

YEAR BY YEAR,
YOUR POLY CHILD:
NURSERY AND PRE-KINDERGARTEN



*A Guide to Child Development
for Poly Prep Lower School Parents*

Your Poly Child

Dear Parents,

To educate young children, we support their emotional, social, cognitive and physical development. Just as young children grow taller naturally with proper nutrition, they develop confidence, emotional resilience, sociability, intellectual and physical skills when given the right environment of experiences and challenges.

A child's earliest experiences and challenges happen in his or her home, where he or she learned to be loved, to express him or herself, and to explore. When a family chooses a school, the project of supporting that child's development must be shared. While each parent is an expert in the history and personality of a child, the school is the expert at understanding the developmental milestones, strengths and weaknesses of a child relative to other children of his or her age. In order for parents and teachers to support each other, communication is vital.

This guide is meant as the start of that communication. Often teachers and parents, with the very best intentions, misunderstand what the other means by "education." By setting out the typical struggles, challenges and goals for children in our Early Childhood and K-4 program, we explain here the reasoning behind the curriculum: not just the scope and sequence by which children learn to read and write, but also the path along which they learn to separate confidently from their parents, to become independent in meeting their own needs, to tolerate frustrations, to play well in small and large groups, and ultimately to respond to life's challenges with a potent combination of confidence, empathy, and problem-solving skills. We see the academic and emotional realms as equally important and interconnected.

The material that follows is taken mainly from conversations among the faculty who teach each grade level—our resident experts. However, we have also included suggestions for further reading at each age level. While parenting may seem rightfully mysterious, the best literature on child development can often clear up many puzzling questions. Why is my six-year-old suddenly speaking in baby talk? Why is my four-year-old boy becoming aggressive? Why is my nine year old withdrawn? Often what appears to be a crisis is a wholly normal stage of development, as typical and necessary for future growth as a lost front tooth.

We encourage you to read this guide, and to refer to it again as challenges arise, as they almost certainly will. Each child's development takes its own course, and the adults in his or her life must respect and encourage that particular course, doing what we can to support positive growth and to inhibit behaviors or patterns that will get in the way of their progress. Our job as parents changes as our children grow. Sometimes our work is wholly intuitive, but sometimes we must work against our instincts to help a child grow.

Please read this carefully and refer to it as questions and challenges arise throughout the year. We welcome your feedback and further discussion of what you find in the pages that follow.

All the best,

Launa Schweizer
Head of Lower School

Kate Wechsler, LCSW
Psychological Consultant

NURSERY

We divide our nursery children by age into three distinct classes, two younger and one older recognizing differences between older and younger three-year-olds. Nursery A and C include our youngest children, and Nursery B begins the year with children up to 3 years 11 months. Below we outline guidelines for communication with families as well as our expectations for a child's emotional, social, cognitive and physical growth.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHERS

For many parents, this first year or years of school can produce a good deal of anxiety. While we want our children to grow, we are unsure if we want that growth to happen away from us! School can (and should) be different from home, and the experience of encountering new routines, new expectations, and new philosophies different from our own may be disconcerting for children and for their parents. Often the best antidote to anxiety is effective communication, and as a school we encourage a close partnership between parents and teachers.

What we do:

In the Nursery classes, we communicate our normal routines as frequently as possible, and always call or ask for a moment of your time if we have a concern about your child. You will receive information on EGY Parent Night, which we require you to attend. We also send home newsletters about curriculum, trips, and special festivals in the class. We hold a parent-teacher conference in January and an optional conference in May.

Sometimes we need to call you on the phone or set up a face-to-face meeting. This is quite common, and may happen if your child is facing a particular challenge with some area of his or her development, or if there is something to celebrate.

Early in the year, we communicate in great detail how a child is adjusting to school. However, once the year is underway, we can't offer a full report each day for each child. Transitions and separations are by their nature stressful times, and they become more difficult if parents use that time for more than a brief exchange. We appreciate your understanding and cooperation in this regard. We very much want to talk with you, but we need to focus on the children during transitions.

What you can do:

We work with you as partners with your child's best interests in mind. If you have questions or concerns, ask. We know that those concerns are real. You can, and should, call the teachers at school and leave a message with a good time for them to call back. You can always connect with the teachers in the morning for a minute. This is particularly important if you need to pass along information about pick-up, or to tell a teacher that your child has had a rough morning. However, if a conversation of more than a minute or so is required, we want to give you our full attention. We will set aside ample time to talk at a later time.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SEPARATION AND TRANSITIONS

Perhaps nothing causes more anxiety for parents than negotiating separation. For some families, tearful and prolonged goodbyes take up the better part of the first half of the year, while other children bound into the class without a backwards glance. Either situation can produce the normal parent's mixed feelings: guilt, pride, uncertainty, freedom, and loss. There is simply no pain-free separation; instead, we set the goal of a healthy separation that helps the child at his or her own pace to feel comfortable and settled in school.

Remember that the goal for a healthy separation is for the child to learn to confidently enter school, knowing you will return at the end of his or her day. For this to occur, you need to model this confidence, and reassure the child through your own attitude of confidence that he or she will be cared for in school when you are not there. He or she will, eventually, follow your lead.

What we do

We introduce children to Nursery school gradually with a two-week "Adjustment Schedule." This schedule is designed to ease children into our routines. The first classroom visit is brief, giving each child an individual introduction to the teachers and the classroom. At this visit, the parent stays in the room. We then invite children to school in half groups for short periods of time, gradually lengthening the stays and introducing them to more children. During at least the first few days of this process, we need for a parent or trusted caregiver to stay nearby in the school to provide children with a sense of continuity and safety. The teacher will let you know when your child is ready for you to go: please follow his or her lead.

After two weeks, the children attend school on their normal days, eat lunch together, and begin more typical separation patterns. Once the adjustment schedule is over, parents of nursery children often bring their children in, read a quick story or check in with the teacher, then head out the door. Quite often children cry, a normal part of the separation process. However, if you trust the child's teacher to cuddle and care for your child, he or she will more quickly adapt to the routines of school. If you linger to stop the tears yourself, your child will not be able to learn to be comforted by another caring adult. This separation is an important part of your child's growth.

What you can do:

- **Realize that the separation process is also for you.** Accept that you may feel anxious, fearful or sad about sending your child to this new school, but trust the instincts and professional experience of your children's teachers. If you can accept their efforts to comfort and educate your child, your child will react well to that trust.
- **Prepare your child for separation.** Talk to him or her in a matter-of-fact way about where you are going and why, and when you will return. "You are going to school, and I am going home to work. I will come back after lunchtime to pick you up."

- **Get them used to new people gradually.** Children feel more secure when they know and trust the grown-ups who are taking care of them, but trust takes time to grow. Children gain trust when they see that you like and trust their new caregiver.
- **Provide a consistent routine your child can count on, and support school routines.** With young children, consistency creates confidence. Establish an early, regular bedtime and stick to it so that your child is rested each day. **Arrive at school on time, each day,** and follow a brief routine for saying goodbye. By the second month of school, this routine should take no more than a few minutes; prolonged separations often are much more painful for children.
- **Be on time to pick up your child, either at 12:30 or 2:45, depending on the schedule you have chosen.** This is vital if your child is to feel confident with separations.
- **Understand that some children experience a delayed separation anxiety.** If this happens after a few weeks, simplify the child's schedule, spend more time together at home, put him or her to bed a bit earlier, then follow the teacher's lead in the classroom. You may be asked to stay for a bit, or to go, depending on what is happening with your child.
- **If the teacher asks you to stay in the classroom to reassure your child, we have the following important advice: be boring.** Avoid distracting, entertaining or engaging your child, and don't take on the teacher's role of reading to or engaging other children. Your job is to encourage your child to join the group and to model quiet confidence and interest in the teacher.
- **Recognize that this is all normal, even when it feels most difficult.** Children (and their parents) have been weeping at the schoolhouse door for generations. Teaching your child to separate with confidence requires that you trust that he or she can, with the right support, do so. Your child will come to know that your love is more powerful than a short separation, and that he or she can endure, and even thrive, in your absence.

INDEPENDENCE

What we do:

Children in the nursery program will learn to toilet and wash their hands independently, if they have not done so already. The teachers help this process along by encouraging children to use the potty when they need to and at specific times of the day through imitation and positive encouragement.

Children are largely responsible for shaping their own play, and are encouraged to choose what to do throughout the day. They will also learn to put their own coats on, to retrieve their belongings, to clean up toys, to throw trash away, and to eat their lunches. For parents used to doing so much for their children, this developing independence can be a welcome surprise.

What you can do:

- **Encourage them to perform simple tasks for themselves.** Often we do everything for a child for the sake of speed and convenience; parents need to take the time to let children master skills like dressing themselves or picking up toys with help.

- Let them choose their play. Children need to be surrounded by an interesting variety of materials under caring supervision. But they don't need for you to control their play or to play with them at all times. Allow children the freedom and responsibility to make choices independent of adult interaction (or the siren song of the television screen.)
- Read up on potty training if this is still an issue for your child. We suggest Penelope Leach, *Your Baby and Child*. Again, trust your child's teacher if you are uncertain about how to encourage your child without pressuring him or her.
- Send a healthy lunch your child can (and will) eat independently. Choose healthy foods that your child enjoys, and pack so that your child can unpack and eat lunch by him or herself.

FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

Childhood can be difficult, and often it is the parents' impulse to make it easy for our children. We hate to see children struggle. Too often, as a way of caring for our children, we remove all obstacles rather than teach them to overcome them.

However, a child's ability to tolerate frustration is like a muscle that needs to be developed. We need to encourage them to accept and face the small frustrations of early childhood so that they develop resilience. Resilience is the strengthened ability to meet life's inevitable challenges, and it is one of the most important things that children learn in school.

What we do:

Children learn in Nursery school to wait their turn, to try a new challenge with a teacher's support, to use words rather than hitting, and to cope when things don't initially go their way. They learn these skills in an environment of total support, encouragement and tolerance.

They also learn, as a part of a group, that their needs can not always come first. We help children to deal with the unpredictable behavior of their peers without hitting or aggression. Although some children are not yet ready to empathize with others, we support the development of empathy as an important underpinning of social success.

What you can do:

- **Set clear, reasonable limits for your child.** Begin to understand that your child can start to control his or her feelings and behavior.
- **Be patient with them, and around them.** Model steady persistence whenever possible, and help them to see that they can sometimes wait a bit to have their needs met. Healthy frustration tolerance will help them enormously with their social and ethical development as well.
- **Teach them to manage their feelings.** Children are often easily overwhelmed by their reactions, and need to be taught appropriate ways to express themselves and manage their powerful impulses.

SOCIAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Easy social interactions do not come naturally to most children; they are a skill to be learned, perhaps the most important skill of the pre-school years. Our teachers recognize this, and thus our program is structured to encourage children to interact with teachers and with each other. Our goal is for children to be comfortable in a variety of groups, and to be comfortable leading or following.

Most importantly, healthy social development becomes the basis of ethical action, which is the core mission of Poly Prep. In early childhood, a child learns that he or she is part of a larger world, not the center of that world. The willingness to take turns with others – which starts as a purely pragmatic way of getting a turn oneself – in time becomes empathy, fairness, honesty and good character in an older child.

What we do:

Through routines and gentle encouragement, children will learn in the nursery program how to cooperate, how to share and to wait their turn. They will develop relationships with adults other than their parents and become comfortable expressing their needs and responding to the needs of other people. They will also gain control over their powerful impulses, learning to use their words, not their bodies, to get what they need. Children at this age are not yet ready for abstract notions of “good” and “bad,” and we do not use these terms to describe behaviors. When telling a child that a behavior is out of bounds, the adult needs to offer an acceptable alternative to replace it. Children need this guidance to behave appropriately and to make friends.

We are very clear about a limited number of classroom rules, which we enforce patiently and consistently. We understand that children of this age need help understanding these rules, and only rarely can internalize them to act appropriately when adults aren't close by.

What you can do to support your child's development:

- **Set limits.** Children need guidance from adults to gain the self-control necessary to be with other people. Children who can accept limits make friends more readily as well. If you need guidance or support in how to do this, we suggest reading *Setting Limits with your Strong-Willed Child*, by Robert MacKenzie, or *1-2-3 Magic*, by Thomas Phelan. Either book provides a very basic and effective approach.
- **Encourage sharing, and taking turns, and discourage hitting and roughhousing when supervising your child's play.** Ask children to use their words to express frustration. If you have a particularly physical child, provide appropriate outlets.
- **Arrange 1-2 playdates a week, starting in the early winter, only once children have adjusted to school.** Choose times when your child is feeling good. Encourage your child to maintain existing friendships outside of school, and to gradually play outside of school with as many of his or her classmates as possible.

- **Don't overschedule or overstimulate children; school is stressful enough.** Less is more when it comes to activities for young children, so avoid the “overbooked” approach to childrearing. Allow your child large stretches of unstructured time in which he or she can process what he or she is learning. Now is the time to teach the importance and pleasure of “down time.”

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Young children are natural scientists, learning about the world through a remarkable process of concrete experiences. They don't learn, as adults do, by listening to adults talk. Instead, they learn through observing, mimicry, and play. Unlike social development, cognitive development unfolds quite naturally, and does not require you to lead the process. Your role is to provide appropriately engaging experiences (like school, or walks in the park) and to answer questions simply and honestly as they are asked. No amount of worksheets, flashcards, or direct instruction will help a child learn a concept before he or she is ready, and may – at the worst – frustrate a child. Be patient and respect the importance of this stage of a child's learning – it is much more complex than it may seem.

What we do:

The core of our curriculum is language development. We encourage children to speak to express their needs, to develop vocabulary, to ask questions and to offer answers. They become more articulate as they hear and contribute to discussions. A child's ability to use his or her words, rather than hitting, to get what he or she wants, is an important step in cognitive as well as social development, and thus we help children express their needs clearly to other children. They also hear and tell stories, developing important skills. Teachers refer to these skills as “receptive language” (understanding what is said) and “expressive language” (speaking to be understood.)

Children develop their memories through songs and repetitive games. They also learn to recognize colors, numbers, and shapes. They count and sort small toys. Some children are ready to learn the names of letters, although this comes later for others.

We also help the children to develop focus and concentration, encouraging them to complete a task with help if they become frustrated. They learn to listen and to follow instructions, beginning with one or two-step directions, and moving to three-step directions by the end of the year. We also watch for how children process stimuli and seem to understand what is going on in the class. Often we provide specific sensory experiences or investigations of materials (sand, shells, rocks, animals) to engage their thinking. This curriculum lays a strong groundwork for all they will learn in the future.

What you can do:

- **Talk with your child on his or her level.** If he or she always offers short answers, reword what he or she has said, adding 2-3 additional words. Rather than directly correcting errors in speech, restate what your child has said. Spend time with each child individually reading and talking.

- **Look at pictures and ask questions.** Discuss what your child sees. Get him or her to imagine what happens next.
- **Read books to your child as much as you can, but only for fun.** Choose the books that hold your child's interest – let them pick two, then you pick a new one that you like to read. It's not necessary to teach your child to read; instead, model the pleasure of stories and reading. Your child is learning all he or she needs to know about reading by watching and hearing you read and relish these stories.
- **Sing and read in rhyme.** Repetition helps children to learn to anticipate and appreciate rhymes and word sounds, a valuable pre-reading skill.
- **Play appealing games.** Often the ones they want to play again and again are just the right level of challenge. If a child loses interest quickly, it's probably too challenging, and you should put it away for a few months.
- **Follow your child's lead to what is interesting, and provide simple experiences of the world.** The television is compelling to many children, but you should avoid having them watch for long stretches or any violent computer games (explosions or weapons) in favor of a more direct relationship with objects, nature and language. Be careful, also, not to expose children at this age to violent material on the news.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The nursery curriculum is designed to develop each child's large and small motor skills. Through play, they learn to use their bodies confidently and independently.

What we do:

Encouraging healthy physical development in young children is crucial, and a central part of our mission. We help children to develop large muscle coordination by encouraging play, indoors or outdoors, every day. Children dance, play ball, climb on playground equipment, run, jump and skip. Through these activities, they also develop spatial awareness. Children draw, paint, play with blocks and manipulatives to develop their fine motor coordination. Since potty training and speech articulation also involve a child's physical development, we pay close attention to a child's strengths and weaknesses in these areas.

What you can do:

- **Encourage play!** Children need to move their bodies vigorously every day. Bumps and bruises, within reason, are a normal part of childhood, so do your best not to hover while they play.
- **Let children try before you step in to help them.** They will learn physical skills gradually if given the independence and confidence to explore and endeavor.
- **When they are ill, keep them at home.** Children can't learn when they are feeling ill. If they are playing well, without a fever and without Tylenol or Advil, they can come to school with a

runny nose. However, please keep your child home for 24 hours after he or she has had a fever over 100 degrees, has diarrhea or has vomited.

MOVING ON: NURSERY B OR PRE-K?

Children are ready for Pre-K when they will be fully four years old on September 1 and when they have developed adequate social skills. A child's age, rather than his or her cognitive development, determines the best placement. At the end of the year, many parents of children in Nursery A are eager to see their children move to Pre-K. We understand that our age cutoff is different from that in the public schools, but we have come to the September 1 date through careful thought and experience. In some cases, the teachers will advise the parents of a four-year-old that a year in Nursery B would be beneficial.

Over the summer between Nursery and Pre-K, we encourage you simply to enjoy your child, to read with him or her, and to encourage lots of physical play.

Suggested Reading:

Ames, Louise, *Your Three-Year-Old and Your Four-Year Old*

These short guides are the ultimate for understanding normal child development. If you have time to read nothing else on this list, read these books to better understand your own child.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish, *How To Talk So Kids Can Learn*

Leach, Penelope, *Your Baby and Child*

Wisdom and advice for rearing children birth through age five.

MacKenzie, Robert, *Setting Limits with your Strong-Willed Child*

Mogel, Wendy, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

Phelan, James, *1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12*

Thompson, Michael, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*

Best Friends, Worst Enemies

Mom, They're Teasing Me: Helping your Child Solve Social Problems

PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Children are ready for Pre-K when they are fully four years old on September 1 and have developed adequate social skills for a full week program in the fall, and a full-day program by January. Children are mixed by age in each of the two classes.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHERS

School can—and should—be different from home, but the experience of encountering new routines, new expectations, and new philosophies different from our own may be disconcerting. However, it is in the child's best interest for parents and teachers to cooperate, and thus communication between teachers and parents is vital.

What we do:

In the Pre-K year, we communicate our normal routines as frequently as possible, and we will call or ask for a moment of your time if we have a concern. You will receive information on ECY Parent Night, which we require you to attend. We also send home newsletters about curriculum, trips, and special festivals in the class. We hold a parent-teacher conference in January and an optional conference in May.

Sometimes we need to call you on the phone or set up a face-to-face meeting. This is quite common, and may happen if your child is facing a particular challenge with some area of his or her development, or if there is something to celebrate.

Early in the year, we communicate in great detail how a child is adjusting to school. However, once the year is underway, we can't offer a full report each day for each child. Transitions and separations are stressful times, and they become more difficult if parents use that time for more than a brief exchange. We very much want to talk with you, but we need to focus on the children during transitions, particularly at the 12:30 pickup for ease-in children.

What you can do:

We work with you as partners with your child's best interests in mind. If you have questions or concerns, please ask. We know that those concerns are real. You can, and should, call the teachers at school and leave a message with a good time for them to call back. You can always connect with the teachers in the morning for a minute. This is particularly important if you need to pass along information about pick-up, or to tell a teacher that your child has had a rough morning. However, if a conversation of more than a minute or so is required, we want to give you our full attention. We will set aside ample time to talk at a later time.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SEPARATION AND TRANSITIONS

When a child enters Pre-K, he or she is developmentally ready to separate from his or her parents. However, some parents complicate the process out of misplaced kindness, by lingering in class longer than they should.

What we do

We introduce children to school gradually in Pre-K, with a week-long “Adjustment Schedule” that eases children into the routines of school. Students new to Poly visit briefly the Friday before school begins, giving each child an individual introduction to the teachers and the classroom. At this visit, the parent stays in the room. We then invite children to school for short periods of time, gradually lengthening the stays and introducing them to more children. During the first day of this process, we need for a parent or trusted caregiver to stay nearby in the school to provide children with a sense of continuity and safety. The teacher will let you know when your child is ready for you to go: follow his or her lead.

After the first week, the children attend school on their normal days, eat lunch together, and begin more typical separation patterns. Parents of Pre-K children bring their children into class, read a quick story or check in with the teacher, then head out the door. Quite often tears appear, a normal part of the separation process. However, if you trust the child’s teacher to comfort and care for your child, he or she will quickly adapt to the routines of school. If you linger to stop the tears yourself, your child will not learn to be soothed by another caring adult. As a rule of thumb, you may stay no more than 10 minutes during the first month, and only if your child really seems to need you. After that, your child is ready to be a part of the group, and you are ready to let him or her.

Remember that the goal for effective separation is for the child to learn to confidently enter school, knowing you will return at the end of his or her day. For this to occur, you need to model this confidence, and reassure the child through your own attitude that he or she will enjoy school when you are not there.

What you can do:

- **Realize that the separation process is also for you.** Accept that you may feel anxious, fearful or sad about sending your child to this new school, but trust the instincts and professional experience of your children’s teachers. If you can accept their efforts to comfort and educate your child, your child will react well to that trust.
- **Prepare your child for separation.** Talk to him or her in a matter-of-fact way about where you are going and why, and when you will return. “You are going to school, and I am going home to work. I will come back after lunchtime to pick you up.” Let them understand that you have work to do, and they do as well.
- **Get them used to new people gradually.** Children feel more secure when they know and trust the grown-ups who are taking care of them, but trust takes time to grow. Children gain trust

when they see that you like and trust their new caregiver.

- **Provide a consistent routine your child can count on, and support school routines.** With young children, consistency creates confidence. Establish an early, regular bedtime and stick to it so that your child is rested each day. **Arrive at school on time, each day,** and follow a brief routine for saying goodbye. By the second month of school, this routine should take no more than a few minutes; prolonged separations often are much more painful for children.
- **Be on time to pick up your child, either at 12:30 or 2:50, depending on the schedule you have chosen.** Children become anxious when you are late.
- **Understand that some children experience a delayed separation anxiety.** If this happens, simplify the child's schedule, spend more time together at home, put him or her to bed a bit earlier, then follow the teacher's lead in the classroom. You may be asked to stay for a bit, or to go, depending on what is happening with your child.
- **If the teacher asks you to stay in the classroom to reassure your child, we have an important request: be boring.** Do your best to avoid distracting, entertaining or engaging your child, and don't take on the teacher's role of reading to or engaging other children. Your job is to encourage your child to join the group and to model quiet confidence and interest in the teacher.
- **Recognize that this is all normal, even when it feels difficult.** Teaching your child to separate with confidence requires that you trust that he or she can, with the right support, do so. Your child will come to know that your love is more powerful than a short separation, and that he or she can endure your absence.

INDEPENDENCE

What we do:

Children in Pre-K will toilet and wash their hands independently. As a part of normal classroom routines, they dress themselves to go outside, retrieve their belongings, clean up toys, throw trash away, eat their lunches and clean up together. For parents used to doing everything for their children, this developing independence can be a welcome surprise. Enjoy their independence and encourage its development at home.

What you can do:

- **Encourage children to perform simple tasks for themselves.** Often it is easiest to do everything for a child for the sake of speed and convenience; remember to take the time to let them master skills like dressing themselves or picking up toys with your help.
- **Let them choose their play.** Children need to be surrounded by an interesting variety of materials under caring supervision. But they don't need for you to control their play or to play with them at all times. Allow children the freedom and responsibility to make choices independent of adult interaction (or the siren song of the television screen.)

- **Send a healthy lunch your child can (and will) eat independently.** Choose healthy foods your child enjoys, and pack so that your child can unpack and eat lunch him or herself.

FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

While four-and-five year old children are a lot of fun, they struggle to control their own impulses and to understand the needs of others. They are exuberant and often out of bounds, and need to be supported to gain self-control. A child's ability to tolerate frustration is like a muscle that needs to be developed. Childhood can be difficult, and often it is the parents' impulse to make it easy for our children or to give in to their many desires. We hate to see children struggle. Too often, as a way of caring for our children, we remove all obstacles rather than teach them to overcome them. Instead, we need to teach children to feel resilient: confident and competent to meet life's inevitable challenges. Developing resilience is one of the most important lessons of school.

What we do:

Children learn in Pre-K to wait their turn, to accept a play or work assignment, to try a new challenge with a teacher's support, to use words rather than hitting, and to cope when things don't initially go their way. They come to understand that they can not choose their own activities every day, and that many parts of the day are structured for fairness and cooperation. The environment is more structured than that of our Nursery classrooms, as children start to need this support. Children learn to share and care about others in an environment of encouragement and patience. We strongly encourage the development of self-control and empathy as the underpinning of social success.

What you can do:

- **Help your child to manage his or her feelings.** Children are often easily overwhelmed by their reactions, and need to be taught appropriate ways to express themselves and manage their powerful impulses.
- **Set clear, reasonable limits for your child.** Begin to understand that your child can start to control his or her feelings and modify behavior, with your help.
- **Be patient with them, and around them.** Model steady persistence whenever possible, and help them to see that they can sometimes wait a bit to have their needs met. Healthy frustration tolerance will help them enormously with their social and ethical development as well.

SOCIAL AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

Easy social interactions do not come naturally to most children; they are a skill to be learned, perhaps the most important skill of the pre-school years. Our teachers recognize this, and thus our program is structured to encourage children to interact appropriately and kindly with teachers and with each other. Our goal is for children to be comfortable in a

variety of groups, and to be comfortable leading or following. Healthy social development becomes the basis of ethical action, which is the core mission of Poly Prep.

What we do:

Through routines and gentle encouragement, children learn more sophisticated ways to cooperate, to share and to wait their turn. They develop respectful relationships with adults other than their parents and become comfortable expressing their needs and responding to the needs of other people. They will also gain control over their powerful impulses, learning to use their words, not their bodies, to get what they need. When a teacher tells a child that a behavior is out of bounds, he or she will then offer an acceptable alternative to replace it. Children need this guidance to behave appropriately and to make friends. They also need to learn to resolve conflicts, work through disagreements and become comfortable with a wider group of classmates and friends.

What you can do:

- **Set limits.** Children need guidance from adults to gain the self-control necessary to be with other people. Four-year-olds can be quite disrespectful without adequate limits. Understanding limits will also help your child make friends. If you need guidance or support in how to set limits, we suggest reading *Setting Limits with your Strong-Willed Child*, by Robert MacKenzie, or *1-2-3 Magic*, by Thomas Phelan.
- **Encourage sharing, and taking turns, and discourage all hitting when you are supervising your child's play.** Ask children to use their words to express frustration. If you have a particularly physical child, provide appropriate outlets.
- **Set up 1-2 playdates a week, choosing times when your child is feeling good.** Encourage your child to maintain existing friendships, and gradually to play outside of school with as many of his or her classmates as possible, including children who may not be his or her initial favorites. It's best for your child to develop a wider group of friends this year.
- **Don't overschedule children; school is stressful enough.** Do your best to avoid the "more is better" approach to childrearing. Instead, allow your child large stretches of unstructured time.
- **Don't take sides in your children's disagreements.** Often Pre-K children will tell elaborate stories of the horrible misdeeds of their friends; while this is certainly their accurate perception, they are rarely aware of their own role in a disagreement. Trust that the teachers are protecting your child and encourage your child to see the value of all of his or her friends and classmates. If you find yourself concerned about your child's social interactions, we strongly suggest Michael Thompson's book with Lawrence Cohen and Catherine O'Neill Grace: *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Young children learn about the world through imaginative and concrete experiences. They don't learn, as adults do, by listening to adults talk. Instead, they learn through play. Unlike social development, cognitive development unfolds quite naturally, and does not require you to lead the process. Your role is to provide appropriately engaging experiences (like school, or walks in the park) and to answer questions simply and honestly as they are asked. No amount of worksheets, flashcards, or direct instruction will help a child learn a concept before he or she is ready, and may—at the worst—frustrate a child.

What we do:

The core of our curriculum is language development. We encourage children to speak to express their needs, to develop vocabulary, to ask questions and to offer answers. They become more articulate as they hear and contribute to discussions. A child's ability to use his or her words, not hitting, to get what he or she wants, is an important step in cognitive as well as social development, and thus we help children express their needs clearly to other children. They hear and tell stories in Pre-K, and begin to write and illustrate their own stories and poetry. Teachers refer to this as "receptive language" (understanding what is said) and "expressive language" (speaking to be understood.)

Children develop their memories through songs and games. They write their names and write and recognize most upper-case letters by the end of the year. They can sequence and work with numbers up to their age. They do puzzles and create elaborate structures and stories with blocks. They also engage in fantasy play, taking on different identities. We encourage them to play with tactile materials, including play dough, legos, duplos, blocks and water.

We also help the children to develop focus and concentration, encouraging them to complete a task with help if they become frustrated. They learn to listen and to follow multiple-step instructions. We watch for how children process stimuli and seem to understand what is going on in the class. This curriculum lays a strong groundwork for all they will learn in the future.

What you can do:

- **Talk with your child on his or her level:** Children typically speak well in Pre-K. Spend time with each child individually reading, talking, and answering their endless questions.
- **Read books to your child as much as you can, but only for fun.** Choose the books that hold your child's interest. While a very small number of children will learn to read on their own, no child of this age can tolerate being pushed to read, or can learn to read before he or she is ready. Children learn the most from being read to frequently, and watching you enjoy reading.
- **Play appealing games.** Often the ones they want to play again and again are just the right level of challenge. If a child loses interest quickly, it's probably too challenging, and you should put it away for a few months.

- **Stay simple.** Provide direct and concrete experiences of the world and plenty of unstructured “downtime” for them to think and dream about all they are learning. Avoid the impulse to fill their non-school time with many activities.
- **Turn off the TV.** Television is compelling to many children, but you should choose any TV wisely, focusing on PBS or simple videotapes. Avoid having them watch for long stretches or any violent computer games (explosions, death, or weapons) in favor of a more direct relationship with objects, nature and language. Be careful, also, to avoid exposing children to violent material on the news.
- **Look at pictures, ask questions, and discuss.** Get children to imagine what might happen next.
- **Sing and read in rhyme.** Repetition helps children to anticipate and appreciate rhymes and word sounds, a valuable pre-reading skill.
- **Follow your child’s lead to what is interesting, and provide simple experiences of the world.**

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Play in Pre-K develops each child’s large and small motor skills. Children learn to use their bodies confidently and independently, and gain the control to start to do more “academic” tasks like writing, sorting and drawing.

What we do:

We help children to develop large muscle coordination by encouraging play, indoors or outdoors, every day. Children dance, play ball, climb on playground equipment, run, jump and skip. Through these activities, as well as in dance class, they also develop spatial awareness. Children draw, paint, play with blocks and manipulatives to develop their fine motor coordination.

We also observe carefully how each child walks, grips a pencil, talks, and draws. If we notice problems with your child’s large or fine motor skills, we will alert you and encourage you to get the appropriate physical therapy. Often trouble with a child’s pencil grip or gait can be best corrected at a young age.

What you can do:

- **Dress them for, and encourage outdoor play!** Children need to move their bodies vigorously every day.
- **Don’t hover.** Bumps and bruises, within reason, are a normal part of childhood, so do your best not to hover while they play.
- **Let children try before you step in to help them.** They will learn physical skills gradually if given the independence and confidence to explore and endeavor.
- **Most four year olds aren’t ready for team sports.** Let them follow their interests, certainly, but

understand that most children of this age can't follow the rules of a game, and will be frustrated by team sports.

- **When they are ill, keep them at home.** Children can't learn when they are feeling badly. If they are playing well, without a fever and without Tylenol or Advil, they can come to school with a runny nose. However, please keep your child home for 24 hours after he or she has had a fever over 100 degrees, has diarrhea or has vomited.

MOVING ON TO KINDERGARTEN

Children are ready for kindergarten when they are fully five years old. They should also be able to write their names and to recognize numbers and most upper-case letters. They must also be ready for the social and emotional demands of a full day kindergarten program. At times, teachers suggest another year in Pre-K to give a younger child time to catch up on his or her skills. Over the summer, children need to play and to be read to, but need no particular preparation.

Suggested Reading:

Ames, Louise, *Your Four-Year Old and Your Five Year Old*

These short guides are the ultimate for understanding normal child development. If you have time to read nothing else, read these books to better understand your child.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish, *How To Talk So Kids Can Learn*

Ilg, Ames, and Baker, *Child Behavior*

This is a multi-age version of the Ames guides, organized by topics.

Leach, Penelope, *Your Baby and Child*

MacKenzie, Robert, *Setting Limits with your Strong-Willed Child*

Mogel, Wendy, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

Phelan, James, *1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12*

Thompson, Michael, *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children*

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys

Mom, They're Teasing Me: Helping your Child Solve Social Problems

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