

Hi Everyone!

First of all we are excited to let you know that we will be taking a bus trip to Emily Oaks Nature Center on Wednesday, October 17th. **We are asking that you drop off your child at 12:45pm** that day so there is time to use the bathroom before boarding the bus at 1:00pm. We are extending the day a bit so we have time to travel to and from the nature center, but will be returning for our normal dismissal time. This is a great opportunity for us to take a trip as a group and get a bit of the lovely fresh fall air! We ask that you send your child in clothes appropriate for the weather (whatever that may be) and comfortable walking shoes. Emily Oaks has a nature trail to walk on, as well as playground area, and we will make sure we have time to utilize both of those things!

Next, we wanted to share a bit about our curriculum and educational philosophy. 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 upon constructivist theory, and more specifically social constructivism. What that means in a nutshell is that we believe people construct knowledge based upon their experiences and that their 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. Play is the medium through which children approach the learning process. We seek to utilize the natural curiosity and wonder of children to create opportunities for exploration and discovery. Teachers are there to provoke this process: 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.

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. Many institutions utilize approaches like "letter of the day," which is an isolated way to share information. While it may provide information, it can be challenging for children to understand and/or apply the meaning of that information. At Park West our goal is not to transmit information from adult to child, but instead to provide an environment where children can be immersed in exploration and construct knowledge based on their experience. So instead of

teaching a group of children the letter of the day, we start with helping each child identify the letters in their own name.

A play-based curriculum presents some challenges that a more teacher-directed environment does not. For example, sometimes the most difficult thing for a child can be figuring out how to access all of these experiences in the context of a group. He/she might be very interested in dinosaurs and be delighted to discover that the sand table is full of dinosaur bone molds, but be unsure of how to navigate the fact that there are six other children who are already playing there. Having to figure out how to access materials is an appropriate challenge for students and we view these social-emotional experiences as vitally important to children's cognition and problem-solving skills and we intentionally set up our classroom in ways that create situations where these things come up. Once engaged in play, children will inevitably run up against someone who thinks differently than them, has different ideas, or a different point of view. And 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. With this being said, you as parents will also experience the same thing. In our role as teachers, we do not see our job to mandate norms or standards, or to pass judgment on children's home culture. Beyond protecting everyone's physical and emotional safety, our goal is to promote 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 ok.

We are looking forward to talking with all of you at our upcoming conferences. If you haven't had a chance to sign up yet please contact Isaac in the office.

Best,
Chris, Kristin, and ali