

The Family School Approach

Underpinning all our activities, and central to our approach, are five fundamental principles:

Learning is part of Living

Ethical Consciousness and Action

Self Governance

Family Involvement is Fundamental

Support the Developing Child

The Family School trusts children to be natural learners:-

Our principle **Support the Developing Child** is based in the clear understanding that children have a strong drive to learn about the world they find themselves in; we believe it is part of their DNA.

Of all the animals, it is human beings who succeed primarily through understanding and manipulating their environment. All children are genetically programmed to engage with their environment, and to develop increasingly subtle and mature understandings of that environment as they grow to adulthood. In one sense, having children learn is no problem at all - they are doing nothing else through their entire childhood. All childhood experiences are learning experiences. When there is no underlying physical cause, problems that arise in a child's learning process are largely the result of this strong drive to learn being obstructed or misdirected.

As purposeful educators, we need to be clear about *what* is important for children to learn. We must be as aware as possible about *how* learning happens in order to do what we can to ensure that this drive to learn is given the best possible conditions in which to be expressed. We must avoid situations and methods which stunt or distort the learning experience.

The Family School's role is to support each child's intellectual, social and emotional development by allowing each child to set their own direction and pace and to choose the content of their learning based upon their own interests. Learning occurs within small, mixed age social groups, within the carefully designed context of a learning culture.

The Family School sets out to create an immersive, learning culture:-

Because children's whole lives are one continuous learning experience, the environment in which they find themselves can be as powerful as what anyone sets out purposefully to 'teach' them.

At the Family School, we are clear that the most effective way to educate is to establish a rich and engaging environment where the skills, characteristics, and habits of mind that we want children to learn are the life of the place. A place where learning - in all its modes - is part of living.

The Family School understands that there are many kinds of learning experience:-

Successful learning experiences are ones in which children are creatively engaged:- this is a characteristic, but is not a description - all sorts of activities, in all sorts of modes can

have this character, and be enthusiastically embraced at the Family School.

We are clear, though, that certain modes are important, and these will be offered and encouraged.

Play is important, in all its varieties: it is highly important that children have ample opportunity for play that is directed by them and participated in by adults. In free play, children can try out roles, ideas, skills that they are beginning to understand or explore. Repeated experience as a key part of learning, and ‘rehearsing’ behaviour as play is a natural learning mechanism - whether it is re-enacting scenes from adult life, or playing tag.

Play also gives adults opportunities to;

- observe uninhibited behaviour - an important mode for clear assessment of development,
- engage with play and use it as a context for introducing, reinforcing and developing skills and thought processes, (for example, if a child has invited an adult to join him on a train trip to Africa, the adult can introduce the idea of crossing over water to get there and this might lead later to looking at world maps and further discussion),
- recognise and clear up misunderstandings that children might have about the world around them.

Adult ‘modelling’: children are naturally keen to imitate the behaviour of adults and older children - this is one key to directing learning in desired/appropriate directions. Adults in the Family School environment will model use of skills we wish children to learn - looking for opportunities to demonstrate the usefulness of numeracy, respectful behaviour, literacy, understanding of the world around us, verbal reasoning and so on in all their activities.

Contact with the marvellous: children need to see what is possible in order to open up their own aspirations, and to give their learning a broad canvas. The Family School will use the natural world (not least at our wonderful site) ; bring in ‘visiting specialists’, and have regular ‘away-days’ (taking advantage of the amazing resources the city and its environs offer) for a wide variety of high quality experiences.

Teaching at the Family School takes children’s own activities and interests as a powerful vehicle for engaged learning:-

While activities at the Family School will often be free-form and open ended, with little emphasis on formal, teacher-led sessions, the teacher’s role is vital and active.

Our teaching style is to enthusiastically encourage and facilitate learning in a non-coercive, non-judgmental way. Teachers are actively engaged in the day-to-day activities of the children in a mutually beneficial and enjoyable way; participating, observing carefully, facilitating connections and moving each child forward in his or her experiences and thinking. Setting the tone, managing relationships and leading by example are important, as is getting to know each child extremely well.

The most fruitful learning situations are those based in an activity of immediate interest to the child. The child’s play and activities that grow out of children’s interests provide ample opportunities for learning. It is equally clear that children’s interests grow from

their environment, and thus adults can develop and encourage children's interests in considered ways.

The Family School has a clear understanding of what children need to learn in order to be well equipped to function in today's world:-

Although learning is a strong natural drive, the scope of what it is truly 'natural' to learn is relatively limited - in different cultures, at different times, people have needed very different skill sets to be competent adults. The Family School's activities will be built around a carefully considered curriculum.

The Family School values highly the traditional 'three R' skills – these skills unlock all sorts of worlds and empower children to become more independent learners. We are equally clear that overemphasising these and separating them from day-to-day activities can be damaging and limiting. We also value ethical and emotional intelligence, creative, practical and physical skills of all kinds.

The Family School aims for a broad and balanced curriculum, with high expectations for all children.

The Family School is committed to mixed age group teaching:-

Children are in mixed age groups at the Family School. We believe that a key part of the innate learning process is learning by imitating others. Mixed age groups afford older children the opportunity to practice being responsible for others, and give younger children role models whose abilities are not too far beyond them.

The Family School pays attention to each child as an individual:-

We value achievement, growth and success, but do not believe that a culture of obsessive testing and checklists encourages a love of learning for its own sake. Defining success solely by external yardsticks works against children developing self-reliance and self-confidence.

Observation and assessment: the small scale of the Family School (groups of 16-20 children, of mixed ages, with high adult ratios), and the wide range of activity types, make it possible for each child to be carefully observed. Careful and comprehensive assessments are then developed from those observations, without the need for explicit tests, which can damage children's relationship with and ownership of their own learning, and which are often dangerously simplistic (measuring a child's reading age does not tell us anything about important questions such as how she enjoys reading, what sort of books she reads, or what sort of reading experience she might like to discover next).

From these assessments, we can identify areas where skills might need to be reinforced, opportunities and directions for development, suggestions for parents and so on.

Development at the child's own pace: a key aspect of the Family School's educational approach and teaching style is a commitment to allowing children to develop at their own pace. In the context of the carefully considered educational environment described in this document, we are confident that children will engage with and develop confidence and competence over a wide range of important skills.

It is important for us to be clear that this means that we will not push a child into

development of any particular skill if the child is not ready. We expect that this will mean that some children will not match numeracy and literacy milestones as set out in the Government's Key Stages during their time in the Kindergarten Group (equally, we expect that other children will forge ahead). As part of the Family School's continuous observation and assessment approach, we will always be aware of the details of each child's development, and be in a position to discuss with parents our judgement and recommendations.

The Family School seeks to engage families in the educational process:-

The home and family environment is obviously a primary influence on any child, and we honour and value this as part of a child's development.

Regular, informal contact and two-way communication between staff, parents and other involved family members will be a strong feature of the Family School, the aim being that family and school environments are mutually supportive and complementary.

Parents are always welcome in school sessions, and will be encouraged to participate in activities. For children, seeing that their parents find the activities they are engaged with at school interesting and valuable is a powerful sign that what the school does is important and worthwhile.

The Family School does not confuse freedom with absence of boundaries:-

At The Family School we encourage and support the development of the individual. We also recognise the importance of learning to set boundaries for ourselves that promote healthy interactions and at the same time allow everyone freedom of expression and the right to live in a safe and supportive environment.

It is important for children's healthy social and ethical development that standards of behaviour are consistent, explicit and that adults are prepared to discuss their application to particular circumstances.

The Family School bases its expectations of behaviour on the following fundamentals:

1. Work and Play safely, and look out for the safety of others.
2. Be considerate in your words and actions.
3. Take care of our school, our places, our own and other people's things.
4. Take responsibility for yourself and your own actions.

These are sufficient to address most normal situations. More detailed and specific rules can be developed from this foundation as required for specific circumstances.