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Prepping for Day 1

By Rob Petkau, For Neighbours February 18, 2010

It may be a while before parent Jani Long hears her son's moans of fake illness to get out of going to school. In fact, these days, the Calgary mom spends a lot of her time convincing her preschooler to come home.

Long chose a preparatory preschool for her children when son Justin was ready for junior kindergarten.

"Every month they alter the play centres and activities around a certain theme, so every month it's exciting for them," she says.

"Last month, there was Moon Sand in the sand table and space suits in another centre ... it was really hard to get my son to come home."

Justin did two years at another preschool, but because he's right on the cut-off date for his year, "we felt he'd be better starting kindergarten at 5 ½, rather than 4 ½, so we wanted to enrol him in a good junior kindergarten program," Long explains. "Preschools and junior kindergartens typically involve a lot of play, but I wanted something that would gear him more toward school. I felt a little more structure would be better, and I'd read about Edelweiss (Preparatory School) and felt it would be a really good fit."

She was right, it turns out. Justin is enrolled in kindergarten next year, and his three-year-old sister Riley is an Edelweiss preschooler, too.

"They recognize that staying in one classroom or one small area is not a good idea -- especially for boys. They move between three different classrooms, so a child can never get bored," she says.

Preparing children for the big leagues of kindergarten and Grade 1 involves more than free play time, which is what typical preschools or playschools offer, says Margaret Reid, who shares directorial duties at Edelweiss with her husband Walter.

"We have more focus on early numeracy and literacy. But we realize that it can't all be structured and academic, it has to be fun. If you strike the right balance, it creates a love of learning," she says.

Edelweiss uses the Jolly Phonics Program to introduce literacy and Handwriting Without Tears to develop fine motor skills, she says.

Calgary Preparatory School also has more teacher-directed activity than a typical preschool, says teacher and assistant director Kathy Bruins.

"We use specialized programs like Handwriting Without Tears within our program to help promote early fine motor preparedness, for example. We understand the earlier we introduce these concepts to children, the better off they will be down the road," says Bruins.

"We attempt to develop the whole child -- creatively, emotionally, intellectually, physically and socially. Our goal is to create confident, happy life-long learners."

Calgary Preparatory believes strongly in the creative arts, and brings in specialist teachers in music, creative movement/drama or French once a day, she notes.

Edelweiss emphasizes Spanish and music, as well as science. Edelweiss, like many preschools has a science discovery table, but Reid says she believes children need more. That's why they get regular visits from Captain Science (Walter in a lab coat).

"He does really unique, exciting science experiments to get them excited about science. Every experiment ends with the children yelling out, 'That's amazing!' and they're right. Walter finds these great resources and the results are amazing," Reid says.

Both preparatory schools offer programs for three- and four-year-olds, as well as junior kindergarten and kindergarten.

"Our senior kindergarten program is more academically focused than most kindergarten programs," says Bruins. "We offer about a half hour more per day than what is typical, and we have two fully qualified teachers in the classroom, so we're able to expand upon the government curriculum.

"Children finish our senior kindergarten program with reading preparedness, fine motor preparedness, experience with printing and drawing and all those important skills they need for Grade 1."

Calgary Preparatory students get accustomed not only to school culture and school work, but also school facilities, Bruins notes.

"I like that we're in a school building - a former Calgary Public school district facility -- rather than a church basement or a strip mall. They get used to the classroom setup, so they're prepared to go onto what we call 'the big school.'"

Reid also believes her school's graduates are ready for the big school, and says others agree.

For one thing, Edelweiss won the Calgary's Child Parents' Choice Award for Best Preschool in each of the past four years.

Both schools' graduates go on to a variety of public, Catholic, charter and private schools, although Bruins says a higher percentage of Calgary Preparatory children head to private facilities than most preschools.

Calgary Preparatory welcomes special needs children, and brings in educational assistants when they're necessary, while Edelweiss is for average and above-average learners.

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