

Addendum: The Nature of Play

At Good Shepherd, we recognize that experimentation is natural and desirable in preschool children. We support, applaud, and nurture creative play – understanding that it is crucial to each child's healthy development. Children use their play as a way of making sense of the experiences that they have and they learn the life-long skills of cooperation, sharing, and conflict resolution when they want someone to join them in their play. Play helps them to understand and master personal experiences, ideas, and feelings. It feeds the imagination and the ability to symbolize. It is a powerful force in the development of special and unique individuals and in each child's progression toward literacy and mathematical reasoning.

These are the positive aspects of child development as they relate to play. Equally important is the fact that preschool children do not have the words or the problem-solving skills to express their feelings in peaceable and appropriate ways in all situations. As a school, our first premise is safety. We base each and every decision on the need to keep each child in our care safe from harm.

Our goal then is three-fold: to insure that play serves its optimal role in development; to maintain an environment that is as safe as possible for each and every child; and to consciously and deliberately teach life skills, especially self-restraint and compassion. Our stance is pro-active. We teach children the skills necessary to express a full range of feelings, including frustration, anger, and sadness, in healthy, appropriate ways. We structure the day to encourage creative play and to deter play that could be unsafe or threatening to others. The physical environment is arranged to minimize crowding, to allow for freedom of movement between areas, and to enhance a feeling of well-being. Time is provided for free play, group projects, helping roles, a consistent routine, and the social interactions that teach social skills. Many of our classroom materials support pro-social and nonviolent themes and the principles of justice and harmony, inviting cooperation and de-emphasizing the importance of possessions and competition. We offer a religious program that uses developmentally appropriate stories and activities to reinforce the Christian ethic. We respond to children with respect and encouragement, intervening constructively when necessary and eliminating rewards for aggression. And most importantly, we purposefully teach appropriate responses to aggressive situations, using books, puppets, classroom materials, and actual situations that arise in the classroom. Children are coached through nonviolent conflict resolution, meaningful consequences are designed when necessary and conflicts are defused before they escalate. Kind acts are noted and specific social skills are taught: respect, responsibility, problem solving, cooperation, sharing, helpfulness, assertiveness, self-awareness, listening, impulse control, decision-making, empathy, and perspective taking.

Within this context we use incidents that occur naturally in school as teaching tools. We involve the children in the process of creating solutions to conflicts and we make them a part of the solution. Overall, our children must learn respect by being respected, learn love by being loved, and learn trust by being trusted.

Underlying these guidelines is one specific rule. We do not allow toy guns or weapons at school. Any play involving the creation of guns or weapons from other materials (e.g., legos) is discouraged and diverted. We are always conscious of preventing activities that may threaten or intimidate other children in any way. "Show and Tell" is designed to encourage the development of communication skills and the sharing of information that is beneficial to others in the class. For this reason, "fad" toys are discouraged and guns and weapons are prohibited. This one prohibition and the corresponding guidelines allow us to optimally respect the play of children and nurture their growth as individuals with virtue and character.