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By HILARY MATHESON/The Daily Inter Lake

## Hands-on learning: Preschool lets students work at their own pace

Inside a Quonset building tucked behind Stillwater Christian School's elementary building, animated preschoolers are sprawled around the floor engaged in academics fit for their growing minds.

Welcome to Stillwater Christian School's Montessori Preschool.

The classroom is large and bright. Two three-dimensional paper flowers seem to bloom from yellow walls. Large, geometric shapes are suspended from the ceiling.

The children's energy is tangible, but it's focused in their work. Director and Montessori teacher Joni Williams circulates around the room helping each student with individualized activity. An emphasis on independence is the hallmark of Montessori education, developed by Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori in the early 1900s.

**Williams describes** the activities the children do as "works." There are "challenging works," and "practical living works" among others. She doesn't use the word "play," but calls those activities "fun works."

Classroom aide Colleen Warricks said play has its place in children's development, but so does academic work because the 3- to 5-year-olds are at a key age for soaking up knowledge. The experience gives children a step up when they start kindergarten.

"Their minds at this age are just sponges," Warricks said.

The children are on all levels of learning, she added.



“There are ones just learning numbers one through five and ones that are learning one through 24. In reading, we have ones that are just learning letters and others that are reading their books,” Warricks said.

In the morning the students are engaged in challenging work. Five-year-old Ava Stillo is busy placing numbered tiles in order from 1 to 100.

“I know up here and here and down here, but I can’t figure out all of these numbers,” Stillo said, pointing to different tiles. “I like learning.”

Raina Pond, 5, brings over a workbook to show that she’s been working on writing letters in the alphabet.

“I like to play outside and work hard,” Pond said.

**Some children** are putting the alphabet in order, matching lower to upper case letters, pictures to words, spelling, sounding out letters, or stringing beads according to numbered tiles.

“It’s a very academic program. We let the kids grow to where their ability is. If they can do it we let them,” Williams said. “It might take a few months to master a concept, but when they do, what a great feeling.”

When the children complete their challenging work, they ask Williams or aides Warricks and Julie Thompson to check them. Afterward, students may choose fun activities. Bella Moran, 4, sits at a small table stacking heart cutouts of tan and glitter Play-Doh on a plate. She holds out the plate and calls over classmate Henry Beckham, 5. Handing it to him, Moran warns, “Don’t gobble it up.”

“OK. It’s only for me?” Beckham asks with delight.

“Uh-huh,” Moran said, smiling. “Don’t gobble it up.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Beckham assures her.

Another student daubs colored paint into circles that make up a snowman’s scarf as her fun work activity. Williams said all the activities students work on help develop fine motor skills.

**Williams walks** over to shelves containing the items for practical life work activities that are geared specifically for developing fine motor skills, living daily life and independence. There are buttons to thread, beads to transfer from one bowl to another with tweezers, shelled peanuts to crack and eat, dustpans to sweep, plastic hammers, children’s dishes to arrange a place setting and a container of squishy foam to mold — to name a few.

“They practice their fine motor skills, strengthening their hands [and] getting ready to hold a pencil or scissors,” Williams said. “Like our 3-year-old, who just turned 3, this is where he’s at. This is their first experience of school; we want them to think learning is fun.”

**Throughout the day** students will work on building, art and Bible-related activities. In between, Williams fits in a 40-minute rest period where the children may sleep — the children don't like the word "nap," Williams said with a smile — or read a book while soothing music is playing.

"All Montessori means is it's hands-on learning," Williams said. "Everything they learn they are touching it and putting it all together."

It's soon time for snacks. Students put their work away and gather around on the floor, unfolding blue napkins for snack time. Before eating they sing a blessing.

"Being a Christian school, God is a big part of why we're here," Williams said.

After snacks are eaten a student rings a bell.

"Get ready for recess!"

Williams said she learned about Montessori when she was an aide at Helena Flats School, which has elementary Montessori classrooms. Eventually she owned a Montessori school located in downtown Kalispell. During a tour of Stillwater she was asked to start a preschool program, which is now in its sixth year.

"What I love is everyone is learning at their own pace. It's just not traditional, we're not in a box. We can't just fit everybody into a box; we have to allow the child to learn where they're at developmentally," Williams said.

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