

Defining the Schedule: What happens during a kindergarten day?

Morning Meeting and Building Community

At Cambridgeport, every classroom begins the day with a Morning Meeting. In both junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten classes, we begin with our **greeting** while sitting in a circle; every child is acknowledged by name. We do our **attendance** routine that links with our math curriculum. We often have a **news and announcements** time during which we share personal events and get to know each other. (We also frequently incorporate sharing into storytelling at Writing Workshop.) We integrate academic, social, or curricular themes into a **game or movement activity**. Finally, we wrap up with a **Morning Message** during which we change our calendar, read to find out about daily events, and build enthusiasm for our day.

The kindergarten year(s) are full of great changes for children and families—entry into a new school environment, first experience in a public school setting, first times eating in a lunchroom, riding a bus, or going to afterschool programs. By emphasizing community and working on ways to help kindergartners become supportive and nurturing friends, we aim to facilitate and make positive those changes. Forming a cohesive, cooperative, caring group is the biggest social goal to be reached during the kindergarten year because it is the context for everything that children do and learn at school.

Developmentally, four-six year olds are focused on their own needs, emotions, attributes, and interests, but they are also very concerned with making friends and are interested in noticing the diversity of their classroom and school. Our theme—**Myself and Others**—emphasizes ways to appreciate and respect our individual unique attributes as well as the similarities and differences that abound among appearances, cultural traditions, holidays, families, homes, and food of peoples all around the world.

Learning to Read and Write

In the Kindergarten classroom, our approach to reading and writing development emphasizes oral language through storytelling, drawing and illustration skills, writing, and a love and appreciation of literature from a variety of genres and cultures. This is combined with more skill-based activities designed to help children make sense of the world of letters, sounds, and words. Children learn to read through their writing and to write through their reading; we know from research and experience that the two are connected. Through their individual work, children show teachers their mastery and what instructional steps need to follow.

Learning to Read: Our approach to teaching reading consists of research-based activities that are designed to help children build the skills they need to become fluent, confident,

enthusiastic readers. Sometimes teachers implement these activities as "Literacy Stations" during Choice Time, and sometimes we may have a separate block of time called "Reading Workshop." The decision depends on the needs and behaviors of the children, goals at different times of the year, scheduling, and teaching styles.

- During Shared Reading, teachers lead the class in reading large-print songs, poems, and big books that help children notice aspects of print and develop an expressive "reader's voice." These lessons stress three components: *decoding* (sounding out words based on letter sound knowledge), *fluency* (reading or rereading expressively, smoothly, and with appropriate speed), and *comprehension* (understanding and making meaning of the text).
- During phonics lessons, children learn about letter features, letter-sound relationships, rhyming words, syllables, sight vocabulary (words that children can read without having to "sound out"), word parts (e.g. -at words such as cat, mat, hat), and many other topics. Lessons are taught in a sequential pattern that builds upon children's prior knowledge and leads to reading success. Teachers frequently teach these skills during Morning Meeting (when we read the morning message), Shared Reading, and Writing Workshop so that they are an authentic part of children's natural classroom work.
- During Reading Workshop or Literacy Stations, children work in groups at centers to practice skills that reinforce whole class lessons. In Reading Workshop, teachers balance very structured stations with play-oriented activities, such as letter bingo, building words with play-doh, a listening center, pretend play, and big book browsing. When integrated with Choice Time, children have 2-3 "must-do centers" that they must complete over the course of a week, with or without teacher guidance, and other Choice Time activities that integrate literacy (e.g. making signs in the Block Area).
- Teachers carefully select Read Aloud literature to reflect curriculum themes and children's interests, as well as to expose children to ideas, genres, cultures, etc. that will broaden their thinking. We read time-honored classics, fairy and folk tales, poetry, non-fiction, and many other selections. Also, author/genre studies (e.g. Eric Carle's books or multiple versions of the 3 Little Pigs) throughout the year teach children about different ways that people write or illustrate stories on many topics of interest to our students.
- By late February (following vacation), teachers begin Guided Reading instruction with all senior kindergartners. Guided Reading instruction is *not* part of the JK learning expectations, but may take place as appropriate, based on student interest and skills, in combined JK/SK classrooms. Teachers work with small groups of children who are at the same reading level during Reading Workshop or Choice Time. Reading instruction consists of a teacher-led introduction to the book, children reading the book individually with the teacher observing and helping to problem-solve, and a follow-up discussion. (about 10-20 minutes per group)

Learning to Write: Our Writing curriculum is based on Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe's book Talking, Drawing, Writing: Lessons for Our Youngest Writers and consists of multiple activities designed to help children build the skills they need to become expressive, confident, eager writers.

- Handwriting—We use a program called *Handwriting Without Tears* that teaches young children how to form letters and numbers with proper grip and with improved efficiency and consistency. In combination with learning letter formation, children practice letter sounds and writing new words. Handwriting is frequently taught within Morning Meeting, Reading Workshop, or Choice Time/Literacy Centers and utilizes wooden letter pieces, play-doh, chalkboards, and magic boards, as well as markers and pencils.
- The early and ongoing basis for Writing Workshop is storytelling and the genre of personal narrative (a precursor to memoir in the upper grades). In the JK classroom, storytelling and storyacting is a yearlong focus. We select books to read that will help us connect with mentor authors who tell stories based on their own life experiences; this includes both adult authors, like Donald Crews, and child authors—kindergartners from former classes. Teachers and children tell stories orally and may even act them out. We focus on aspects of what makes a good story—such as beginning, middle, and end; identifying characters; adding details, developing plot, etc. We also differentiate between "true stories" (personal narratives) and "fictional stories" (fantasy). Our first kindergarten homework assignments are based on storytelling, a timeless art celebrated by cultures all over the world.
- Another early basis for Writing Workshop is learning to draw. During Sketching and Drawing Lessons, we explore line, shape, color, perspective, backgrounds, etc. and give specific lessons on how to draw people and objects step-by-step. We build children's confidence and enjoyment of observation and illustration techniques and learn from mentor illustrators whose styles are interesting and recognizable. Illustration is a valued and celebrated part of our writing curriculum. Pictures are children's first method of recording a story, and children's' Sketchbooks and Drawing and Writing Books are our first classroom experiences with "writing."

Over time, children develop their storytelling, handwriting, and drawing skills. Children also learn much about how letters make words from shared reading, interactive writing activities (e.g. making signs for the classroom), and skills they practice in Reading Workshop and Choice Time. Teachers meet with individual or small groups of children to assist in the process. By January, we add a new format—booklets—for recording our stories "that have lots of parts." (Drawing and Writing Books remain a choice for the whole year.) This is a very exciting time for our writing community! As children amass a body of writing, reflecting on their work and selecting a piece to publish in a beautiful format becomes a highlight of their school year.

Becoming a Mathematician and Scientist

In Cambridge, all students in grades SK-5 use the *Investigations* curriculum; this includes JK's in the combined JK/SK classrooms. Students in the JK classroom (Room 3) use the *Building Blocks* curriculum. This is not the math most adults remember! It is hands-on, colorful, and fun and encourages children to solve problems and explain their thinking with words, objects, pictures, and numbers. The hands-on manipulation of objects—such as pattern blocks, interlocking cubes, and teddy bear counters—leads to analytical thinking that is engaging and useful to children. As they explore materials—counting, sorting, classifying, measuring, comparing and noting similarities, differences, and attributes—children construct new understandings.

Math Workshop begins with a **teacher-led lesson** on a new activity. Children then work in teams on **activities** to practice new math *vocabulary* (e.g. *fewest*, *rhombus*, *minus*), *skills* (e.g. breaking a pattern into its units), and *concepts* (e.g. only count each item once). Games are a vehicle through which we teach and reinforce this content. Math Workshop frequently ends with a final **math meeting** during which we share new discoveries and questions.

Opportunities for **scientific inquiry** abound in kindergarten, and this content area is one in which our team has taken a keen interest in recent years. Each teacher experiments with how best to meet the goals of our science curriculum within the context of the school day—for example, integrated as a Math and Science Workshop, during Choice Time, or as a separate block for Science Workshop; timing and implementation may change over the course of the school year as we focus on different topics and themes. However, our entire Kindergarten Team makes it a priority to have daily opportunities for science and shares our most significant goals:

- To use our senses and simple tools to become enthusiastic and careful observers
- To learn the process of science notebook entries and observational drawings and enhance entries with detail, data, labels, and reflections throughout the year.
- To learn important process skills such as how to question, hypothesize, make predictions, reason and explain about observed and inferred phenomena, and respect evidence.

We use these important inquiry and process skills during our **content studies** of autumn, an emergent “earth and sky” topic (e.g. light or rocks), water and sand, and organisms. Children will most definitely have new content understandings by the end of the school year, but we consider the best June success to be children's thinking of themselves as scientists—and knowing what that means!

Choice Time: Nearly every day, children will have at least 40 minutes of Choice Time; a snack center is incorporated during this period. During this precious and productive time, children may finish activities or work from earlier in the day, and teachers may also lead small groups to work more deeply on academic lessons or to assess progress. But the heart and soul of Choice Time is creativity; children explore, experiment, read, dance, observe, build, create, and act—and they *play*! Play is truly the work of young children, and teachers plan the centers carefully to connect to social and academic curriculum themes, as well as student interests. The Pretend Play area becomes restaurants, hospitals, pet stores, barber shops, beaches, and campsites. The Art Studio invites children to reuse recyclable materials such as cotton balls and bottle caps to create "beautiful stuff" masterpieces. The Sensory Table tempts children with a variety of substances throughout the year such as soft pompoms, sand, water, shaving cream, and seeds. The Block Area hosts the cooperative construction of elaborate structures that become sites for dramatic play over the course of the week. Many other activities—play-doh, dollhouses, computer stations, board games, Legos, etc. keep Choice Time fresh and interesting and ensure that every child has multiple places to visit that they find interesting and challenging. Choice Time also honors children's decision-making and encourages their independence since they must budget their own time within a day or a throughout a week.



What is Developmental Learning?

All the teachers at Cambridgeport believe in the philosophy of developmental learning, based on knowledge about children's physical, social, and intellectual growth. Our curriculum validates what children need and want to learn and what we know about how they learn. Teachers adjust the curriculum through their understanding of each individual child as well as by considering the needs of the whole group of children.

What does developmental learning look like within the context of the kindergarten day?

- Children have time during the day to explore their environment.
- The teachers and environment provide opportunities for children to experiment, solve problems, and grow from their mistakes.
- Teachers use an inquiry approach, asking thoughtful, intelligent questions which may have several "right" answers.
- Teachers pay careful attention to how children treat each other and reinforce respect as the basis for interaction.
- Children's ideas, creations, and discoveries are valued and displayed around the room.
- The classroom is a place where children can learn through cooking as well as counting, painting as well as phonics lessons, and pretending as well as writing. Play and direct teaching support each other, versus fight each other for our time.

In order to create such an environment, teachers are involved in an on-going process of skillful planning, organizing, collecting, researching, inventing, observing, revising, and refining.