

Making Decisions Concerning Young Children

Being a parent requires making one decision after another regarding all the details of your child's life. With extended families often miles away and little other support or preparation for parenthood, there is often much uncertainty surrounding these decisions. What's the best way to approach these decisions? What's really important? Obviously, very high on the list of considerations are your culture, your values, and your aspirations for your child. Also very important is your child's temperament, ie. how your child responds to various conditions and situations. In addition, it is very helpful to know what is normal for your child's age and, generally speaking, what are effective ways to handle various behaviors in order to support your child's optimal growth and development. It is in these last two areas that Somerset can be a source of great support for you. Our teachers and administrators all have specialized training in Early Childhood Education and decades of successful experience with literally thousands of young children. We are here to help you, to answer questions, to brainstorm strategies, to provide insight, to reassure. If you are not aware of our staff's qualifications, take a minute to look on our website, www.somersetrochester.org/about under the Staff Information link.

Somerset's teachers and administrators are dedicated, early childhood education professionals. We continuously update our skills and knowledge about best practice in our field. When we make recommendations, they are based on research documented child development principles, current practice, and our own experience with children, families, and local school expectations and practices. Our teachers and administrators work together to provide a consistent experience for young children based on a particular set of assumptions and goals for our children.

Our primary goal is to provide a learning environment for young children that supports their individual, optimal development while guiding them to function independently, effectively, and collaboratively with their peers and teachers. To reach this goal we feel it is important for children feel respected, capable, confident, and that they are a valued member of a community. Our learning environment is consistent and predictable, but not rigid. When there is a good reason to deviate from our normal activities, we talk with the children about what we are doing and why. We may do something different because of a child's idea or request, or an unexpected opportunity. When we communicate with our children we not only talk, we listen.

The way we communicate with children is the primary factor in what makes Somerset unique. Our curriculum is very similar to other early childhood programs on paper. But the implementation is very different. Our teachers actually teach children to learn, and guide them in developing habits of mind that support enthusiastic life-long learning. The key difference is the concept of mediation. Our teachers are not just providing experiences or presenting information. They have an explicit intention in providing each experience, and they modify the way they are interacting with individual children depending on how each child is responding to

the experience. They help the child notice the significant aspects of the experience. They also help the child become aware of aspects of the experience that might relate to other experiences, both past and future. This kind of interaction helps the child incorporate related prior knowledge, and also realize that they can apply what is learned from the present experience to future experiences, i.e., to generalize what is learned. This is an extremely important habit of mind to develop because it causes everything one learns to be a steppingstone to learning more about other things. And finally, the teacher helps the child understand that the experience has meaning, and encourages the child to look for meaning in other experiences. The overall goal here is for children to learn to mediate their own learning. This is in direct contrast to how children often learn in school when they are required to simply be able to provide the required answer to specific questions regardless of whether the child has any level of understanding of the question or answer, or how it relates to anything else. When children believe that “learning” is simply becoming able to produce correct answers, they are missing everything about the learning experience that grows the mind and makes learning exciting and personal.

As the teacher is “mediating” experiences with each child, she is learning a great deal about how each child learns, what the child has already experienced in other contexts, what they notice, how they construct meaning from experience, etc. It is this individualized knowledge of each child, along with the teacher’s knowledge and experience of general child development that enables our teachers to be of great value to you as you negotiate the challenges of supporting your child in growing to his/her full potential.

Among the most challenging of the decisions you are called upon to make are those having to do with your child’s readiness to move through our programs and also their movement on to their next educational setting. Our teachers provide you with their recommendations each year at your child’s Spring Parent/Teacher Conference. Their recommendations are based on many things, but in the final analysis, they look at each child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical development, all together, to come to their conclusions. All parents are concerned about the academic success of their children and the decisions around pre-k and kindergarten seem to be particularly difficult. While our teachers will provide you with our recommendation for your child’s progression, we would like to explain here how we arrive at our recommendations.

The first factor we examine is the child’s birthdate in relationship to the kindergarten cut-off date. A child must have had his/her 5th birthday by September 1st to be enrolled in most kindergartens. We consider this even in our recommendations relating to whether a child should spend a second year in preschool or move on to pre-k because a Fall birthday (after September 1st) will mean that the child who begins our preschool program in the Fall at younger than 3 will not be able to move on to kindergarten after pre-k without spending two years in either preschool or pre-k. The child’s social and emotional development are what

we look at next for guidance. Regardless of the child's interest levels in numbers and letters, social and emotional development are crucial for future academic success. These are the areas where executive function skills develop. And these self-management skills are the fundamental life skills that make the most difference in how successfully your child navigates through his/her formal education. Because our preschool classrooms are individualized, we can continue to challenge each child academically in preschool, even if they spend a second year there, while the child matures, develops, and learns self-management skills in the social and emotional areas. Our children with 2 years of preschool are even more ready to benefit from the academic opportunities of our pre-k classrooms.

Some parents hope that they will be able to get a waiver to allow their child who turns 5 in late September or October to be able to enter kindergarten at 4. This is not a decision we would support in most cases. Kindergartens today are the 1st grade of the past. There is way too much pressure on these young children in the present curriculum and very little support. What will it be like for your child if she/he is one of 25 or 28 children (many of whom are not ready for kindergarten) with one teacher. While the teacher is trying to keep order, help children who are in distress or have had an accident, etc., the rest of the children are on their own. Your child will do much better if they have waited a year, are more mature, independent, and have good social skills and self-confidence. Most of all, you want this first year to be a positive entry to elementary school and beyond. The child who experiences stress and discouragement in kindergarten is at risk for carrying these feelings about their school experience forward. The goal is for children to build the feelings of mastery and confidence during their first exposure to formal education.

For the parent of a pre-k child, the question is whether to send the child to Somerset's kindergarten or to another kindergarten. The answer to this question really depends on birth-date and readiness. Most of our pre-k children go on directly to regular kindergarten and do extremely well. They are well prepared and they are ready developmentally. For the pre-k child who is not age eligible or perhaps not quite ready socially or emotionally, Somerset's kindergarten is an excellent next step. We offer a full kindergarten curriculum, without the pressure or stress. With less than 10 children, there is one teacher, with more than 10 children there are two fully qualified kindergarten teachers. There is still time for free play and continued development of social skills and emotional resilience. Because of our much smaller class size and student to teacher ratio, our teachers can pace the introduction of new skills and information in a way that both offers the appropriate level of challenge, and encourages the child to persist to mastery. We want children to understand that everything isn't easy, but most things can be accomplished by breaking them down into manageable tasks and staying with it until they get that great feeling of mastery. That great feeling is what drives children to meet the next challenge, and the next. Most of our kindergarten children go on to kindergarten in another school, but a number of our children have gone directly to 1st grade and have thrived. This is a decision that can be made in the Spring.

In these early years when the child is building the foundation for all future learning, developmental readiness in all the realms of development, physical, social, emotional and cognitive, is the most important factor, not early academic achievement. Children develop at different rates in different areas of development. When they achieve certain skills is not necessarily predictive of later achievement levels. As noted in one of the articles below, early walkers don't really walk better than later walkers. With a solid foundation, academic achievement will be a natural, fulfilling, life-long process. If early academic experiences are a struggle, they are likely to continue to be a struggle.

The link below offers more information that may be helpful to you as you make program decisions for your child.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>