

Curriculum

The curriculum at Fort Hill develops from teachers' attentive observation of children's focus and intent. The teachers at Fort Hill record their observations and plan how to deepen children's experiences. These recordings may be referred to as "documentations." As educators, teachers seek to participate in the moment without controlling it. Teachers follow the child's interest rather than focusing on a predetermined outcome or plan.

Our active social curriculum is based on the belief that creating a caring, respectful environment takes effort and attention. The staff members practice "emotion coaching," as described by John Gottman, to facilitate and support the development of social and emotional skills.

The process of emotion coaching is as follows:

1. become aware of the child's emotion;
2. recognize the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching;
3. listen empathetically, validating the child's feelings;
4. help the child find words to label the emotion s/he is having; and
5. set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem at hand.

You will notice in the following "Environment" section a description of the Principles of Environmental Design. In that section, we ask adults to refrain from making models for children. Children may ask you to draw something for them. We encourage children's efforts and competencies and consider drawing as one of "the hundred languages" that children use to express their ideas. If a child asks you to draw for them, please refrain from drawing and instead, talk with them about their ideas and support them in their efforts.

One way to help a child is to look closely at an object or a picture of the object and identify all the parts. Another way is to brainstorm places to begin drawing a form – maybe starting with a line or shape, or with a detail and working out from there. For example, "If I wanted to try to draw this, where would be a good place to start? Where would you begin?" Another way to experiment and explore ways to construct a form by drawing is to suggest that the child practice drawing with a finger or capped marker.

Guidance

The goal of our guidance philosophy is to support children as they develop the ability to self-regulate their emotions, impulses, and attention. Our interactions towards this goal are respectful and promote children's self-esteem and confidence. Please do not label behavior in terms that reflect on the integrity of the child, e.g., "babyish," "naughty," "selfish," or "bad." Please acknowledge children's feelings, e.g., "you look very sad" rather than telling them "there's no reason to cry" or "four-year-olds don't cry." By observing the teachers, you will notice a style and way of interacting that is individualized and supports children as they develop self-discipline. As a laboratory school, we model early education and care for students, families and colleagues. Professional, and positive, attitudes and behaviors are important in a high quality program.

Teachers establish routines and set limits as a way to provide boundaries that are reassuring for children. If you have difficulty with a child, please ask one of the regular staff members for help. Below are some of the techniques that teachers use to define the boundaries and set limits on behavior:

- Clearly state of the limit, e.g., "The blocks are for building, the balls may be thrown outside." Children feel safe when there are clear limits.
- State expectations positively, e.g., "Please keep your feet on the floor." rather than "Don't climb on the table."
- Redirection, e.g., "Let's go see what John is doing in the sensory table."
- Support problem-solving and negotiation between the children, e.g., "How can you tell John that you would like to have a turn with the truck?"
- Logical consequences or choices, e.g., "You are having a hard time playing with the blocks without throwing. Please make another choice. Would you like to work with clay or paint at the easel?"
- Model effective ways to express feelings and emotions, e.g., "I do not like it when you grab the book from my hands. What can you say to let me know that you would like to have the book?" – or, "You can ask me for the book, - please may I have the book."

When you talk with children, please be positive – use a tone of voice, active listening and manner that conveys respect for the child as an individual. You may also maintain your self-respect. For example, you may help children understand the limits of their expectations of others by saying, "I'm tired of running, I'd like to rest now."

Conflict Resolution:

Before stepping into a situation, decide if children can settle things without your help. As children mature developmentally and gain more experience in resolving conflicts they will begin to find their own solutions to problems.

Please carefully observe how teachers facilitate conflict resolutions between children. Especially notice body position, tone of voice, choice of words, and questions asked.

Please note we do not require children to say, “I’m sorry.”

Physical Conflict between Children: i.e. hitting, shoving, etc.

Intervene immediately to stop behavior that is unsafe to the child or other children. When children are fighting with others, adults must immediately take action. If children are hitting one another, it may be necessary to physically separate them to calm them down. To do this, position your body in between the children. State to the children that you realize there is a problem, such as: “I see there is a problem. You are really upset. Let’s get some help.” Then locate a teacher.

Interactions

Our interactions with children, families and colleagues are based on respectful listening. Listen carefully and observe the children, as well as the other adults in the room, so that you are able to guide the children.

Scaffolding

Our goal is to offer children the opportunity to enjoy the sense of accomplishment and accompanying positive feelings of self-esteem and confidence by completing a difficult task with just the right amount of support (known as “scaffolding”). Often it is helpful to wait a moment or two, observing and listening, before responding. Your interactions can help a child enjoy the success of meeting a challenge without undue frustration. For example, you may hold down the bottom of a jacket while a child pulls the zipper, or you may demonstrate how to support the milk pitcher while pouring. The scaffolding will be different for each child and for each situation – listening and observing will be the keys to determining how you can best support each child.

The tone and loudness of your voice impact the classroom climate. Please talk directly to both adults and children (do not talk “across” the room or “across” other people). Please speak in a quiet conversational tone and bring your body to a position that enables you to speak face-to-face to children. Please do not talk about children in front of other children or adults. When the adults are positive and maintain control children learn self-regulation and feel safe.

Avoid “over praising.” Rather than saying “good job,” be specific and offer meaningful feedback. For example, you use descriptive phrases such as, “I notice that you drew a long line” rather than “I like it,” “Cool,” or “Awesome.”

Avoid labeling a child – either positively or negatively. Avoid comments like “good girl,” and “you’re so smart,” as well as “bad boy.” Also avoid labeling in conversations with adults, e.g., “John is mean.” Rather, describe behaviors, “John had a hard time controlling himself today; he hit several children.”

Avoid gender stereotyping, e.g., “We need some strong boys to help us move this box,” or “would the girls like to have a tea party?”

Use positive phrasing, for example, “Be gentle with the book” rather than “Don’t tear the book.”

Offer limited choices, e.g., “Do you want me to help you with your coat or do you want to do it yourself?”

Avoid ultimatums, e.g., “You have to do _____ before I _____.”

Prepare the child in advance for what will happen next, e.g., “We will read one book, then we will get our coats on.”

Ask open-ended questions, e.g., “What would happen if…” “Is there another way to…” Answers to open-ended questions lead to longer conversation and dialogue – the answer is not apparent, it is developed and encourages thinking, problem-solving and language.

Give children choices only when they are truly options. Saying to a child, “In five minutes it will be time to clean-up, O.K.?” leaves you wide open for her to respond, “No, I’m not done playing yet.” Instead, be clear in your expectations: “In five minutes clean-up time will start so that we can get ready for recall time.”

Model appropriate manners. Children learn a lot about civility through adults’ role modeling. Please use good manners with children and do not demand that they use words such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’

Avoid forcing children to apologize. We acknowledge children’s feelings and describe the feelings of others. We do not ask children to apologize or say “I’m sorry.”

Use supportive comments rather than praise. We strive for children to gain self-esteem through intrinsic rewards and mastering skills, rather than through the extrinsic rewards of pleasing adults. Examples of supportive comments to make to children are: “Thank you for helping to pick up the blocks. Now we can go have a snack.” And, “I can see you worked really hard on that. You drew a really long line.”

No child is subjected to physical punishment, verbal abuse or threats. Children are not placed in isolated “time outs.” Children are never punished by withholding food or water. The adults do not address children harshly, loudly, with intimidation, ridicule or sarcasm. Please do not discuss a child’s behavior with another adult in the presence of other children or parents. Written or verbal reports regarding conflicts between children do not include the name of the child who bit, pushed or hit the other child.

Environment

The environment at Fort Hill is carefully planned to reflect the importance of community, interaction, beauty and respect. You will notice that materials are carefully organized and displayed, that natural and found materials are used more frequently than materials that have a predetermined use, that light plays an important role in the classrooms, and that the environment supports our image of the child as highly competent.

Principles of Environmental Design

Presented by Cathy Topal, Diane Harr, and Susan Etheredge to teachers at Fort Hill and the Smith College Campus School to support them in setting up their classrooms.

1. We want the school environment to reflect our special identity and mission as a lab school.
2. We want to show [visual] traces of the students and educators who spend time here.
3. We want to create an environment that shows not only the results, but also the processes of learning and knowledge-building.
4. We want an environment that gives a sense of well-being to children and educators. We feel it should feel peaceful, clean, thoughtful, respectful, uncluttered. When too there are too many images, there is no place for children to generate their own images. We ... [prefer to leave] some space blank – as a space for the eyes to rest. We feel that less clutter encourages more reflection.
5. We feel strongly that we don't want commercial images produced by adults on the walls. That also goes for any kind of work on pre-cut templates or made by tracers or stencils.

Whenever we see forms that all look alike, it immediately says to the viewer that the children are missing. Using forms like these is actually disrespectful of children. It says to a child, "I don't think that you can draw a good enough person, head shape, animal, etc." It says, "my shape is better than yours, so I want you to use my shape." It says, "I don't trust you to do it yourself." Tracers and predrawn forms that children fill in discourage children from doing it themselves. They encourage stereotypic work. They take away the challenge.

We want to keep in mind that we never want to be below the potential of children. Commercial images and tracers are below children's potential. They compromise our mission as a laboratory school.

6. We feel that it is part of our mission as educators to educate the community about the intelligence and great potential of children. When visitors enter our school and walk through it, we want them to see that this is a community that respects and celebrates the potential of children. We want the children and educators – their thoughts, images and work to be spotlighted.
7. We want the spaces in our school to say, “This is a place where adults have thought about – and keep re-thinking – the quality of the environment.” “This is a place in which all the people in the school take pride in caring for one another. This caring is reflected in the way we treat the school environment in which we all live.”