

# North Huntington Beach Community Nursery School

The first years of a child's life are a crucial development period, and children who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are much more prepared for formal academics and are more likely to have the social skills they will need when it's time for kindergarten.

Parents are a child's first teachers, but early childhood education programs are also important, especially with the growing number of families with one parent, and families where both parents work full-time.

That's why preschools like the North Huntington Beach Community Nursery School (NHBCNS) prove to be such an important part of early childhood education.

Established in the Fall of 1967, NHBCNS is a co-op preschool open to students between the ages of two and six and focuses its curriculum around the philosophy of "teaching children how to think, not what to think," according to Director/Teacher Tracy Shawnte Roberts, who holds a Masters Degree in Early Childhood Education.

"Core concepts such as tolerance, respect, kindness, freedom, self-expression, diversity, and bonding are the foundation of where curriculum lies," she says. "All feelings and thoughts are respected within an environment where they can safely be expressed."



Unlike many other early childhood institutions that focus on direct academics in preparing the preschooler for kindergarten, NHBCNS opts instead to teach via "age appropriate learning through play" activities.

"Education in general needs to fit with who the person is and where their interests lie," she says. "We believe that education must respect the developmental level of a person and should focus on where that person is currently, as well as, placing value on the journey, not on the destination. We do not believe that it is an early educator's or school's job is to prepare children for the next level, yet instead to provide relevant and purposeful 'curriculum' for where children are in the here and now.

## Child-centered curriculum

"It is only by understanding children that we can plan activities. We believe the environment should always be open to change by a child. We believe that free choice of how children spend their time is important. Our curriculum focuses once again on the child ... is typically 'messy' and is always hands-on."

Another differentiator is the school's policy of adhering to a "very organic pro-

gram" by not utilizing any paper products and teaching children by example the benefits of recycling and being environmentally friendly.

"We use real bowls and glasses and cloth hand towels and napkins," says Roberts. "We garden and have a recycling and compost bin on site – rather than simply showing the children a flash card of a tomato, we plant a tomato garden to give them the real experience. We also have real vs. manufactured products. So instead of having the children play on a plastic workbench with plastic tools, for instance, our students are supervised and learn at a real workbench with real tools." Roberts says the teachers at NHBCNS take the stance that toys are tools for learning and imagination – that a toy should be 90 percent child and 10 percent toy.

"By that we mean that it should serve several purposes," she says. "A child should be able to use it for or as many things as they can think of. Toys should be made from natural materials. In addition, materials such as paint, food coloring, flour, cornstarch, shaving cream, baking soda, tools, water, containers,

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boxes, loose parts and buckets are among the most important supplies for an early childhood program to possess."

In terms of the school's approach to discipline, Roberts says that "we believe that each situation is specific to the child and the issue .. and that it is through the knowledge of each child and each situation that we attempt to guide children to making their own decisions based on what is right for them."

She adds that having a "technique" on discipline requires you to ignore the specifics of the situation and therefore assume that every behavior as well as every child is identical.

"We work in facilitating problem solving and conflict resolution with and among children," she says. "By helping them to develop the skills necessary to stand for themselves, to express their individual desires and needs, to empathize with others, to respect the opinions of others, to actively listen to another person and to come to a solution that works for all parties is what will sustain them for the rest of their lives."

#### Cooperative effort

Roberts says because the staff and parents truly believe that it "takes a village to raise a child," the NHBCNS program is built around this foundation of early childhood education.

"Every person that enters a child's life will make a difference in who they ultimately become," she says. "No person, no matter how significant in that child's life, can raise a child alone. It is the responsibility of us all to make sure that children have what they need physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually to grow and flourish in the world. A school has the responsibility to bring whole families together with educators, and society to build a community where children feel safe to be themselves, explore with very few restrictions, and to know they are valued members of that community.

"I'm happy to say that this isn't a school where parents simply drop their children off and go. Our parents are very involved and get to know the other parents. Lifelong friendships are formed here."



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