

Park West

Cooperative
Nursery
School

Little Link

Information for families



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Dear Parents,

During this past week we have been doing what we call sewing, with Styrofoam boards, yarn, and blunt plastic needles. Some of the kids have done this before, and so you may have seen this last year. But just in case, here's what it is.

We have the needles threaded with yarn before we start because once it gets going it can be difficult to keep up with rethreading the needles. So there's about 18 to 24 inches of yarn on each needle. They are not sharp enough to stab your finger if you touch them, but they can hurt if you push them hard into your skin. You puncture the foam board with the needle, just hard enough to get it through without breaking the board. Then pull it from the other side; the needle widens out at the eye, so you have to pull even harder without breaking. Pull the needle until you get all the yarn through the hole before pushing the needle in again, or else after a couple of stitches it will be too tight to pull through, and so you run out of yarn at the needle end while a long piece is hanging from the starting end. When you get to the end of yarn, cut the needle off so we can rethread it to use again. If you want to keep sewing, choose another needle with whatever color yarn you want. Sounds easy enough.

But a lot of kids had some problems at first because these were some new or unfamiliar skills. Using enough force to push the needle through caused them to hold the board too tight with the other hand, so they squeezed the board and cracked or broke it. Or continuing to pull the needle when it was at the end of yarn caused the board to tear. Cutting the needle off wasn't so easy for kids who turn the scissors parallel to the yarn, and even perpendicular, getting the right scissors stroke on limp yarn was tricky. Some kids even tried to cut the needle itself. And then some kids cut the needle off leaving about a half inch of yarn, and then they wanted the teachers to tie it in a knot!

Anyway, most of the kids got past these difficulties pretty quick, and then they started doing yarn after yarn, faster than a speeding human could replenish the yarn. The skills got so good that their work was moving into an aesthetic dimension, which color combinations, which direction to stitch. The teachers had suggested drawing lines or a picture to see if they could make their sewing follow the lines, but no one really followed up on this. Next time we'll probably start with that idea. But one kid had the idea to sew two boards together, face to face, and it was truly an innovation, because even when she explained it to other kids they were mystified that it could be done. Only a couple of others understood the skill well enough to be able to do that. Next time, we'll also try sewing two pieces together end-to-end.

As usual, some kids weren't interested, or were too busy elsewhere; some kids tried it once; some kids worked at sewing for long periods on each of the three days. Some skills are pretty advanced while others are rudimentary. That wide of a range is normal. It's not that sewing itself is so important, it's just one of the fine-motor activities that kids can get interested in developing. But it does require a burst of force and then a quick slowdown to do successfully, and that is a very different skill than, say, letter

writing or climbing. Fine motor and gross motor often employ different muscles and sections of nervous system, but there is a vast middle ground where both are needed in the same action.

When kids arrive at school, there is a teacher at the washing-hands sink with an attendance list. A lot of kids were curious about it and wanted to find their own name, or see who was not here, what the "A" and the check marks were for. So we started letting kids take attendance too.

Teachers still do it on the official list, but we made up another list with all upper case, but the first names are printed larger because most kids don't know last names very well, or at least what they look like in print. So this is another activity, along with sign-up lists and leader cards, to help kids get used to recognizing other kids' names in print. Only six or seven kids have had a turn so far, and there will probably be a wide range of ability and interest in this, too. It's not a job, so whoever's turn it is can do as much as they want. A teacher works with them, and they may want other kids to help; we also have the classroom namebook and a sheet with everybody's picture and name for the attendance taker to use as a resource if they don't recognize the letters of a name. If they actually see someone is here, they make a checkmark; if we have verified someone is not coming, they make an "A" for absent.

The original format of this attendance sheet had all four days of the week on it, so four different kids would use the same sheet. But it was obviously difficult and distracting for kid to have to see all the other days' marks and then track accurately across from the names at the left to the correct column space further to the right. So now there is just one day per sheet. If they want to do it all, there is space at the top to write their own name (and not a lot of space), what day it is (which they can copy from the calendar), and how many kids are here today. That's a slightly longer list to count than what a lot of kids can do accurately; many kids skip one or two of the teens when counting, and don't keep an accurate one-to-one correspondence all the way there, but some kids do. Maybe one day we'll devise a good way for them to check their accuracy without having them try to count all the moving bodies. So let's see how far their interest goes.

Briefly, a word about spelling, in case we have forgotten to mention it before. Some kids are doing more writing, either making signs or writing "it's for my mom," or kids' names or words of a story. Sometimes they ask us how to write something. We have to make a quick decision. Sometimes we just tell them the letters, or show them how to make the letters, or write it for them to copy; it depends on how patient we think a kid will be with a laborious process at that point, because they are usually in the middle of something more engrossing. But as much as possible, if we see that a kid is thinking the relation between letter and sound, we just isolate the sound and let them write what letter goes with it as they hear it. Correct, or standard, spelling will come later; for now, the connections between sound and symbol will be far more helpful and stronger if they make those connections themselves instead of relying on a teacher.

P.S. please send plastic grocery bags - the kinds with handles, not the produce bags. Thanks

JMA