

an extraordinary preschool for all children

As the children enter the classroom, they find their names among the small cards with Velcro backing arranged by the door, and they place them on the cutout of a school bus to announce their arrival.



Milestones Preschool graduate William Bennett and friends.

photo courtesy of Leah Tiisler

Soon two boys are searching a box for the toy farm animals they want to put in the model barn on the table. Three girls sit on the floor, building their own barn and barnyard with blocks, as two others work at a table on farm animal puzzles. A tussle over a coveted cow is resolved with a reminder that there are plenty of animals to go around.

An ordinary preschool scene at a far from ordinary preschool. The Milestones program, now in its sixth year, is committed to providing children ages 2 to 5 years with an unusually rich developmental experience. Activities that promote social skills, independent thinking, intellectual growth, and positive self-image not only mix fun and education but are also carefully designed to address the needs of each child in the class. “We look individually at every child,” Milestones manager and teacher Leah Tiisler says, “to make sure we have everything each child needs to develop as best he or she can.”

The emphasis on each child’s needs is an

outgrowth of Abilities United’s traditional programs, but at Milestones is made available to both typically developing children and children with disabilities. As Janel Astor, director of Children’s Development Services, puts it, “We ask whether we are providing good developmental programming that is beneficial for any child. We want to help children grow.”

That means small classes (a maximum of 20 children in each of the three sessions), a pupil-teacher ratio of 5:1, and a dedicated staff with experience in both general early childhood education and special education. Milestones operates year round, providing continuity of care and routine—and freeing parents from the problem of finding summer programs for their children. It also allows children to enter the program and to progress from one class to the next whenever they are ready.

Deborah Bennett, whose son William is typically developing, was looking for a preschool with small classes that had trained

and experienced staff and provided both a caring, nurturing environment and a play-oriented approach to learning and development. On her first visit, she appreciated the classroom space and the activities available to the children. But even more important, she was impressed by the presence of three to four teachers in the room and how they dealt creatively with each child’s needs and stage of development. “There are,” she says, “so many ways to encourage kids to sit in a circle. They can have a special chair, a pad, a box, and with the staffing ratio, the teachers can give each child direct attention.” The teachers’ experience is also available to parents, both in informal conversations and in regular reports. Deborah says she welcomed suggestions on how to get William to cooperate at home, using and reinforcing techniques from school.

William loved being at Milestones. He learned “zoophonics” and how to write his name and what goes on in the back room of Piazza’s grocery store. Last fall, William moved on to kindergarten in the Palo Alto public schools. Although he is among the younger children in his class, he was well-prepared and ready to learn in a kindergarten environment. He still mentions Milestones often and how much he enjoyed going to school there.

And most of all, his mother says, “He is really good at adapting to other children’s styles, and I’m sure he picked that up at Abilities United. He’s also sensitive to different people and people with disabilities and they never seem to give him pause. I love that about him.” •

**See Milestones Preschool in action,
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