to our well being.

Another way we strengthen the concept of community is through the lens of ant, bee and beaver communities. Children see similar patterns and relationships through animal communities as they learn about the roles individual insects and beavers play for the good of the whole community. In addition to building on higher thinking skills, children learn how the concept of “community” compares with our own.

Cognition

Cognition is the process of learning and understanding new things. Children's thinking and learning skills build throughout childhood and include: Memory, Reasoning, Problem-solving and Symbolic representation.

-Morning circle is often a time to practice rote learning and memorization of their name, age, birthday, address; and of the alphabet, numbers, days of the week, months and seasons. This is also an opportunity to discuss how boundaries (rules) keep everyone safe and included. We seek to include children in problem solving of issues such as differing feelings about where to go outside, what to do, and solving altercations with one another as well as helping children understand why we have guidelines.

-Symbolic representation unfolds as children role play, build structures from cardboard boxes, create mud pies, and "write" books. Our days are filled with imaginative play both indoors and out which also involves cooperation, planning, sequencing, motor skills, patience and the time needed to see a creative process through.

Creative arts

Giving children a chance to create is a great way for them to express themselves, explore, and learn to problem-solve. Creative Arts include both creating and responding to art such as music, visual arts (painting, sculpture), drama, and dance. The creative arts also support other areas of development including:

Social and emotional development – Children can relax, focus, feel successful, and express their feelings.

Language and literacy – The creative arts offer an active way of communicating. Children can also discuss their art and add words to it (on their own or by talking to an adult).

Cognitive – Children compare, predict, plan, and problem-solve when creating and responding to art.

Physical – Children use small motor skills to paint, write, glue, use clay, and make collages. They use large motor skills to create large sculptures or dance.

Children benefit from exposure and practice in all types of art, including music, visual art (drawing, painting, sculpting), roleplay and open-ended play, dance, poetry, and more.

-Creativity is an integral part of every day at GNPnK. Opportunities for expression through the arts are both intentional and spontaneous. Art materials are available, and many of our creative experiences are integrated with other areas of development. Yoga and movement might include hopping like a frog, flying like a bird or a flower emerging from the ground or a bud. We sing songs about the alphabet, numbers, seasons, animals and feelings. We express our feelings using color. We learn about geometry through drawing, pasting, organizing and coloring shapes. Outside children often further their understanding after learning in circle or from an excursion. Children created their own beaver lodge in the woods after a visit to one; built an ant colony and bee hive; and, after observing the town public works department, they dug trenches and highways.