

Seeds Grow at Love A Lot Preschool

On a sunny morning last month, the classroom at the 99 Suffolk Street of Love A Lot Preschool (they have a second facility, for older preschoolers, at 21 Clinton) was filled with music and dance, as the school's older and younger children moved about with great relish, along with a singer playing the guitar.

"Today the children will do some planting in our private garden," says school founder Olga Bosio. She is a vibrant, Brazilian woman, who ushers me from one hub of activity to another.



Backyard planting at Love-A-Lot

Both schools were celebrating The Week of the Young Child (April 11-17). It turns out (from the last US census) that some 13 million infants, toddlers, and preschool children spend their days in non-parental care in the United States, including 45% of children younger than one year. This is because the majority of mothers with children under age 18 work, including 59% of those with infants and 74% of those with school-aged children.

Cutting-edge preschools like Love A Lot have turned these statistics into an opportunity. The school maintains a high ratio of adults to children – with infants it's one to three, for toddler's one to four, and for pre-K one to seven. This high level of supervision provides for a calm, remarkably harmonious environment. The children are engaged in the ongoing activities, and there's always someone to turn to.

"We're planning to open a kindergarten next year," says Olga. "All our Pre-K students transition into the Gifted and Talented programs in NYC public schools, and we continue to provide the quality of education and childcare Lower East Side parents are looking for."

The multicultural background of the staff reflects the diversity of the Lower East Side. The children are exposed to bilingual teachers who integrate Spanish, Japanese and German into the daily curriculum. Bosio emphasizes that the more exotic language studies are a general introduction to the foreign sounds and symbols, rather than hard language drills.

She's proud of the seemingly carefree, easy-going environment of her school. And the kids running every which way on the newly planted grass certainly do not bring to mind any notion of early age indoctrination. It's a very happy place, with a lot of things going on.

"We teach our kids at their own capacity, exploring everything about the world, about the weather, about the ground and the soil and the flowers," says Olga, as a troop of noisy children sweeps into the muddy yard, armed with plastic shovels. "And with that come language skills and social skills..."

Cathy Gelber, the school's educational consultant, with a background of 25 years in early childhood development, joins the conversation. "We have three things going on simultaneously today: group planting in the garden, individual planting in the classroom, and an art project, making bird seeders for the backyard, with pine cones and peanut butter."

I ask her about the school's reputation in boosting children's ability to learn. "We provide kids with hands-on experiences," says Gelber. "This backyard is a wonderful asset for them, to learn about nature. They feel the soil, they plant the seeds, then they'll watch them grow."

The program, obviously, has a rich developmental curriculum. Add to it their special instructors in music, yoga, even chess, and you get an exciting image of a busy, forever curious, community of small people. Still, according to Gelber, "what's most important is nurturing the children and creating a safe environment so they can forge friendships."

Different children develop at different paces. "Our children are grouped by ages, with the full spectrum of individual abilities," says Gelber. "The teachers plan individually for children who need extra help in certain areas. It's done collaboratively, and there's a game plan for each day. Each day, we present them with opportunities to grow."

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