

Emergent Curriculum

Children between the ages of one and five do not learn because they are taught. They learn as a result of their own doing...through actions, relationships, inquiries, opportunities, and repetition. This knowledge is the foundation of SFCLC's emergent curriculum.

Our teachers become research partners with children, seeking answers to questions and supporting investigation. Our school is their laboratory, offering the materials and tools to inspire each child.

"Once children are helped to perceive themselves as authors or inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of inquiry, their motivation and interest explode."

**Loris Malaguzzi
Founder of the
Reggio Emilia Schools, Italy**



Young children develop an astonishing number of brain cell tendrils called 'dendrites' during these years. 'Dendrites' grow when learning occurs, connecting one cell to another in very important and lasting ways. Without these connections, brain cells die.

Children learn (and therefore develop brain cell connections or dendrites) when they:

run	jump	dress up	speak
socialize	read	listen	sing
paint	catch	kick	hit
throw	climb	observe	swing
question	scream	pull	push
rhyme	create	shape	and more...

When children experience delight and a sense of success during these activities, their brain cells establish permanent 'connections' between the activity and the feelings of delight and success it inspires. If activities at school (*and at home*) result in negative feedback, boredom, memorization or lack of stimulation and motion, the child's brain cells establish *permanent* negative associations with school and 'learning'.¹



Therefore, our first and most important goal with emergent curriculum is to inspire delight, curiosity, and inquiry in the classroom. Doing so has been proven to build intrinsic motivation (coming from within the child) and a long-term love of learning. These are the greatest gifts our teachers can give a child in preparation for their primary school experience.

¹ Dr. Elaine, Johnson, Ph.D, "The Way the Brain Learns Best", 2006

Historically, preschools and childcare centers in America (including ours) have followed a classroom model in which the teacher chose what information and activities the children would 'receive' and when. In this model, the teacher presented only those activities which were "age-appropriate", based upon published developmental stages. S/he created lesson plans and weekly themes, often for an entire year before the year begins. One's teaching success was measured by the ability to get children to take interest in the chosen lesson and stay focused. The child's success was measured by how well they could cut a straight line, form a letter or a letter sound, arrange shapes by color, and of course, behave.

The downsides, however, was multifold. This approach lumps students into projects based on age rather than individual capabilities, interests and learning styles, in spite of the fact that we know children differ *dramatically* at this age.²



Also, a dynamic emerges in which the natural curiosity of each child is being constantly redirected toward the subject matter chosen by the teacher. The length of the inquiry is arbitrary (ie: Monday-Friday), which means it ends whether the children have finished their wondering or not. Often the themes were scripted for the whole year in advance. According to new research, young children withheld from directing their own learning at this age experience disappointment and boredom, creating permanent negative associations with school.

It only takes a slight shift from this traditional model to embrace an emergent curriculum approach.

- First, we transform the image of the child from that of an empty vessel being filled by the knowledge of the teacher. Instead, the child is seen as having "preparedness, potential, curiosity and interest in constructing *their own learning*... and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them."³
- Next, we begin to assume that the inquiries and their duration, as chosen by the child, have equal validity to those chosen by a teacher. They may last a year! Several may be happening simultaneously. Children may work independently.
- Lastly, work is not carried out according to a preconceived plan. Educators of very young children (with a maximum teacher:student ratio of 1:8) have a unique opportunity to allow children to pursue learning activities at different paces, using different materials, and with entirely different guiding questions and outcomes.

Thus the lesson plan, with its uniform goals and objectives, becomes obsolete. The emergent curriculum focuses more on documentation of the process of learning on a

² Dan Hodgins, "You Can't Help Me Until You Know What I Can't Do", 2005

³ Lella Gandini, "Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education", *The Journal of Young Children*, November 1993

group and individual basis. Teachers must understand *how and what* children learn and how to recognize moments when they can support children by asking a provoking question, providing a tool, sharing a story, helping seek an answer...

*Therefore, our emergent curriculum requires our teachers, in knowing **how and what** children can learn at these ages, to support and guide learning as it emerges naturally inside the school, in the natural world, and in our community as a whole.*

In most pre-primary schools, time is typically set by the clock. Activities are given a certain length of time to occur, and if a child is fast or slow, they must stretch or contract their work to meet the time expectations of teachers. Children who are excited to continue work are rushed to clean up and move to the next scheduled activity. Children who are finished long before become bored. The consequence is that children are given the impression that their natural attention span for an activity is not valid, and their learning becomes divided into arbitrary timeframes. It is no surprise that we struggle to retain their attention later in life. The traditional preschool schedule teaches them to ignore their own learning rhythm. If a child can paint for 50 minutes, they should be allowed to do so. If a child gets bored after painting for 10 minutes, he/she should be allowed to seek another activity that will inspire them.

Therefore our goal is to allow children to develop long-term projects, deep concentration, and the ability to redirect themselves if they are bored or otherwise not engaged in an activity. This is fundamental to development of the positive associations that will support learning throughout their lifespan.

In 2004, 37% of preschoolers were expelled in the US. 87% of those expelled were boys, the causes being hitting, kicking and biting. According to current research, all of these activities are developmentally normal, especially for boys.⁴ As a society of educators and parents, we have been much better at recognizing that some children learn by caring for a doll or roll playing “mommies” or making a necklace. We are less welcoming of the ways in which children learn that cause impact, noise, chaos, and friction. Providing safe ways to carry out these activities in the school setting is essential.

Therefore our staff must recognize that critical learning takes place during conflict, during activities often labeled “unacceptable” in the pre-primary school setting, and during the resolution, brainstorming and negotiation process. Our curriculum recognizes that children have different learning styles and that they actually learn as much or more from running as from learning to pronounce a letter sound. We will provide outside time and free exploration daily, and we will support the varied learning styles (visual, auditory, sensory, verbal, etc.) in gender sensitive ways.

Our complete list of goals and methods is attached. SFLC will provide regular training for parents, faculty and professionals, with opportunities for input, evolution and quality improvement.

⁴ Dan Hodgins, CAEYC Conference, April 2006

GOALS OF EMERGENT CURRICULUM

1. to inspire delight, curiosity, celebration and inquiry in the classroom.
2. to build intrinsic motivation and a long-term love of learning in children.
3. to help children craft an internal compass to guide them as a learner, rather than relying on instruction and direction from others.
4. to inspire children to be authors, inventors, illustrators, designers, dancers, singers, actors, etc. and to celebrate their unique talents and abilities.
5. to encourage consistent self-reflection and professional growth among teachers, so they may always improve the quality of classroom experience.
6. to maintain a teaching staff well-versed in the fundamentals of **how and what** children learn, so they can support and guide learning as it emerges naturally inside the school, in the natural world, and in our community as a whole.
7. to allow the natural pace of individual and group learning to emerge, and not be guided exclusively by the clock.
8. to create cooperation, partnership, resource-sharing and amiability between staff, students, parents and the community.
9. to give children an organized environment in which to use all of their senses and faculties to learn.
10. to recognize that critical learning takes place during conflict, negotiation, brainstorming and resolution.
11. to provide adequate outside time daily.
12. to support the varied learning styles (visual, auditory, sensory, verbal, etc.) in ways that are also aware of gender differences.
13. to carry out assessment in the form of student portfolios and documentation of learning.
14. to honor and welcome children with special rights (aka special needs) into our school community.
15. to practice supportive social learning rather than punishment.

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

- Daily journals with photos and written evidence of learning for each classroom
- Weekly classroom documentation displayed
- Monthly portfolio additions for individual students
- Student-led expeditions, inquiries and investigations
- Field trips and excursions outside the school
- On-going staff training and professional development
- Regular activities involving community members and families
- Activities in our dramatic play, block, science, sensory, literacy and manipulative areas at the school, as well as on the playground.
- Opportunities to experience conflict, negotiation and resolution in a safe setting.
- Opportunities to run, jump, sing, dramatize, rough-house, wiggle, write, read, create original work, and YES - hit, kick, yell, throw, catch - all with appropriate targets of course – and nurture, feel, cry, hug, feed, care, wonder and more...

WHY?

Because this is how children learn. They do not learn by sitting before a teacher who imparts knowledge. They learn by doing and self-directing! And they succeed in the future by learning to love school. Their delight and spontaneous wonder will always be our first priority.