

# Everything You Want to Know About St. Matthew's

The following pages are intended to answer commonly asked questions and hopefully touch on some of the things you may be wondering about.

**Teaching academics through a play-based curriculum:** You'll find academics everywhere, tailor made for the great potential and wide-ranging interests of a preschooler. The teachers weave occasions for using academic tools throughout the preschooler-sized world of the classroom. Academicians in science, pediatrics, and education have long studied young children's learning and effective methods of teaching. In the last forty years, and with the advent of brain imaging, the results of their research strongly suggest that imaginative play fosters positive learning outcomes. Day by day and year by year we work with you to develop the behaviors, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understandings that prepare your child for kindergarten and far beyond. We seize upon the motivating nature of imaginative play to insert academic tools. Are you playing "Veterinarian?" Shall we make a patient sign-in sheet, name plates for the carriers, a prescription pad for medications? Are you planning a party? Let's write a guest list, a shopping list for party food and favors, and practice polite words for greeting your guests. When "academics" can be put to use, their reason for being becomes clear and, with that, the incentives to master them. Teachers are close by to plant the seeds and help them grow.

**Our teachers are our greatest resource.** A preschool teacher must be a special kind of leader. Like parents, they are present at the beginning of a process, so their task is distinctive and significant. Preschool teachers don't teach like the teachers you remember from elementary and high school. They often engage in guided play, participating with an implied agenda to teach in an appealing way. They try to grow their classrooms into cooperative societies; to give the children a voice in making the rules and decisions that govern the class; to help their children see themselves as responsible individuals; to develop self control; and to realize that school is THEIR place to learn and grow. To that end, teachers shape the daily routine and its contents to encourage feelings of belonging and to support the growth in confidence to take initiative, to work independently and with peers, to take pride in their actions and accomplishments, and to feel and become competent.

**How will next year differ from this year?** A child-centered program, St. Matthew's provides a learning environment structured to meet each child where they are developmentally. From that point, with existing abilities and growth potential in mind, teachers lead children forward, step by step, providing a variety of choices for learning new skills and behaviors, providing help where needed, and granting independence as children are ready. The structure of the day will remain the same and will expand to match the greater capacity to learn and grow in a group setting.

Here are subtle but important changes that take advantage of your child's growth this year and carry the process forward:

The **daily routine** is a powerful vehicle for developing an excellent learning attitude. The elements of the daily routine may seem insignificant, but each is devised to promote BIG IDEAS. As the children park totes, sign in, answer the Question of the Day, read the message of the day, plan, work, and then recall their work, they are reading, writing, speaking, employing number concepts, and using math vocabulary. As the children engage in the day's experiences they can be seen developing and exercising habits of the mind including persistence, self-control, communicating clearly, listening, questioning, utilizing knowledge, striving for success, responding with wonder, using senses to gather data, finding humor, imagining and creating. Add to that the physical challenges presented and motor competence developed on the playground, and you have a well-rounded learning day that grows.

**Large Group** time extends a bit as children are more settled and interested and able to share thoughts and ideas, taking turns talking and intentionally listening. Literary repertoires and vocabularies are expanded (through traditional rhymes, tales, and high quality picture books), attention is directed, memory stretched, and actions and words coordinated through songs, dances, and dramatizations. Daily written "messages" are read and responded to with more understanding and participation. Math, language, literacy and science process skills are systematically guided and exercised aligned with accepted standards, best teaching practice, and the interests of the children.

**Small Group time** increasingly (1) involves math games and concepts, (2) explores and practices skills from Handwriting Without Tears (a developmental writing program), and (3) prompts children to represent their observations or ideas through drawing. Drawing is a first step in the writing process and putting ideas down on paper is a precursor to story writing. Children learn and refine ideas through their acts of drawing and are at the same time developing the motor skill necessary for printing. Small group topics are teacher chosen and include hands-on activities to help children focus their attention and explore and discuss a shared experience. They are a foreshadowing of kindergarten activities but without pressure or limits on creative thinking. Children's intention for their work during **Center time** is more focused and complex. Classroom centers are rich with open ended materials, giving daily exercise to children's imaginations. The company of peers, whether they are working side-by-side or cooperatively, raises the value of center-work exponentially. One child works with the blocks, pursuing his idea at his level of ability. Another child joins in with other blocks and the possibilities surge: language flows, ideas are exchanged, new ideas emerge, differences of opinion require negotiation and resolution to keep the ideas moving, problems are solved, fun is had, and a positive attitude toward school work and learning is formed. Add in the teacher who is circulating among the centers finding opportunities for instruction, supporting and extending children's interests, and you have an optimal environment for learning.

Words are central in every center. As children use oral language to “objectify” situations and events, putting them into words (even conflicts), those words increasingly begin to serve as “tools of the mind,” laying the groundwork for more abstract thought. Children’s expanding vocabularies and communication skills—their ever-growing experience with literature and printed words all around them, their increasingly effective use of symbols to represent ideas and events—all signify progress along the road of reading, writing, comprehending! The writing center, which afforded many threes the opportunity to explore drawing and writing, is the site of more skilled use of materials and models by the fours and fives. Familiarity with letters and their sounds, words and their role in our lives, and with numbers and their purpose in mathematical thinking are definitely on the agenda.

**Reading researchers** tell us that there are some things that preschool reading IS and some things it is NOT. *It is not:* phonics without fun, simply memorizing the alphabet or vocabulary words, or introducing reading instruction before children love books and understand their function. **Preschool reading IS:** telling and dictating stories, word play (what rhymes with “cat?”), singing songs, drawing pictures, beginning to print one’s name, dialogical reading, reading sign and product labels in a print rich environment, learning letter names and associating letters with their sound, engaging in conversations, and dramatic play. These things build good readers.

There are things that **math** for preschoolers is NOT. *It is not:* memorizing equations, flashcards of numbers, computer software, or toys that only promote one right answer. **Math and spatial skills ARE:** finding patterns; counting; dividing and sorting items; making categories; playing “I Spy;” noticing more and less; describing comparisons; playing board games; measuring with Unifix cubes; playing with blocks, trains, puzzles, geo-boards, hundred-boards, dominoes, and dice. At St. Matthew’s, we do these things and more every day.

**Will my child be prepared for kindergarten?** Definitely, yes! Kindergarten teachers love St. Matthew’s students. However, don’t look for the pre-kindergarten year to BE kindergarten. It doesn’t need to be. These children are powerful learners. They’ll easily master the kindergarten curriculum the first time through—no need to take away its magic or to give up the richness of preschool.

You hear it said over and over again: kindergarten is the new first grade. That’s not a good thing: five year olds are still five year olds, after all. However, it means that we have to be sure our children enter kindergarten as strong as can be: able to self-regulate and ready and eager to learn when they arrive. Both the 3-day and 4-day classes prepare a child very well for kindergarten and allow children to acquire the behaviors, skills, and foundational academic abilities needed to be a successful kindergartener. Although adding a fourth day each week allows for more experiences together, children attending either three or four days a week have the same preparation.

**Birth dates and class assignments:** Children need to turn three years old by December 31 in order to enroll. Children enrolling in the 4-day morning program should turn four by May 31.

We have found that the 2-day, three-year-old classes function well when a broader range of birthdates are included: the younger children take their cues from the older threes, who respond more easily to the teachers’ directions and are usually more ready to coordinate their play with another child. (That is, playing cooperatively rather than in the solitary or parallel manner of a younger or less experienced child). As for the older, more social threes? What could feel better than to be a friend and a helper and to communicate what you know to someone who’s younger than you are?!!

The fours typically work well grouped by similar age. We usually have classes of older fours/young fives and classes of younger fours. In the afternoon our 3-day class is generally a more mixed-age group; the 4-day class includes four and five-year-olds.

**What about class size?** We have found that wonderful learning happens in groups of 16-20 students with two teachers. This affords us a large enough group to ensure a range of ideas, interests, experiences, and abilities. When the class is in “center time,” the children disperse among the classroom’s centers according to their interest. This is prime time for both classroom teachers to engage them in meaningful individual and small group interactions and to teach about the materials or situation at hand. Having this number of children in the group assures us that there will be friends to interact and solve problems with throughout the day. Peer interaction is one of the most powerful ways young children learn, because communicating with another child—getting another child to coordinate their ideas and efforts with yours—can be a significant intellectual challenge, as it requires the children to organize their ideas, to persist, and perhaps make multiple attempts to accomplish their goal.

**Other questions?** Please call 703.494.3090 and ask to speak with the director or email [director@stmatthewsva.org](mailto:director@stmatthewsva.org).