

4AM 2nd Floor Classroom Information

Hello Everyone,

Welcome! We're glad you're here. Another year is upon us, and we are so excited to be getting started. This letter is intended to summarize what we will cover in the parent meeting, and to elaborate on a few things. It is a lot of information, but we hope it will be helpful to you.

As we embark upon another year, we look forward to building relationships with you and your child. We tend to get to have more contact with one another at the beginning of the school year, but we want to let you know that we are here for you throughout the year. As things come up for your child and your family, please let us know, as it will help us have a fuller understanding of your child's experience. For example, if you are getting a new sitter, your child is transitioning out of a nap, or a beloved pet passed away, jot us a note or send us an email to let us know.

We consider the experience to be a partnership between parents and teachers and look forward to the conversations we will have together about your child. It is important to us that you keep in touch. The best way to contact us is via the Park West email (parkwest@parkwestcoop.org) with "Attn: Joseph and Amanda" in the subject line. We will get back to you as soon as we can. You can also call the office (773 327 1115) and leave a message and we will call you back as soon as possible. Arrival and dismissal are often pretty hectic and it is usually difficult for us to be available to have even quick conversations because our focus is helping children through those major transition times. However, we love notes and find they can be a great way for you to give us information!

We will inform you about classroom happenings through newsletters and 20-minute parent teacher conferences, which happen formally twice a year (once in the fall and once in the late winter/early spring). We will notify you when the sign-up sheet becomes available in the office. We can also make ourselves available for informal conferences and conversations as the need arises throughout the year. Please know we will contact you if we feel the need to discuss any part of your child's school experience or development.

The rest of this letter will cover some of our philosophy, our approach to education, procedural information, as well as some tips and expectations. It does cover some of the same topics that are addressed in the handbook, but will differ in some spots to address our specific classroom's norms and guidelines.

Curriculum: We know many parents have questions and expectations about what their children should be learning and how they will go about learning those things. Park West's approach to education is based on constructivist theory, and more specifically social constructivism. What that means is that we believe people construct knowledge based on their experiences, and that those experiences are often highly influenced by the people around them. In order to

understand something, one must have the opportunity to explore, ponder, play with, experiment, hypothesize, theorize, and question. Being in a classroom environment provides the opportunity to do those things in the context of a group of peers.

The way this theory is put into practice at Park West is largely through our play-based curriculum. We do not view play as separate from learning; in fact, our practice is shaped by the thinking that the most meaningful learning takes place when children can access information that is woven throughout their experience. Our socialization has dichotomized the concepts of work and play. We are taught that if we are doing one, then we are probably not doing the other. However, we do not believe this to be the case, especially in the way young children learn. Play is the medium through which children approach the learning process. We believe that “learning in the context of meaning” allows children to access knowledge and information they will then be able to apply in a variety of situations, instead of learning a concept in isolation (i.e. letter of the day), in which case the information learned might not be so transferable. Our goal is not to transmit information from adult to child, but instead provide an environment where children can be immersed in explorations and construct knowledge based on their experience. The teachers are there to provoke this process: to ask questions, make observations, provide assistance, create stumbling blocks, refer a child to a peer, help in the process of reflection...and so on, and so forth.

Learning in the context of meaning is an idea that looms large in our classroom. We seek to utilize the natural curiosity and wonder of children. We want our students to have opportunities to explore what is meaningful to them, which leads us to another catch phrase at Park West: “the child is the curriculum.” We use what children are interested in as a tool to access and help form critical thinking and problem solving skills. To meet children’s interests, we are very intentional in our creation of the classroom environment. We create a space that invites exploration and stimulation.

However, all of this does not exist in a vacuum. Sometimes the most challenging thing for children can be figuring out how to access all of these experiences in the context of a group. They will inevitably run up against someone who thinks differently than them, has different ideas, or a different point of view. This is what we find so exciting! When conflicts arise, we see it as an opportunity for children to expand their thinking. Relating to another person requires flexibility of thought and that takes practice. We are here to help kids practice accommodating ideas that may seem discordant with their own.

One of the realities of group life is that your child will inevitably be exposed to behaviors, ways of approaching the world, and rule systems that differ from what they are accustomed to at home. You, as parents, will also experience the same thing. In our role as teachers, we do not see our job as one to mandate norms or standards, or to pass judgment on children’s home cultures. Beyond protecting everyone’s physical and emotional safety, our goal is to promote tolerance and understanding through expanding awareness. When sensitive issues, like birth, death, religion, gender, toileting, sexuality, anatomy, and marital status come up (and they will), we do our best to listen and acknowledge what children have to say of their own personal

experiences related to these issues in a way that does not impose our values on them. In the end, hopefully the message is that a lot of things get done in a lot of different ways, and that is all okay.

In addition to being introduced to different ways of doing things and thinking, despite our best intentions, kids will also hit, bite, punch, spit, kick, pull, and call each other names. Certainly not what we are trying to instill, but it is behavior we expect. Developmentally, as children are working on mastering verbal communication, there are times when physicality is an easier way to communicate. We take this very seriously, but tend towards helping children figure out a way to translate their emotions and physical behavior into words and help them to notice the effects their physicality had on the other person or object. These things are going to happen and it is what we are here for - - to help kids figure it all out, including the stuff that can feel messy and bad, like anger and sadness.

Here is an example of all the parts of a typical day at Park West (however, not necessarily in the order that your child's class will experience them):

Arrival: All children must wash hands before entering the classroom. We use the bathroom at the end of the corridor before the stairs that head up to our classroom. A teacher will always be there to greet children and assist them as necessary.

Free Play: Free play is the time when children are able to explore all parts of the classroom based on their interests and desires. We will have specific activities set up for children to engage with (art projects, tactile materials, the easel), as well as areas of the classroom that invite more open-ended play (dramatic play in the play house, the block rug, sand and water tables). There are places to play with others, or on your own; materials that lend themselves to creativity, and others that have more structure. There are opportunities to focus on fine and gross motor skills, to write, to read, to count, to experiment. We seek to have our environment be one where children are able to explore autonomously. We want them to access the materials that interest them. Thought and planning go into what we have available in our classroom, and as the year progresses, we will work hard to incorporate what children are focused on learning.

--A note on **clothing**: play at school WILL get messy. We encourage you to dress your child for mess. We do have smocks available, and often encourage their use, but rarely require that children wear them. In addition to the inevitable mess, we have found over the years that children can tend to perseverate on what they are wearing. Children can be highly aware of what they and others are wearing, which can become a focus and/or competition in the classroom. While this isn't intrinsically bad, we do seek to create an environment that is focused more on experience rather than appearance. We never want a child's experience to be limited because their clothing is too fancy or constricting, nor do we want to foster an environment where one feels less than, because their clothing is not fancy. Please send your child to school in clothes they can move in and fully engage in their school experience. Similarly, footwear is important! There are lots of stairs that kids are up and down while they're at school, and running,

jumping, and climbing to do in the gym. Please be sure their shoes can stay on and aren't slippery.

Cleanup: At the end of each free play, we ask that children participate in a group cleanup process. We help them anticipate this by giving five-minute warnings before free play ends. Throughout playtime, we encourage children to take responsibility for putting away materials as they finish with them, however it is nearly impossible to catch each transition between activities. We try to help children understand the necessity for cleanup by focusing on what is coming next. For example, "we need to put the blocks away so there is room on the rug for group time."

Group time/Story time: These activities provide an opportunity for the whole group to share a focus. Group time allows time for singing, sharing and relaying experiences, addressing classroom happenings, demonstrating projects, etc. You will probably see us experimenting different approaches throughout the year, based on the class's interests and ability to attend for varying lengths of time. Story time is typically one of our last activities of the day and is a way to gather together to hear a book before saying goodbye.

Snack time: Each day, we will gather to eat snack together family style. Some children look forward to snack all day, while others find it burdensome to interrupt their play to have something to eat. We ask students to serve themselves, including pouring their own drinks. We view snack as a chance for children to practice self-regulation, de-centering, and autonomy. It often comes as a repeated shock to children that they are not allowed to take all the food for themselves. We might say to a child, "if you take all the crackers in your bowl, then there won't be enough for everyone. Would it be okay if I took all the crackers in my bowl and you didn't get any?" All in all, snack can be a raucous time of day full of opportunities to connect and chat with each other, and teachers help initiate conversation as necessary.

--The snack guidelines are in the handbook. There are specific cracker choices, based on allergy safety and nutritional guidelines, as well as some restrictions for certain age groups. No dried fruit, carrots, or grapes for the 4AM group, because many kids are still under 4 years old. There are lots of other fruits and vegetables you can bring! Just remember that all the food prep must be done at school, including washing and cutting produce. If you'd like a paper copy of the guidelines to keep on-hand for trips to the grocery store, you can ask Isaac to print one out for you in the office.

Gym: Gym time is typically a highly anticipated time of day. Many children look forward to the opportunity to run, ride, jump, throw, and be loud. For some children, the space and sounds can be a bit overwhelming, so we work to have some areas of the gym be a bit quieter and less bustling. Generally, the gym provides opportunities for gross motor activities and more exuberance. It is much like our free play in that children get to make choices about what they want to do. However, there will be days when we will play whole group games for a portion of the gym time.

Dismissal: We will dismiss from the center set of double doors each day. Dismissal tends to be a bit chaotic, as all three groups dismiss at the same time, and it is a big transition for kids. Unfortunately, it is usually not the best time to chat with teachers, because our focus is on keeping children safe. Please familiarize yourself with the loading zone procedures and to be sure to go through them with any other caregivers or alternate pickup persons.

Assisting: Assisting is an opportunity to be with your child in the classroom, and can only be done by a parent. These days can feel stressful and challenging, as you and your child try to navigate such a novel event. Some children are really excited about having a parent join them at school, and others are overwhelmed by the idea. Some children want to spend every moment together, and others would rather go about the day as they might on any other day, while their parent attends to tasks and observes or plays with other children. All of these are okay experiences to have. Parents, too, have different ideas about assisting days: many feel most comfortable with a list of jobs to take care of, while others really like to settle into play with a group of kids, or take some time to read a book with their own child. Again, all of this is okay. We will help you balance the assisting responsibilities with your child's needs and your hopes for the day. There are plenty of tasks we ask for your help with, but we also see assisting as an opportunity for you to get a look at the classroom, to observe how teachers relate to children, and how a large group of your child's peers interact with one another.

When you arrive to school on an assisting day, please come 30 minutes early. The office opens at 8:30am, and you can ring the bell to be let in after that time. Teachers will be working on setting up the classroom and the gym, but at least one of us will be available to help you get started. Before heading up to the classroom, take a moment to wash your hands and your child's hands. You may need to switch the cubby tags from our afternoon group to our morning group, so you can set your things down in the classroom and then head out to the cubbies to do that. Before other children come, you and your child can settle into your day with us. There might be something we need help with, but you might also have time to play a quick game, read a book, or have a tour of what your child finds interesting in the classroom. It is often helpful to children to have this time together to ease into things and get used to having one's parent in the classroom.

Once you're settled, you can do some of your snack prep: fill our drinking water container from the filtered water spout in the sink room, empty and refill the bleach solution from our cleaning spray bottle, and wash your produce. Jane will come in to get you at 8:55 to assist her with arrival. During this time, you will be greeting children and walking in with those who are ready to say goodbye to their caregivers outside. When you come back to the classroom, we will be having free play. This will be a time when you can finish some snack prep, but you will not clean and set the tables until we are having group time. Free play is primarily a time for you to observe or be with your child. Follow their lead, and try to get a look at what they're interested in here at school. Keep in mind, however, that assisting days are not typical days for your child. S/he might be shyer, more temperamental, and clingier to you; as teachers, we've seen it all. While perhaps surprising to you, we think these behaviors are honest responses to a novel experience (even if you've assisted before!) and it is okay for you to take some time alone with your child as needed throughout the day. Alas, fear not! We will help you through any bumpy moments. We will also walk you through your responsibilities for the day when you arrive each time, so do not feel like you have to commit this all to memory right now.

Please keep in mind a few final items – do not use your cell phone in the classroom. If you have special circumstances requiring you to be on-call during your assisting day, please tell us when

you arrive. Then, if you must answer your phone, step into the office so someone can replace you in the classroom. Children are not allowed to use the vacuum or the spray bottle with the bleach solution. If they want to help with these jobs, try to offer another job for them to do (we have small hand brooms and dustpans kids can use). Children cannot roam the hallways unattended. After class, it is your responsibility to know where your child is. It often helps to bring a snack or activity for your child after dismissal. If you bring a snack, it must follow the snack guidelines. You can also make arrangements for your child to be picked up at dismissal if that works better for your schedule.

Thank you in advance; we know assisting is a lot of work!

Separation: The separation process at Park West is based on our beliefs about what children need to be able to learn. Children must feel safe, valued, capable, and have a sense of purpose in order to be able to engage in the risk-taking process that is learning. Our separation process is set up to allow children to build relationships with us and to begin to transfer trust from their caregivers to their teachers.

Our expectation is not that children get dropped off at school on day one, but instead that each child will go through a separation process based on their needs. Sometimes, parents think this means we are hoping each child will separate happily from their caregivers with no tears, skipping joyously off to school. This is not our intention. We believe each person, adults and children alike, respond to separation and that there is no “good” response or “bad” response. Some children may cry, others may immerse themselves in play, some may have a particular friend they seek out, some may stick close to a teacher, and some may latch onto an object or activity. All of that is okay. There may be tears, there may be some unrest, or there may not be, but please know that we will be there to care for your child and help them work through the emotions they are experiencing.

We will go through an individualized process for each family to ensure that children have begun to feel safe and comfortable with their peers and with teachers. This might mean that we ask you to be available for many days, with the plan being that you leave the classroom for longer and longer periods of time each day. It could also mean that we ask you to help your child settle into an activity at the beginning of the day, and that you do not have to come back until you meet us outside for dismissal. Depending on your child’s needs, it could be anything in between. Each child will need something different, and as we balance the needs of the whole group, we ask that you be patient with us. That said, if your family has particular restrictions on availability, let us know and we can try to move things along. Generally speaking, for 4AM classes, we find that separation goes more quickly than in our younger groups, because many children have had some experience at school and are in a different place developmentally.

Please make accommodations for your child to be accompanied by an adult for the entire first few days of school. We will make a plan for the following days after we see how things go on day one. The separating adult does not have to be a parent, but we do ask that it be an adult with whom your child has an existing relationship.

--A word on goodbyes: we have found it works best to be clear and direct when saying goodbye to your child. Let your child know that you are leaving, where you are going, and when you will return. For example: "I'm going to go upstairs to have coffee with some other parents. I will be back at cleanup time." Use statements to convey this information, as opposed to questions (i.e. try not to say, "is it okay if I go now?") If your child does get upset when you are saying goodbye, we still want you to go ahead and follow through with the plan. We will be there to comfort them and help them cope with their emotions. If it turns out we have made a mistake and your child is inconsolable, we will come and get you. During the separation process, please do not initiate saying goodbye without talking to a teacher first. And, please do not leave without saying goodbye to your child! Even though it may seem easier or more comfortable, it does not get us to our goal of helping children learn ways to cope with and work through their emotional experiences.

Discretion: Throughout the year, as you are in and out of the classroom, you may see a lot of different behaviors. Please remember that while it may be appropriate to share information with us, it is not appropriate to share it with other parents. Keep in mind that you are in the classroom on an occasional basis and will not have had the opportunity to develop a full picture of all situations. Remember that children are in process. What they do and who they are today is different from who they will be in the future. We do rely on you, especially while assisting, to share incidents and pertinent information you have observed. However, we ask that you do not share this information in front of children. We also ask that you do not share this information with other parents. We ask that you share your observations with us so we may fit them into a more complete picture. We will not disclose information about your child to other parents, nor will we share information with you about children who are not yours.

Discipline: As adults in the classroom, it is our role to supervise behavior to ensure everyone's safety, both physical and emotional. It is our responsibility to help children understand the causes and effects of their actions. We also must help them find positive ways of interacting with each other, especially when their ideas and plans are at odds with one another. Undesirable things are going to happen, but we do not look upon this as undesirable in and of itself. Instead, conflicts, arguments, and misunderstandings are opportunities to construct a fuller sense of the world and how it works.

Despite being a child-centered program where free play is a major component of our day, we do set boundaries and limits and have behavior expectations. We do a lot of verbal reminding and explaining to help children understand why certain behavior is not okay. In general, we use redirection when specific behavior is becoming disruptive or harmful. If necessary, we will ask a child to come away from an activity if their behavior is somehow causing a problem (i.e. throwing sand, dumping toys, or being physically aggressive) and will help them find something different to do.

When intervening in a dispute, we try to base our actions on the assumption that children want to sustain their play with each other. Many disputes erupt because children have been

ineffective in communicating their ideas to one another. This happens a lot. We are here to help them practice and improve these skills. A big part of our curriculum is helping children find effective tools, strategies, and resources for interacting with one another. This takes a lot of time and practice.

As adults in the classroom, we often find ourselves in situations in which we need to act as interpreters, asking questions to help kids get to the core of what the problem is and what they are trying to express (think of it as investigative conflict resolution). We work to help children identify and label their feelings and then find appropriate ways of expressing them. We want children to know what they feel is important and valid, but also help them come to understand how their actions and behavior impact and are interpreted by others. Again, this takes a lot of time and practice – a lifetime if you really think about it!

-A quick disclaimer: If you really watch the teachers, you will probably notice we will handle similar situations on different occasions differently. This is in part because it is our job to know individual personalities and have a sense of each child's individual capabilities and needs. As we get to know children, we are in a continual process of evaluating and reevaluating how we approach our interactions with them. While we do strive for consistency, at the individual level, there is always the need to tweak things slightly.

Finally, while we know this is a whole lot of information, it is far from exhaustive. We know you will have questions, need clarification, and have concerns that we have not addressed. Please come to us with all those things. Let us know what you are thinking, and what we can do to support you, or when we might need to clarify our plans and expectations. We want this to be an enjoyable and meaningful experience for everyone! We would like to end by reiterating how much we view our work with you as a partnership. You know your child better than anyone and we look forward to gaining insights from you and sharing our observations of your child's school experience.

Let's get started!

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