

## Receiving a Wild Lilac Education:

### Experiencing Our Classroom:

Wild Lilac respects every child's imagination, interests and pace of learning as unique and important. We support the children in being creative and energetic, while simultaneously asking them to be loving members of our community. At Wild Lilac we believe that respect for oneself is intertwined with respect for others, so we emphasize both.

Our staff celebrates diversity. We cherish the vitality and energy ignited by variety of spirit, and we strive to model that a truly moral and magical life is one where we feel connected with our communities and where we are endowed with voices that are loud enough to generate change and to be heard in a busy society.

### Our Curriculum:

At Wild Lilac, our focus is on exploration, creation, and play, play, play! We believe that playing is the true work of early childhood, as it is through play—cooking, running, singing, gaming and inventing—that a child can build her or his imagination, confidence, language, interpersonal and problem-solving skills.

Children engaging in symbolic-play with a gardening hose to be a firefighter or with dirt to make a mud-pie are experimenting with information and deepening their understanding of the world around them. Open-ended activities support children's cognitive development by asking them to question and think. As they imitate what they see they begin to understand how things work, as Vivian Paley explains in her book, [A Child's Work: the Importance of Fantasy Play](#):

*The mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas.*

*Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind, whether in the service of further storytelling or in formal lessons (2004:102).*

The materials we use for imaginative play sometimes suggest a specific use, such as a toy wooden car, but are often open opportunities, such as baskets filled with silks and blocks which become stages, forts, boats, beds, and more.

Consistent with this thinking, the projects and activities we undertake at Wild Lilac usually emerge organically from the events and ideas that are most intimately affecting our children. For example, a visit from a child's birth-parent may prompt discussion about adoption, which may lead to adoption art-projects and play. We find that children are most engaged and excited about learning when it is their initial interest that paves the way for further exploration.

Instead of asking questions with a predetermined answer like "How many days are there in a week?", which just put children in the position of being right or wrong, Wild Lilac's open-ended activities put children in the position of inquiry, of wanting to find out more about the world's possibilities. For example, while learning how food grows from a well-illustrated book will give a child the basic understanding of where our food comes from, Wild Lilac's annual event of planting seeds, watering the soil, charting how many days it takes for the sprout to emerge from the earth, transplanting the seedlings into the garden and then eating the resulting vegetables and fruits in salads and as snacks, fosters in our children a deep, intimate connection with the planet, our food, our bodies and human skills.

### Our Teachers:

Every Wild Lilac teacher nurtures into existence safe, healthy class spaces devoted to creativity and learning. As Jean Piaget was famous for saying: "construction is better than instruction," so Wild Lilac teachers encourage children's search for understanding by nurturing the child's natural curiosity rather than filling him or her with facts and information.

Our teachers help our children gather the tools they need to engage happily with their peers, and then let the child experiment and personalize those tools naturally and over time in the social setting. During open-play, for example, our teachers will observe the children and intervene primarily when a child is struggling to keep an interaction safe and productive. Our teachers value the importance of letting a child learn natural consequences and discovering what ways of being are most likely to lead to his or her happiness.

**Discussion of Play and Literacy:**

At Wild Lilac, we strongly believe that children who are allowed and encouraged to develop their imaginative selves when they are under seven-years-old are more confident and developmentally prepared when it comes time to learn to read. Our experiences and educations indicate that a child is most ready to begin reading when their brains are primed to process abstract symbols at seven-years-old rather than by pushing younger children to memorize letters and words. Children who are expected to sight-recognize words without being developmentally ready to read may become discouraged, frustrated and develop bad associations with reading or with school.

Imaginative play empowers children with the social tools, problem-solving abilities and confidence that are necessary for academic success later in their lives. We strongly believe that children who are spoken to intelligently, read to and exposed naturally to music and poetry are given an important head start for later literacy learning.

In a German study of one hundred public school preschool classes, one half employed only play, while the other half focused on both play and academics. The study followed the students as they entered elementary school, and found that by the time the children were ten-years-old, the play-only children had passed the others in their physical, social, emotional, and mental development (Der Spiegel, pp. 89-90).

The research of Jean Piaget, one of the most important leaders of early childhood education and child development, supports this data. He found that children between two- and seven-years-old are developing many of the foundational cognitive skills that are later used for formal academic learning. Piaget found that attempting to rush or skip these developmental stages is a threat to the child's healthy cognitive development (cited in Crain, 2005: 136). Although children have the capacity to memorize numbers, letters and poems at a young age, and while it can be part of a productive education, it ought not to be the primary goal of a young child's education.

Because of this research, rather than focusing on rote memorization, Wild Lilac guides children through imaginative exploration, playing, questioning, and experimenting in order to support each child in building a strong, confident base for later academic learning.

**REFERENCES:**

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Paley, V.G., (2004). A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.